

# **Anglo Activists:** English speakers and Quebec Social Movements since Confederation

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For Montréal and its histories  
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# Introduction: plan

- Definitions
- Focus on working class activism :
  - Joe Beef
  - Lea Roback
  - Black Rock Group
- For each:
  - “In their own words” slides in orange
  - My reflections on language and activism
- Conclusions

# Introduction: research questions

1. What was the nature of their activism?
2. Did language affect their activism? How?
3. What can historians and social actors learn from this?

# Definitions

## Anglophone

- Mother tongue or language of use/work

## Activist

- “A doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.”  
*(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)*

**JOE BEEF:**

**WORKINGMAN'S INNKEEPER**

**JOE BEEF**  
**1835-1899**

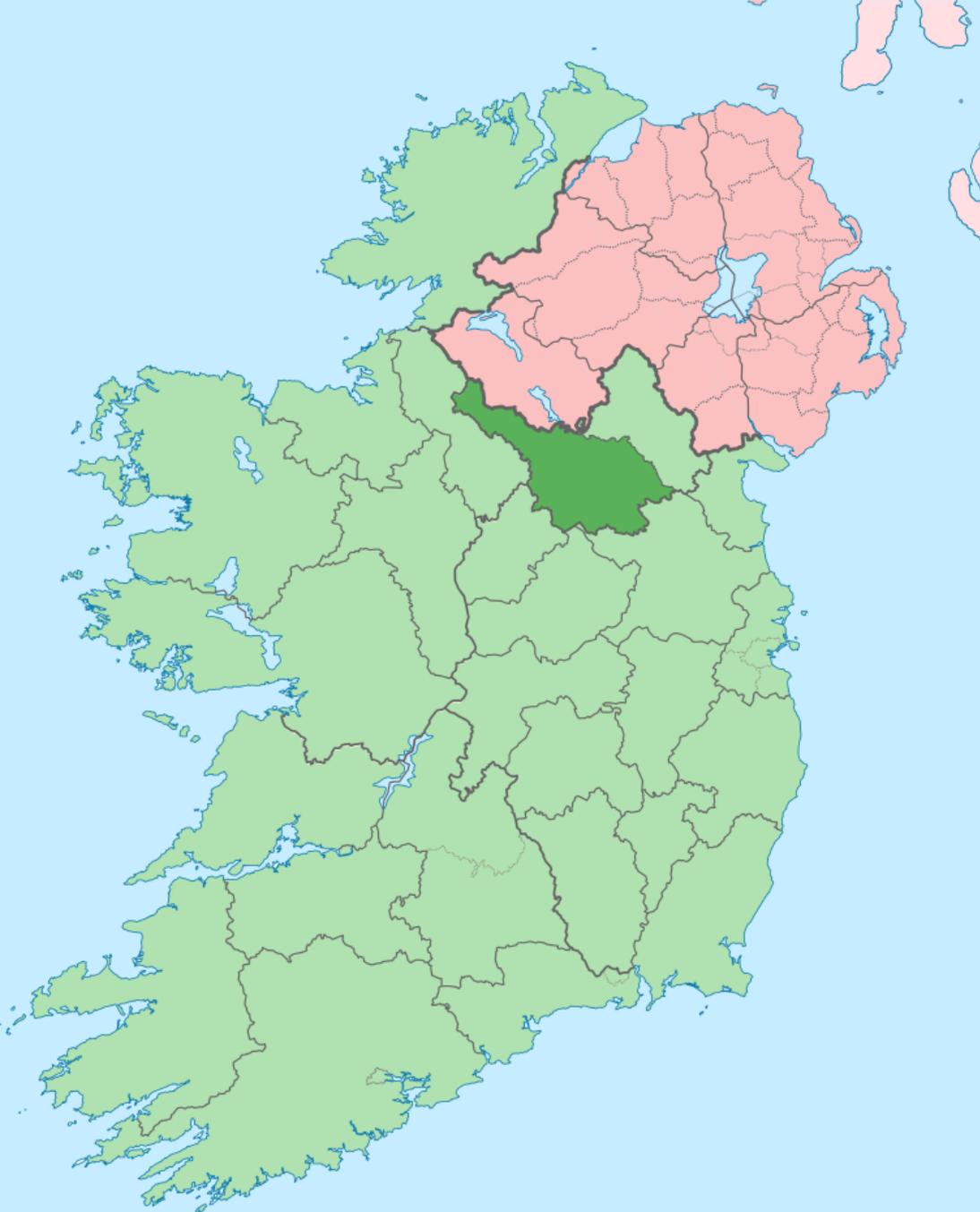


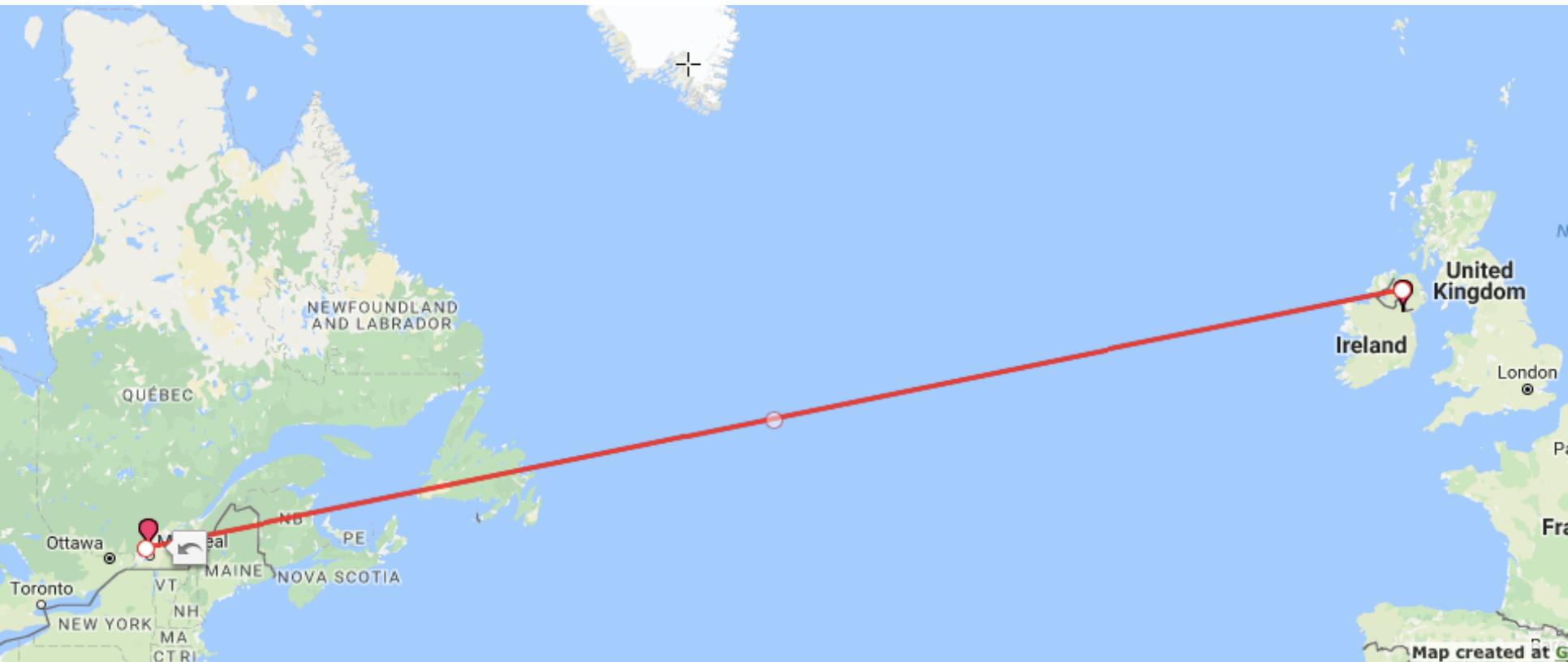
**EARLY LIFE**

# Origins

- Born Charles McKiernan, 1835
- Catholic family
- From County Cavan, Ireland

