A local union is an ambiguous collective entity. It can be viewed as the manifestation of the collective will of a group of workers to further their aims in the workplace. Alternatively, it can be seen as a creature of a national or international union office that has little interest in fostering rank-and-file democracy. A local union, being a product of many influences, is multi-dimensional. This chapter attempts to capture the complexities of Local 27’s founding, including the major influences on its development.

Several salient questions are germane to this chapter. As a large local in an important international and later national union, to what extent was Local 27 the product of grassroots activism? Who led the local and attempted to guide its policies? How well did it tolerate dissent? How did it deal with the influx of immigrants into Canada in the post-World War II era and the entry of women into the blue-collar work environment? And finally, to what extent did it afford its working-class members an opportunity for direct participation? The answers to these questions are complex and frequently intertwined, and they reveal a local union structure that afforded members a chance to participate in an organization of their own making.

The United Auto Workers International: Goals and Practices

The initial formation of Local 27 and its subsequent growth must be considered in relation to the overall development of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union in the postwar era. Founded in 1934, the UAW was a leading industrial union in 1950 and was the dominant union in the automotive industry. It relied on aggressive organizing tactics to enter new workplaces.
and fostered a sense of union identity within its membership that was based on formidable victories, beginning with the 1936 General Motors strike at Flint, Michigan. The Oshawa, Ontario, General Motors strike in 1937 established the union in Canada, while the 1946 Windsor Ford strike led to the creation of the Rand Formula and the institutionalization of union security through dues check-off.¹

While the UAW billed itself as an international union, it was overwhelmingly shaped by Americans. By 1950, the year Local 27 was founded, the international union had been wracked by internal division. Left-leaning groups within the union either had been or were being purged by the UAW administration led by Walter Reuther. Some locals, such as Local 248 at Allis-Chalmers in Wisconsin, were assaulted by the international office in Detroit, their leaders forced from office, while others acquiesced to pressure to purge themselves of left-leaning elements.² The Canadian locals belonged to UAW Region 7, which was led by George Burt in 1950. Region 7’s office was originally in Windsor, Ontario, but was moved to Toronto by Burt’s successor, Dennis McDermott. Burt, a veteran of internal union politics, rose through the union’s ranks in the pre–World War II years but was not considered a Reuther ally.³ Region 7 included the Canadian Council, founded in 1939. As Charlotte Yates notes, the council was a rank-and-file deliberative body to which delegates from the various locals across the country were assigned on a per capita basis.⁴ It met several times per year, had the power to create regional bylaws, and allowed greater membership control over union policy. The union had a small staff in Canada in the early 1950s, and its efforts were largely devoted to organizing new workplaces and otherwise expanding the union’s influence in the broader labour movement.

The UAW was initially concentrated in major automotive manufacturing centres in the immediate postwar years and had 60,000 members in Canada in 1950.⁵ The labour movement in London, Ontario, had not been involved with a union like the UAW before 1950. Until that year, the city’s labour movement was divided between the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada and the Canadian Congress of Labour. The former federation was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL),

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and the latter with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which comprised unions that had left the AFL in 1935. The UAW was affiliated with the Canadian Congress of Labour. Some industrial employers, such as Kelvinator, had employee associations. The arrival in London of a militant industrial union based in the United States was therefore an event that would reshape the character of the city’s labour movement and of the entire labour relations environment within the city. It also marked the expansion in Canada of the UAW beyond its initial strongholds in Oshawa, Windsor, and St. Catharines.

**The Founding and Expansion of Local 27**

Local 27 was founded partially as an institutional response to corporate policy and partially in response to worker hopes for union representation. Workers at Eaton Rich Automotive [hereafter referred to as Eaton Auto] in Windsor, Ontario, had shown interest in joining the UAW in the late 1930s, and they eventually certified a local union. By the 1950s, conditions in the plant had not improved, and management’s construction of a new plant in London was viewed by the UAW Canadian leadership as an exercise in union avoidance. Burt dispatched international UAW staff representative George Specht to London to lead an organizing drive at the new plant.

