

**Activism and Empathy
ChLA 2019 Indianapolis**

Paper title: “Which side are you on?”: children as trade union activists in radical and mainstream children’s literature’

The depiction of trade union activity in mainstream children’s literature tends to be of a critical nature. Those involved in the movement often appear as uneducated, unorganised and without purpose, and the action they are involved in as ill conceived, mistaken and often violent. However, as radical publishing developed and began producing work for children such depictions of the Trade Union movement and its protagonists were challenged, and a more positive picture began to appear.

This paper will look at publications from the late nineteenth century and into the twenty-first, examining the treatment of the subject of the child as trade union activist in children’s literature. It will appraise the representation of the child in both mainstream and radical works and will assess the nature of the role that is assigned to children in these publications. It will also look at the role of some of the radical youth movements in organising child-centred protest around events such as the General Strike of 1926. Is the child a victim of trade union activity, or observer, or more excitingly the centre stage activist, often in solidarity with the adults in its life? This presentation will look at these examples of activism and assess the solidarity between working-class adult and child, for if we are honest, although it is liberating for the child to be free from adult supervision in the adventure stories that populate much of mainstream children’s books, it is surely more liberating to be aware that as a child you are part of that working-class community, and that you are an equal participant in the struggle.