# County Cavan, Ireland





Cavan to Montreal: 4677 km

# Career

- Artillery school at Woolwich (now in London)
- 10th Brigade of the Royal Artillery
- Quartermaster during the Crimean War (1853-1856)
  - Russia lost to an alliance of France, Britain, the Ottoman Turkish + Sardinia



Co. Cavan → London → Sevastopol

# About his name

“Whenever his regiment was short of food, he had an unrivalled knack of somehow finding meat and provisions, hence his nickname Joe Beef”

Dictionary of Canadian Biography

# Move to Quebec

- 1864:
  - His Brigade sent to Quebec City
  - In charge of military canteen there + later at Île Sainte-Hélène
- 1867: **Confederation**

# Early life

- Some observations
  - International background can be seen as having set the stage: gave him **knowledge of varied economic and social conditions and cultural realities**

# **THE CANTEEN**

# Joe Beef's Canteen

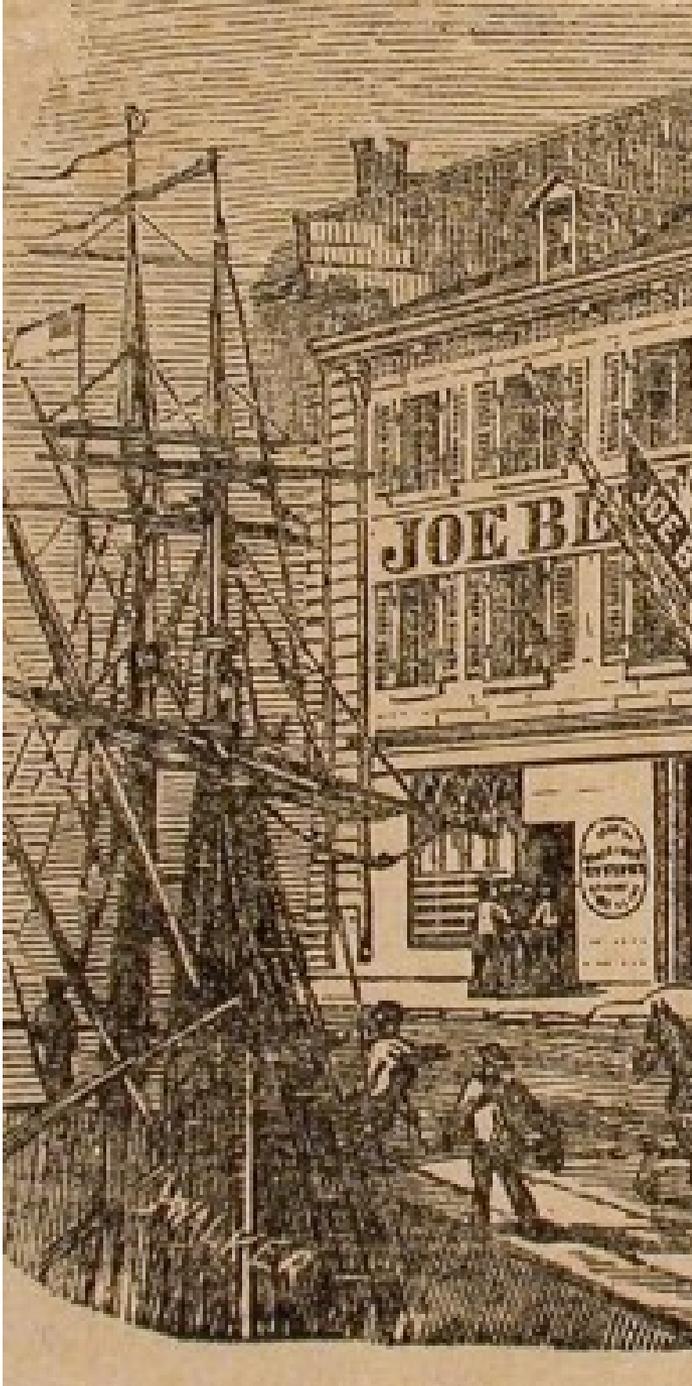
- 1868:
  - Discharged from military
  - **Opened Joe Beef's Canteen**, Rue Saint-Claude
- 1875: moved canteen to Rue de la Commune
- The canteen was a bar + an inn