The Eaton Auto plant was built in a solidly working-class area of London on Highbury Avenue. Windsor workers were offered employment in the London facility, a decision that quickly undermined the company’s hope of avoiding the UAW. Joe Laporte, who worked at both Eaton Auto plants in Windsor and London, remembered that the economic decision to move to London was fairly obvious for many Windsor workers: “They asked seven or eight guys, some girls too, if they wanted to come. . . . [If I didn’t move] I wouldn’t have work.” Laporte recalled that Eaton Auto management did not want the UAW in the London plant, having dealt with the union in Windsor, but that the London workers were certainly in favour of it. Although the exact number of workers who transferred from Windsor is unclear, it is evident that former Windsor workers formed
the nucleus of the first local executive. Organizing Local 27 was thus dependent on a membership that originated in Windsor and was transplanted to London.

The creation of Local 27, London’s first UAW local, would initiate the growing prominence of the UAW in London. In fact, the union was becoming increasingly active across southern Ontario, occasionally facing competition from other unions. Indeed, Local 27 was founded despite such a challenge. According to the London Free Press, Local 24689 Steelworkers Federal Labour Union, chartered by the AFL, had applied for certification at the new Eaton Auto plant but the UAW intervened to prevent the application from moving forward. Interestingly, Eaton Auto management apparently did not resist the AFL affiliate, but they did attempt to avoid the UAW. The AFL claimed that the London plant should in no way be covered by the UAW agreement at the Windsor Eaton plant, since “most of the employees at the new plant were Londoners.” Burt and Specht vigorously opposed the AFL drive, however, and both of the unions and Eaton Auto appeared before the Ontario Labour Relations Board to argue their positions. In addition, the autoworkers’ union sent a letter to Eaton Auto workers extolling their union’s advantages:

You will soon have to choose between the United Automobile Workers (CIO) and the AFL Steelworkers as your collective bargaining agent. The best way to see what each can do for you is to “look at the record.” . . . Your choice in the labour board vote is between something and nothing, between a union and something that would like you to help it become a union. Eaton Auto workers chose the UAW by a wide margin, with eighty-seven workers voting to join the autoworkers and twenty-six choosing the AFL affiliate. The creation of Local 27, London’s first UAW local, would mark the beginning of the growing prominence of the UAW in London. Side by side this growth, spontaneous worker organizing appears to have diminished in the postwar era. Don Wells argues that the creation and administration of union locals became more bureaucratic and more controlled by
national and international union structures. This theory is partially borne out by the founding of the Eaton Auto unit since the organizing drive was initiated by the UAW Canadian office and thus represented a form of bureaucratic reaction to anti-union corporate policy. On the other hand, the drive’s success was dependent on the willingness of workers at Eaton Auto to draw upon the tradition of UAW membership that they had acquired during their years working in Windsor.

Organizing new units was accomplished by having potential new members sign cards confirming their interest in joining the union. This was followed by a vote to certify the union as the sole bargaining representative in the workplace. The 1950s were a brisk organizing period for Local 27, with over one thousand members added between 1950 and 1953. General Motors opened a diesel locomotive factory in London in 1950, and its collective agreement was actually negotiated through Local 27 before that of Eaton Auto. GM and Eaton Auto were followed by the addition of two more units: Minnesota Mining and Manufacture (3M) in 1952 and Kelvinator in 1953. GM and 3M had previous experience working with the UAW since the UAW had organized other GM and 3M plants in Canada; negotiating with the union in their London plants was therefore not unusual for them. Other smaller units were added in the later 1950s and early 1960s. Eaton Auto announced that it would expand its workforce to 200 workers when it opened, 3M employed 400 people shortly after it opened, GM initially had 560 people in unionized jobs, and Kelvinator joined with 700 members.

Local 27’s founding was somewhat different from the founding of the local autoworkers’ unions described by Lisa Fine and Peter Friedlander. Most notably, it was organized in a city in which the UAW had not previously appeared. The workers described by Fine and Friedlander formed locals in the shadow of major UAW locals in the Detroit area. The Madison, Wisconsin, battery workers discussed by Robert Zieger formed a stand-alone local. Don Wells discusses the creation of a UAW local in Oakville, Ontario — a city that also had no previous experience with the UAW. All of the locals examined by Fine, Friedlander, Zieger, and Wells were based in one workplace. Thus, this research on Local 27’s formation
brings some new insights to the existing work on local unions due to both the circumstances of its founding and its composite form.