Nos. 4, 5, & 6, Common Street, Montreal

Joe Beef's Canteen, Rue de la Commune



At the port, “where ‘carters of cord wood,’ bricks, and hay jostled with longshoremen and sailors. There were also factories nearby which employed a large number of workers.”

*Dictionary of Canadian  
Biography*

# The canteen

- Some observations
  - Canteen location ensured him **knowledge of and access to workers living in difficult and precarious conditions**

# **CANTEEN CULTURE + POLITICS**

# “Rough” working-class culture

- Heavy drinking
- Menagerie of animals
- Music and rhyming talks



## **Joe Beef's Canteen, Montreal.**

Take away the Beef and Beer from the British Army, and England is no more !

### **JOE BEEF'S ORIGINAL GENIOUSES**

Citizens, we eat and drink in moderation ;  
Our head, our toes, and our noses are our own,  
And all we want is to be left alone !  
We eat and drink what we like,  
And let alone what we dislike !

# In his own words: working class solidarity

“I never refuse a meal to a poor man. No matter who he is, whether English, French, Irish, Negro, Indian, or what religion he belongs to, he’s sure to get a free meal at my place if he can’t afford to pay for it.”

*La Patrie* March 24, 1882

# Working class rights

“Inside the Canteen, the rights of the common man always triumphed.”

Peter DeLottinville, “Joe Beef of Montreal” p. 16.

# Covered in the French language press



Ce que vous voyez est la fameuse Ourse Noire "JENNY DOUGALL," sans queue, seule capture des guerriers de la Rivière Rouge.

**JOE BEEF.**

23 Avril.—189

*Le Canard, 25  
April 1873*

# In his own words: language and class

*I must tell you that Kingston is dead, Quebec is  
Dying and out of Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto  
hundreds are flying*

***In the country parts unless you can Parlez-vous, There  
is nothing for you to do***

*[...] So in the fall God help the Poor of Montreal.*

“Joe Beef's Advice to Biddy, the Washerwoman”

*La Minerve, 7 November 1873*

# Canteen culture + politics

- Some observations
  - Beef believed:
    - workers shared a culture and rights
    - language barriers = added challenge for English - speaking workers

**ACTIVISM**

# Activism

## Charity

- Collected money for Hôpital Notre-Dame + Montreal General Hospital
- Supported the Salvation Army

# Activism

## Social services

- Feeding and lodging the destitute
  - 300 clients a day for meals; 100+ beds upstairs
  - An employee searched streets the needy

# Activism

## Labour organizing

- The inn = informal centre for job seekers
- Support for 1877 Lachine Canal strikers
  - Irish and French workers demand better working conditions
  - Joe Beef provided free food, leadership, moral support

# In his own words: Canal Strikers

Joe Beef speaking to 2,000 people assembled during the strike:

“No one can blame you for demanding the "Almighty Dollar" a day. The man who promises 90 cents a day and pays only 80 cents is no man at all. The labourer has his rights.”

*Montreal Witness, 21 December 1877*

# Activism

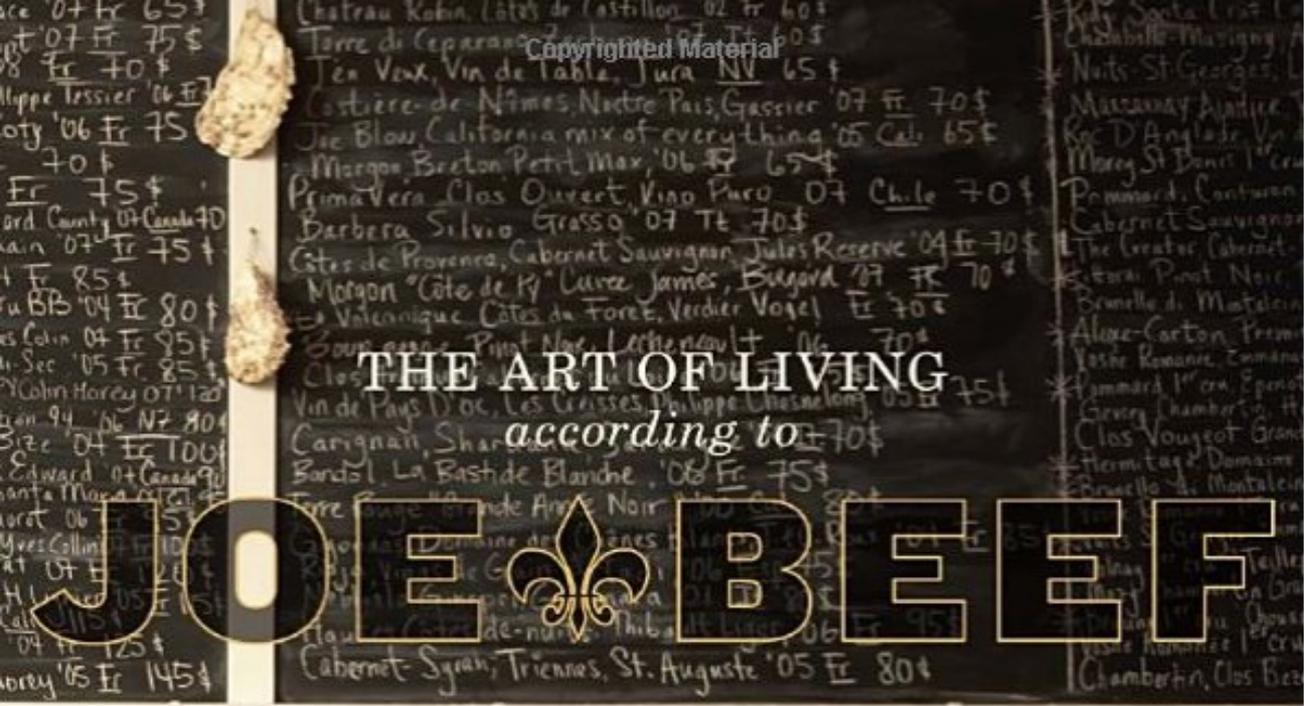
- Some observations
  - Going beyond charity to recognizing and addressing structural causes and solutions to inequality:
    - **power disparities**
    - **workers' rights**
    - **organizing + acting for positive change**