Some new units had previously been represented by other unions or staff associations, notably Kelvinator and Northern Telecom. The certification of former employee associations as unions was not unusual in the immediate post–World War II years. Lisa Fine examined a similar process at the reo Motor Company. Kelvinator was different, as it had been in operation in London since 1928. Kelvinator’s staff association, formed in 1943, stayed in place until Local 27 organized the plant. This association was a manifestation of employer paternalism, and former employees considered it a company union. Management adeptly maintained control over it, listening to enough demands to keep the association from becoming militant. George Medland, who worked at Kelvinator, remembered management meeting some of the association’s demands during negotiations. Kelvinator also fostered employee social interaction through a wide range of clubs and committees. Employees eventually became disenchanted with the association, however, because plant management changed in the post–World War II era. The new management showed less respect for the association and did not practice paternalism as skillfully as their predecessors had.

The next major units to join Local 27 were Northern Electric in 1968 and Firestone in 1972. Northern Electric’s association was different from that of Kelvinator. Tom McSwiggan, who worked at Northern Telecom, recalled the difficulty of trying to deal with management through the association and how its ineffectiveness helped to spur worker organization, which resulted in a dramatic confrontation at Northern Electric. The company had first opened a small experimental plant in older east London in the late 1950s. This facility was eventually replaced by a much larger plant at the city’s southern periphery, immediately adjacent to Highway 401. Unlike other major Local 27 bargaining units, which were part of American-owned subsidiaries, Northern Electric was a large Canadian company. Organizing drives had taken place at Northern Electric before, virtually from the time its first pilot plant opened in London in 1959 — a plant that subsequently closed when its larger successor was built. An
internal organizing committee consistently remained in place in the new plant.21

Since the 1940s, the United Electrical Workers (UE) had been recognized as the dominant union in the electrical parts sector and would thus have been a natural fit for the London plant.22 The UE was also widely believed within the labour movement to be Communist-led, a perception that was also found at the local level among Local 27 members and UAW staff reps.23 The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers were interested in organizing the London Northern Electric plant, and ultimately so, too, was the UAW Local 27 activist Tom McSwiggan, who was heavily involved in both organizing campaigns.24 He initially organized on behalf of the UE, in 1966, but eventually supported and participated in the UAW drive. In fact, he had helped get cards signed for the UAW in 1960, although he and other Local 27 officers had been directed by George Burt to return the cards, as the Northern Electric plant was not considered part of the UAW’s jurisdiction. The Canadian UAW had declined to raid the UE and absorb its locals following the latter’s expulsion from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC).25

By 1968, the UAW was prepared to represent a plant that it had previously considered the UE’s turf, but this time, it faced the USWA. Raymond Murray, a former CLC representative, recalled that the USWA was very active in the London area during the 1960s and 1970s — a situation that certainly spurred that union to try to organize Northern Electric.26 Local 27’s rapid expansion brought it into competition with the USWA, while also leading to changes in rank-and-file allegiance. The UAW’s message was clearly more compelling, as its activists, such as McSwiggan, signed sufficient cards to certify a bargaining unit. Some people who had initially supported the USWA drive, such as future UAW staff member Jim Kennedy, switched their union affiliation during the organizing drive.27

Local organizing involved some peril at this time: McSwiggan and his family found themselves under some duress during the first organizing campaign at Northern Electric. This was one of the instances when anti-Communism played a role in Local 27’s activities. Northern Electric workers were not necessarily Communists; they simply wanted a more
effective union than the staff association that was in place in their plant. Regardless, the CLC sought to influence the outcome of the Northern Electric certification vote in opposition to the UE. Two members of the London Labour Council, one of whom was a member of a skilled trade union, visited McSwiggan’s home while he was away and threatened his wife, Sheila, telling her that her husband had better be careful or he would be “deported for being a Clydeside Red.”