# **THE HERITAGE OF JOE BEEF**



Joe Beef  
Restaurant,  
Wellington Street,  
Montreal





THE ART OF LIVING  
according to

# JOE BEEF

A COOKBOOK OF SORTS



Frédéric Morin, David McMillan & Meredith Erickson

Foreword by David Chang

Copyrighted Material

Cookbook,  
2011

# About the cookbook

“The form of living described within would be much more recognizable to the educated leisure class that makes up today’s ‘foodie’ universe than the original Joe Beef or his clientele...”

Ian Mosby

# Heritage

## Joe Beef Market

- Organizer: Point St. Charles Community Theatre = group in an old working class district of Montreal
- Features theatre, art, community groups; promotes social expression + exchange

# Joe Beef Market 2013



# Heritage of Joe Beef

- Some observations
  - The **Joe Beef Market seems to correspond** to the elements of Joe Beef and his activism that I'm presenting

# Joe Beef Market 2013: QAHN was there!



**LEA ROBACK:  
INTERNATIONAL ACTIVIST**

**LEA ROBACK**  
**1903-2000**



# **JEWISH IN BEAUPORT**

# Jewish in Beauport, 1903-1019

- Born 1903 in Montreal
- Parents = Polish Jewish immigrants
- To Beauport age 6 months
  - =French speaking community near Quebec City
- Life at home:
  - Yiddish, English, French
  - Very open culture of reading, learning, communicating



# In her own words: family culture

- “À ses neuf enfants, ma mère disait : ‘Ça c’est injuste, il faut faire quelque chose.’”

# In her own words: family culture

- “J’ai appris, toute jeune, qu’il ne doit pas y avoir de barrières ethniques ou religieuses entre les travailleurs.”

# Roback family in Beauport



# Jewish in Beauport

- Some observations
  - Family: importance of **language**, culture, rights, action to help others, links to others as workers
  - These elements helped her **social integration** with neighbours and at school

**YOUNG WORKING WOMAN**

# Young working woman, 1919-1922

- 1919: back to Montreal
- 1919: British American Dyeworks, Verdun
  - Working week: 54 hours/6 days

“This first experience of a working-class job had a profound effect on her.”

Louis Fournier, historian

# Young working woman, 1919-1922

- 1922: His Majesty's Theatre, Montreal
  - French theatre repertoire

“Nous trois:” Lea + fellow workers, Montreal, 1923



# In her own words: the French connection

“Au théâtre [His Majesty’s, Montreal], une madame Dax, qui faisait partie d’une troupe française, de Paris [...] me dit: ‘Dites donc, vous, pourquoi vous n’allez pas étudier en France, ça coûte moins cher qu’ici.’”

# Young working woman

- Some observations
  - Knowledge of English and French allowed **economic opportunities and knowledge of varied economic conditions and cultural realities**

# **ADVENTURES ABROAD**

# Adventures abroad

- 1925 in Grenoble
  - Student in French + English tutor
- To 1929: sales clerk, New York City
  - In English, probably also Yiddish
- 1929: to Berlin
  - Learned German
  - University
  - Communist Party

été 1926 par théâtre  
Edmond  
III  
Paris



Lea in  
Paris, 1926

# In her own words: English imperialism (c. 1925)

- “À Nice, deux Anglaises de classe moyenne arrivent et essaient tant bien que mal de baragouiner le français. Je les mets à l’aise en leur parlant anglais; elles me demandent d’où je viens.
- --Canada
- --Oh, she belongs to us!
- J’ai été si choquée au’à partir de ce moment-là, je disais aux touristes britanniques que j’étais américaine.”

# In Germany



# In her own words: encountering Nazis

At a Communist demonstration, c. 1929:

- “Avant qu’on puisse dire lapin, de jeunes voyous, de petits nazis, sont arrivés pour semer la pagaille dans la marche. Moi, j’étais juive, j’étais étrangère, alors un des camarades a dit: ‘Pars de suite [...] je viendrai te chercher.’”

# Adventures abroad

- Some observations
  - Her language skills allowed her **to integrate politically, socially and economically**
  - She saw **links between language, ethnicity, culture and power**

# **COMMUNIST ACTIVISM IN MONTREAL**

# Communist activism, 1932-58

- In Montreal
  - Communist Party of Canada
  - Modern Bookshop
  - Fred Rose political campaign organizer
  - Union organizer:
    - International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
    - RCA Victor

# In her own words: why Rose Pesotta of the ILGWU hired her

“C’est elle qui m’a embauchée pour l’aider car elle ne parlait pas français et la majorité des midinettes étaient des Canadiennes françaises.”