Upset over this visit, Sheila initially urged Tom to rethink his involvement in the organizing campaign. Former Local 27 activist and GM Diesel worker Roland Par ris confirmed that Tom Harkness from the Carpenters’ Union and Bob McLeod from the CLC were the people who threatened Sheila.

Local 27 went from organizing one plant, Eaton Auto, at the start of the 1950s to representing seven units by the end of the decade with a total of fifteen hundred members. Major gains had clearly been made in a short time. The process of expansion continued through the 1960s, with the addition of six additional units: Fruehauf Transport and Tecumseh Products in 1963, Keeprite Unifin in 1967, Northern Electric and Bendix in 1968, and Eagle Machine Tool and International Harvester in 1969. The local focused on organizing in automotive parts production, as Tecumseh Products, Unifin, and Bendix were parts factories. The latter two joined the local after the introduction of the 1965 Auto Pact. Fruehauf, although a transport company, was dependent on industrial production for business, and International Harvester was a farm implement firm. Northern Electric was the notable exception since it produced telephone equipment. Although Local 27 was not initially a product of the Auto Pact, it grew through representing some workplaces that were engaged in automotive parts production.

The local continued to add new units in the 1970s. Firestone Steel, previously a barrel manufacturer and later becoming Accuride, joined in 1970. Globe Envelope, joining in the same year, was a manufacturer of envelopes and paper products and was not related to automotive production. Universal Engineering joined in 1971; ITT Lighting, which manufactured lighting fixtures, in 1972; and Alcan, a window manufacturer, in 1973. A small unit comprising Bendix office staff also joined in 1973, and two more
units certified in 1974: AWL Steego, an automotive parts distributor, and light bulb manufacturer Phillips Electronics. Vinyl siding manufacturer Mastic Manufacturing joined in 1976. Although the type of products that they produced varied, all of these companies had a focus on manufacturing or were workplaces related to manufacturing, so Local 27 made no substantial move toward service sector organizing during this period.32

The late 1960s and early 1970s also brought the loss of some existing units. Kelvinator shut down in 1969, followed by Eaton Auto in 1971. Both closures were largely unexpected and attracted considerable attention from the media and the broader labour movement.33 They brought the first major job losses suffered by the local. Bob Nickerson, who had been appointed staff representative just prior to the announcement of Kelvinator’s closure, was surprised by the closure, as negotiations were underway between the company and the union, and management had not indicated any major changes.34 The closure led to the loss of seven hundred jobs and had a significant impact on Local 27 because Kelvinator was a major bargaining unit and its focus on appliances diversified the type of work performed by the local’s members. Having members in a smaller number of industries meant that the local was more likely to suffer the effects of economic cycles in those industries. Representing workers in a broader range of industries and workplaces also helped the local gain wider bargaining expertise.

The 1980s brought a continuation of the expansion and closure cycle. Some service sector organizing occurred with the addition of auto mechanics and autobody technicians at London Motor Products (LMP) in 1980. Light manufacturing firm, Carmor Manufacturing, joined in 1980. Sparton of Canada, which manufactured military sonar systems, joined the local in 1981 after previously being represented by a small union called the National Council of Canadian Labour (NCCL). This was another occasion when Local 27 found itself in competition. The NCCL accused the UAW of attempting to raid its membership as early as 1975. Sparton workers eventually voted for the UAW and joined Local 27.35

Proto Tools, a producer of hand tools, closed in 1986. It was one of the earlier units in Local 27, having joined in 1953, and was never as large as units like GM or Northern Electric. Bob Sexsmith, who worked at Proto,
remembered that workers unsuccessfully tried to buy the plant prior to its closure.\textsuperscript{36} This was the only attempt at employee ownership during the local’s history. Highbury Ford, an automotive dealer, was certified briefly in 1988. Form-Rite, another auto parts manufacturer, joined the local that same year. The last large addition was the 1989 merger of Local 27 with the remaining units of CAW Local 1620. Local 1620 had seen its membership reduced due to the closure of the Fleck Manufacturing plant in Huron Park, approximately forty kilometres north of London. Two smaller bargaining units — Eastown Chevrolet Oldsmobile and Burgess Wholesale — were organized by the local in 1990. Local 27 ended the 1980s with 5,800 members.\textsuperscript{37} This was a substantial increase over the 1,500 members represented at the end of the 1950s.

The UAW, a new phenomenon in 1950s London, clearly wanted to establish a major presence in the London area. A prominent industrial union with a visible public profile, the UAW attracted a large number of new members. Workers at plants like Northern Electric chose the UAW over other unions, having observed the union’s success in the local community and beyond. Local 27 represented some of the most important plants in London, including GM, and it would have seemed a natural choice for disenchanted workers seeking workplace representation.

Local 27 consisted of several bargaining units in a variety of industrial facilities. Its composite form was one of its most defining traits and would shape its internal development, including who led it. The local initially requested composite form from the international UAW office and approval was granted.\textsuperscript{38} Locals that represented just one workplace seem to have been more common than composites. Local 27’s request was probably granted for one main reason: to quickly expand the local and the UAW’s influence in London. The UAW and later the CAW included other composite locals. For example, Local 222 in Oshawa, which became the largest autoworkers’ local in Canada, included units other than its principal GM plant. UAW Local 199 in St. Catharines also grew to encompass smaller workplaces in addition to its main GM unit.\textsuperscript{39}

Local 27, however, was different from those composite locals because it included a broader range of manufacturing plants and, most importantly,
because it was not dominated by a single large bargaining unit. Locals 199 and 222, although composite, were almost exclusively associated with GM. But while Local 27’s inclusion of a variety of workplaces became a source of strength and diversity, it also occasionally caused some contention. Composite locals, such as UAW Local 211, were also found in the United States, but they appear to have been less numerous across North America than locals that represented a single workplace.40

**Creating an Internal Structure**

Local 27 began as a relatively small administrative operation. The addition of the GM Diesel unit strengthened the local but also created an entity that would compete with the Eaton Auto unit for broader influence. The addition of GM also necessitated the creation of two levels of local leadership: unit and local executives. Eaton Auto and GM Diesel began holding separate unit meetings in the mid-1950s.41 Other units adopted the same practice. Some units almost grew into locals within a local, while others remained comparatively small.

Rank-and-file members who wanted to become involved in the union could do so by running for elected positions. Local officers in the 1950s were not paid for their services outside of reimbursement for costs incurred while on union leave. By the mid-1960s, paid full-time local and bargaining unit officer positions had become common in the larger units, such as General Motors Diesel and Northern Electric, but smaller units, such as London Generator Service in the 1970s and London Motor Products in the 1980s, always had volunteer officers who had to request leave time to conduct union business.42

The elected staff at the local’s hall consisted of a president, vice-president, recording secretary, secretary-treasurer, and sergeant-at-arms. Trustees were also elected for various terms of service. Duties performed by local staff officers included routine administrative tasks like taking notes at meetings, correspondence, and bookkeeping. Written correspondence between officers, with employers, and with the UAW national and international offices was voluminous from the 1950s to the 1980s.
Everything from requests for office supplies, to approval of political donations, to requests for union leave was routinely typed and mailed. These administrative demands grew so time consuming that in 1963, the local hired its first full-time employee — secretary Olive Huggins.  

It is clear that from its inception, Local 27’s local officers were familiar with the basic functions associated with administering the organization, including corresponding with employers, leading meetings, and handling the local’s finances. There are two possible explanations for their competence. The role played by former Windsor Eaton Auto workers at the new London facility was undoubtedly crucial to the local’s early success. Of the nine people on the first executive in 1951, including two women, Elta Efford and Gladys Scott, four had transferred from Eaton Auto in Windsor: Efford, Scott, Ernie Axon, and Archie Wrench. Axon was the local president and Scott was financial secretary. Even if they had not served as local officers in Windsor, they were familiar with union membership and were able to guide new members.

The other factor was the regular attendance of UAW staff representative, George Specht, at local meetings and unit meetings. He monitored the local’s progress and responded to issues relating to the national and international offices. The UAW Canadian office had devoted considerable effort to pursuing Eaton Auto from Windsor to London and undoubtedly wished to ensure that its new London local was developing in a manner that did not challenge the national and international union agendas but that ensured its survival and growth. Specht’s regular presence at meetings helped foster that process.