# International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union

## Strike leader, 1937

- 5,000 on strike
- Result: better wages + conditions

“This strike was one of the first — and remains one of the most noteworthy — union struggles to improve working conditions for women in Canada.”

Canadian Encyclopedia

Lea Roback at a banquet of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, late 1930s



# In her own words: RCA Victor

“Les contremâîtres craient des ordres en anglais.  
Toute la gérance était anglaise.”

# Madeleine Parent: Roback = linkage by language



# Communist activism

- Some observations
  - Her language skills allowed her **to organize workers and political campaigns in multi-lingual, multi-ethnic working-class environments**
  - She could **transmit politics and cultures** across the language divide to help solidify working-class solidarity

**AN OLDER ACTIVIST, 1958-2000**

# An older activist, 1958-2000

- Montreal movements
  - Peace: Voice of Women / La voix des femmes
  - Anti-apartheid / anti-racism
  - Women's
  - Environmental

# In her own words: anti-racism

- “Je ne suis pas gênée là-dessus; le racisme contre les Juifs, les Noirs, contre n’importe qui, je ne laisse pas passer.”

# In her own words: justice and action

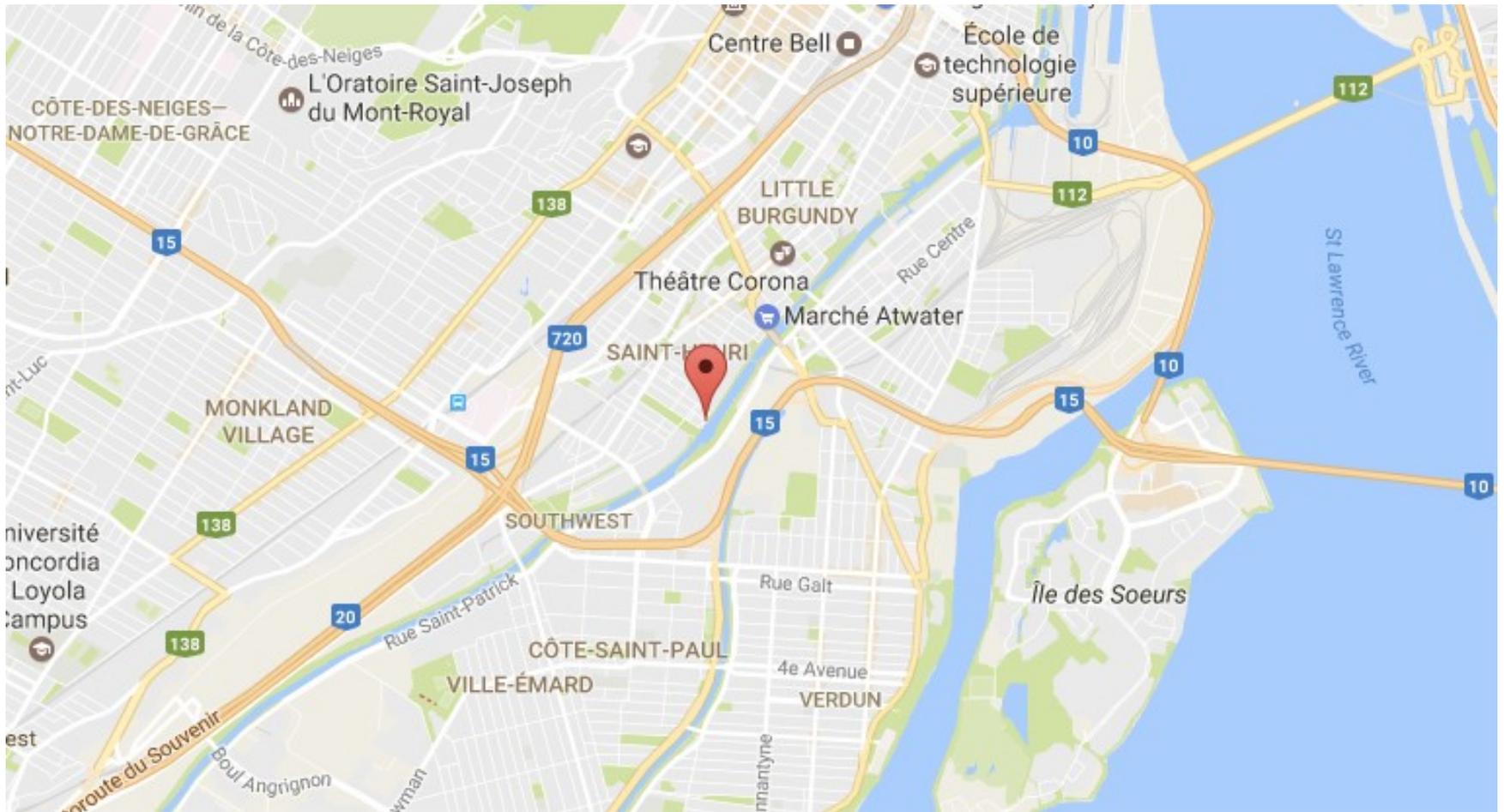


# **THE HERITAGE OF LEA ROBACK**

# Heritage

- Films, book of interviews, comic book
- Lea Roback Foundation – promotes education
- Centre Léa Roback - social inequality research
- Streets named in her memory