Building the local’s administrative structure also required the creation of a financial apparatus. Member dues were the primary source of revenue from 1950 to 1990, and the local was generally on its own when it came to financing its operations. It began with a small budget but ended the 1980s with substantial financial assets. For example, for the fiscal year 1958–59, the local had a total income of $88,848.29 and had cash assets of $36,317. Those assets were allocated in various savings accounts. By the end of the 1980s, the local’s balance sheet was more detailed and reflected a complex administrative operation. Total annual revenues for the local,
as of October 1990, were $262,171, equivalent to $50,818 in 1958 dollars, and
the available funds totaled $742,877, equivalent in 1958 dollars to $143,997.47
Revenues, as expressed in 1958 dollars, declined somewhat between 1958
and 1990, but the local’s cash assets increased. Furthermore, in 1990, the
local had the hall, a valuable asset not listed on the balance sheet.

The local’s money was used for a range of purposes. In 1990, the per
capita payment, paid to the CAW national office for each member of the
local, was the largest expense at $105,273. Two of the next largest expenses,
$58,449 on lost time (wages) and $26,957 for travel and expenses, were
related to official union business. Those three categories of expenses
constituted 66 percent of overall expenses. The bar cost $47,119 and
brought in $53,474. The per capita tax was the most important expense
paid by the local. Remitted to the national union office, it provided the
principal form of revenue for the UAW and CAW. Dues were the main
source of revenues for national and international unions operating in
Canada. Local 27, like all local unions, collected dues for the national
and national union offices. Local unions thus played a crucial role in
maintaining the financial solvency of those offices.48 Local 27 was never
put under trusteeship, or direct control, by the national or international
offices. It maintained a stable financial structure.

Along with an internal financial system, Local 27 adopted a demo-
cratic structure, which included a set of bylaws and an accompanying
governing apparatus. The chairperson of each bargaining unit had a seat
on the local’s executive board, and members of each unit could vote in
their specific units as well as in local elections. They could also run for
local positions.49 Local officers were elected primarily from the executives
of the various bargaining units. Those officers included Ray Atkinson and
Archie Baillie from GM, Bill Froude from Kelvinator, and Jerry Flynn
from Tecumseh Products. GM quickly became the largest unit, with a
commensurately large unit executive.50 Roland Parris, who worked at
GM, remembered that a common view among local members was that
his unit ran everything.51 This opinion is at least partially borne out in the
election results from the early 1950s to the late 1980s. Some of the local
presidents — such as Atkinson and Baillie, who led the local in the 1960s
and the 1980s, respectively — came from GM. Local presidents like Al Campbell and Bill Froude did not, however, come from GM: Campbell was from Eaton Auto and Froude worked at Kelvinator. Sam Saumur, president in the mid-1970s, worked at Northern Telecom. Overall, fewer than half of the local’s presidents came from GM.

All of the local and unit officers were drawn from the rank-and-file membership, but it seems that the same people tended to run, either successfully or unsuccessfully, for elected positions. Local and unit officers also appear to have worked predominantly in production rather than skilled trades jobs, probably because skilled tradespeople were a minority in most industrial workplaces. Al Campbell, the chairperson of the Eaton Auto unit for many years, ran unsuccessfully for local president in the 1960s before finally becoming president when Bill Froude could no longer run after Kelvinator closed. Campbell, Froude, Atkinson, and later Sam Saumur, Rene Montague, and Archie Baillie won elections at both the local and unit levels.