# Rue Léa Roback, Montreal



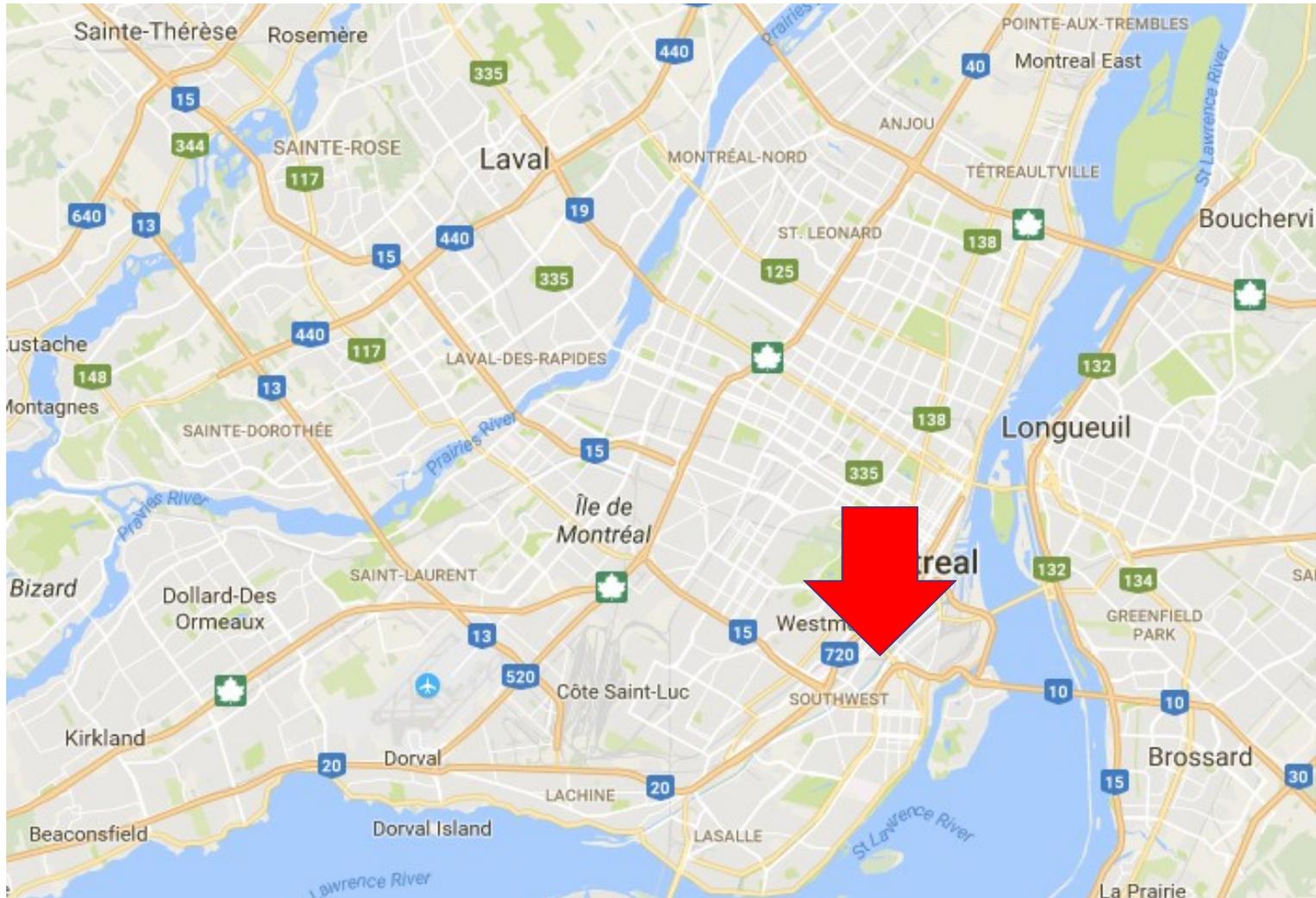
**BLACK ROCK GROUP: ARTIST-ACTIVISTS  
IN VERDUN + THE POINT**

# Black Rock Group

These are preliminary reflections: historical sources are scarce

# **DEFINING THE GROUP**

# Where: Verdun + Point St. Charles



Source: Google maps

# When/what

- 1981- founded

“What has emerged is not easy to classify; the group acts as **a focus for working class, Verdun cultural and political activities** [....] This group is based upon a singular community of interest which includes many, many varying points of view and attitudes.”

Richard Flint, *McGill Daily*, July 28, 1982 p.1 + 6

## Who: partial list??

- Adams, Danny
- Arkinson, Linda
- Beriault, Georges
- Bowman, Martin
- Bradley, John
- Calder, Nelson
- Callahan, Kevin
- **Fennario, David**
- Filip, Raymond
- German, Kevin
- Salmela, John
- Salmela, Sheila
- Sorley, Jimmy
- Wilcox, Keith

# In their own words: defining the group

“These [Verdun working class] people were interested in building some sort of centre that would give expression culturally and politically to some of our aspirations and thoughts.”

“Culture in the sense that it’s a way of life rather than big historical artifacts like compositions, ballets etcetera.”

John Bradley + Nelson Calder, *McGill Daily*, July 28, 1982 p. 6.

# In their own words: defining the Group

“We have a formation which is amorphous, it’s very difficult to group together people who have no basic goals sometimes because their own class has dictated that there is no light at the end of the tunnel.”

Danny Adams, *McGill Daily* July 28, 1982 p.7

# Defining the Group

## Some observations

- Focus on **English-language Verdun/Point working class culture**
- To repeat Richard Flint: the Group was “**not easy to classify** [... and] includes many, many varying points of view and attitudes.”

**POLITICS**

# Class solidarity

Claimed common  
interest with the  
Francophone  
working class



# In their own words: class solidarity

**“The French working class recognize [...] that in fact the English working class were never recognized as an entity—**shadows of the same kind of phenomenon that was the basis for Quebec nationalism.”

John Salmela, *McGill Daily* July 28, 1982 p. 7.

# Language

- Defined selves as English working class
- Distinguished themselves from wealthy and middle-class Anglophones

# In their own words: language

“It’s not like Alliance Québec’s sort of thing where guys are pissed off, ‘Gee, we’re not going to get a job here, if we don’t get a job we’re going to go to Toronto [....] These [Verdun working class] people here can’t go to Toronto, they never wanted to go to Toronto [...] We want to stay here.”

John Salmela, *McGill Daily* July 28, 1982 p. 6,7.

# Politics

Some observations:

- In their analysis, **being working class:**
  - **Linked them to Francophone working class, within limits**
  - **Divided them from Westmount + Alliance Quebec**
- In my view, the language issue was complex:
  - **Divided them from Francophone working class, within limits**
  - **Linked them to Westmount + Alliance Quebec but unequally + uneasily**

**ACTIVISM**

# Club + cultural centre



1982- opened at 5365 Lasalle Blvd., Verdun

# Demonstrations

- Christmas 1981- “We’re not cheap”:
  - Protest of of Westmount “paternalism” in giving Christmas turkeys to Verduners
  - Involved delivering a rotting turkey

# In their own words: “We’re not cheap” demonstration, 1981

“We went to Westmount with a sign saying we’ve been feeding Westmount for years and years out of the exploitation of Verdun workers, high prices, high rents, crummy conditions, low wages and all the rest of it.”

Nelson Calder, *McGill Daily*, July 28, 1982 p. 6.

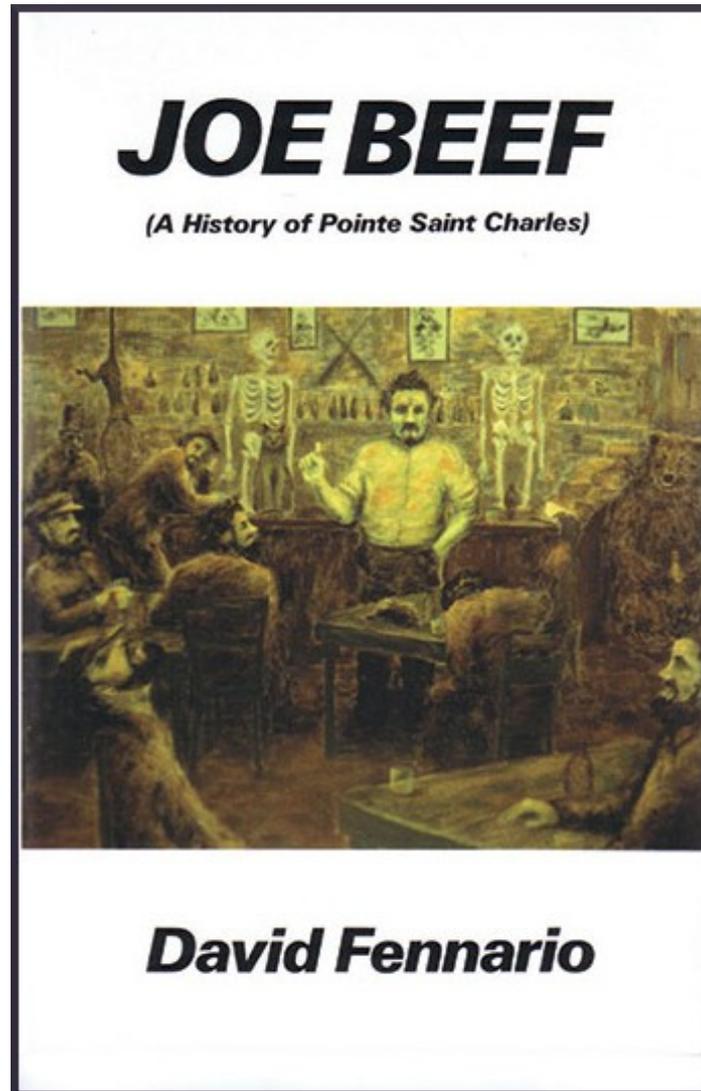
# Demonstrations: “Les maudits blokes,” May Day 1982



# Theatre + other events

- Produced David Fennario's play *Joe Beef* (1984).

Publication of  
the play, 1991,  
Talon Books



# Review of Fennario's *Nothing to Lose*

“Fennario [...] ce peut être, pour les Québécois francophones, [...] de réaliser qu’il existe, en parallèle avec la condition ouvrière dans Hochelaga, par exemple, un prolétariat anglophone [...] dans le secteur de Pointe-St-Charles.”

Jean-Paul Brousseau, *La Presse*, 12 Sept. **1980**

# Publishing

Black Rock Manifesto, 1981.

“It speaks for those who would stay in Quebec, accepting the responsibility and the challenge of creating and transforming their world.”

Nick Auf der Maur, *Montreal Gazette* Nov. 13, 1981.

# In their own words: Manifesto

## BLACK ROCK MANIFESTO

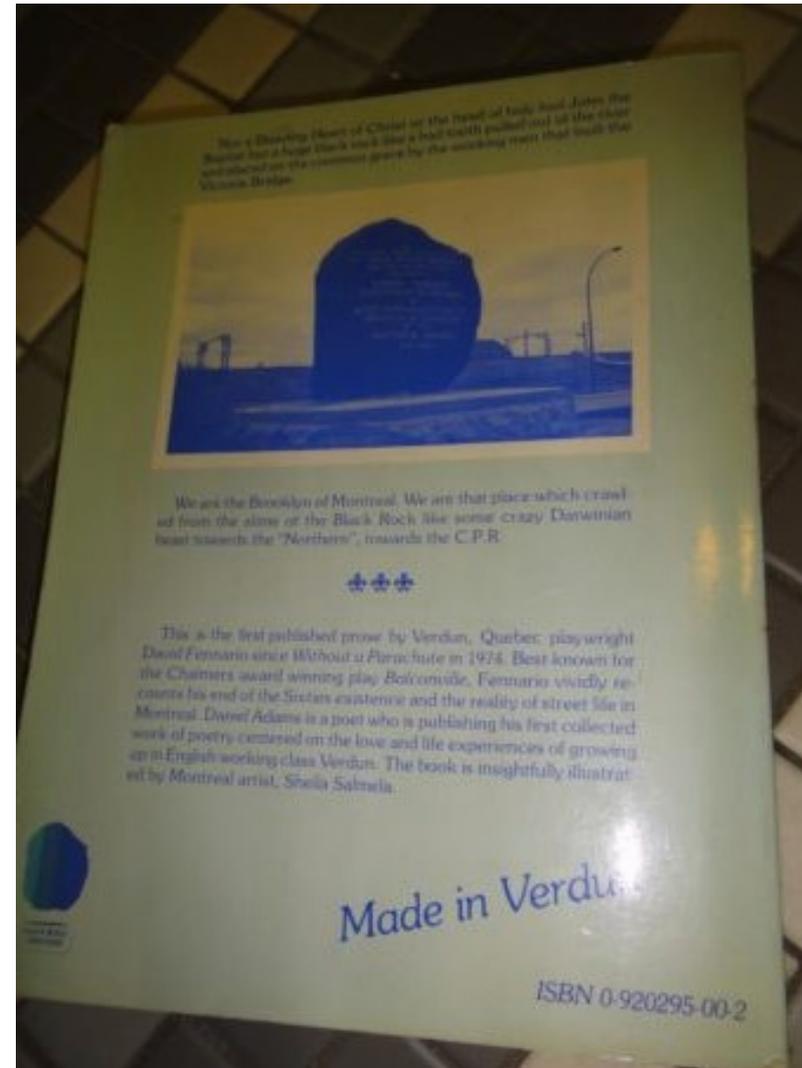
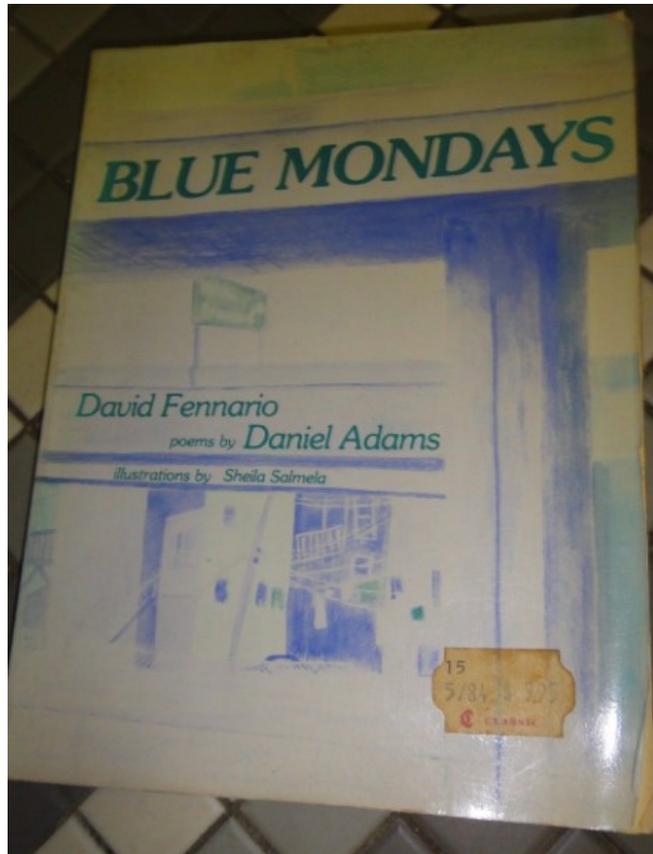
The Black Rock memorial stone in the traditionally Anglo working class district of Pointe Saint-Charles in Montréal, honoring the 6,000 immigrants that died of typhoid fever in 1847.

Not a Bleeding Heart of Christ or the head of holy fool John the Baptist but a huge black rock like a bad tooth pulled out of the river and placed on the common grave by the working men that built the Victoria Bridge.



# Publishing

- *Blue Mondays*, 1984.



# Activism

Some observations:

- Activism based on **art and protest** expressing **English working class realities** in Quebec

**WHAT BECAME OF THE GROUP**

# Group challenges

Members mentioned challenges including:

- No clear goals
- Organizational weakness

# In their own words: Black Rock Group development

“There’s an affinity group that is built up but what utility it has culturally or politically is to be seen by the amount of work people will put into it.”

John Bradley, *McGill Daily*, July 28, 1982 p. 7.

# What happened to the group?

???

My plan – learn more through interviews + research

# Post-group pursuits

- Plays (writing, acting, translating)
- Creative writing
- Poetry
- Teaching
- Community organizing
- Housing activism

**CONCLUSIONS: ANGLO ACTIVISTS**

# Conclusions

I said I would present

1. What was the nature of their activism?



# Conclusions

## 2. Did language affect their activism?

Yes. It affected their experience, understanding + analysis of:

- Social, economic + political integration
- Varied economic conditions and cultural realities
- Links between language, ethnicity, culture and power
  - **Beef + Roback: access + awareness**
  - **Black Rock Group: exclusion + empathy**

# Conclusions

Also: language affected capacities to organize workers and political campaigns in multi-lingual, multi-ethnic working-class environments

- **Beef + Roback: “bridges” for class solidarity**
- **Black Rock Group: expression could express politics and culture of Anglophone working class to others, both Anglophone + Francophone**

# Conclusions

3. What can historians and social actors learn from this?

**Language is a useful category to consider in looking at the history of activism in post-Confederation Quebec.**

It helps us understand:

- Who the activists were
- Details + realities of their thinking and acting
- Aspects of power in Quebec society, economy + politics