Local leadership positions were not equal in terms of influence and working conditions. They were initially part-time volunteer positions, but some became paid jobs in the mid-1960s. Language that stipulated how local and unit officers could perform union business during working hours was included in collective agreements with some agreements, such as GM’s, providing detailed instructions on the number of committee representatives and how much time they could take away from work to perform union business. Unit chairs at places like GM, 3M, Accuride, and Northern Electric became full-time paid roles. Some units had more than one paid position: for example, GM had a paid full-time health and safety representative by the late 1970s. GM and Northern Telecom unit officers also enjoyed super seniority, which meant that they were exempt from layoffs in their bargaining units. Full-time unit officer roles were compensated by the employer, while local officers were funded by member dues. Smaller units, like London Motor Products in the 1980s, relied on part-time officers who had to request permission from their employers to conduct union business. They were not compensated for any expenses beyond those incurred while on union business.
Whether an elected position was full-time or part-time and whether any compensation was involved would certainly have influenced a person contemplating running in an election. Although acting as a union representative meant an additional workload, being able to devote time exclusively to union business — even just a few hours per day — would have been a welcome break from routine factory work. Running for an elected position at a unit like Northern Telecom or GM could entail considerable electoral effort. It also meant that a person’s profile was raised within the broader Canadian UAW. For example, Rene Montague worked at Northern Telecom and eventually became plant chairperson during the 1970s. He remembered putting considerable personal resources and time into running in plant elections. While he was not elected to a local executive position, he nonetheless became the CAW’s nominee to the Ontario Labour Relations Board in 1986. Unit officers from larger workplaces also participated in groups specific to a particular employer, such as the GM Council.

The foregoing discussion should not suggest that smaller units like Central Chevrolet or London Generator Service were necessarily marginalized within the broader Local 27 structure. They were able to draw upon the collective bargaining experience and resources of the entire local. They also played an important role in deciding the outcome of an election that was being contested by candidates from the larger units. However, leaders from smaller units had to build political support within the larger bargaining units if they had any aspirations of winning a local executive position. Unit officers from medium-sized workplaces like Tecumseh Products or Phillips, such as Jerry Flynn and Jim Ashton, were able to win local executive positions, but to do so, they first devoted years to local activism, thus building support within the larger bargaining units.

Unit and local officers occupied roles at the top of the leadership hierarchy. Below them was a range of stewards who varied in number across the units. In the 1950s and 1960s, stewards were considered the foundation on which local unions are built. Despite this, the steward position was often difficult to perform and did not attract sufficient
numbers of people, a reality certainly found within Local 27. Being a steward required steady commitment to the union and its goals, and yet the job was performed on a volunteer basis. Unit and local executive positions were almost always contested and filled, but steward positions were not always filled, and elections for them were not overly competitive. For instance, the 3M unit had a full slate of officers and committee members following its 1963 election, but only half of the required number of stewards. Even elections for local officer positions were not always contested. For instance, in 1969, the positions for first and second vice-president, financial secretary, recording secretary, and sergeant-at-arms were filled by acclamation. Even though this was a period when the local was expanding, the membership showed little interest in running for all of the leadership positions.

Stewards were not the main policy makers in the local despite being the initiators of membership grievances and the primary point of contact with management on the shop floor. Serving as a steward was in many ways a thankless task. As Leonard Sayles and George Strauss noted in the early 1950s, a steward was the “man in the middle,” with little real authority. People like unit chairpersons did not necessarily have to be in constant contact with rank-and-file members, but stewards worked alongside the membership and were buffeted by a continuous stream of union issues, while also carrying out work for their employers.

The fact that elections were not always closely contested probably had something to do with the influence exercised by the incumbent leadership. Activist Roland Parris described the election process:

What will happen, as the executive is coming along [for re-election], is the current president will get all of the key players — all the plant chairs and key activists — and they will caucus and divide the [Local 27-wide] positions, to a degree.

This did not necessarily mean that election outcomes were predetermined, but efforts were certainly made to achieve a consensus prior to votes being cast. Anyone who attempted to challenge this method of selecting candidates had the potential to split the local.
Rank-and-file participation in local policy decisions primarily manifested itself through membership meetings rather than by running in elections. Meetings were held for the entire local and within each unit, but attendance was not always particularly high unless something noteworthy like an election was on the agenda. It was also through those forums that political differences within the local appeared. Parris and Sexsmith recounted how different bargaining units would form competing electoral caucuses before local elections. These caucuses often coalesced around differing political ideologies. The Left caucus was based at Eaton Auto, while the Right caucus formed in GM. In the 1950s and 1960s in the local, Right and Left meant tension between social democrats and Communists. The UAW was not unique in having internal political debates across its national structure or within its locals. Bill Freeman describes similar internal conflict within Steelworkers Local 1005. The fact that meetings were at times sparsely attended suggests that the debates between Left and Right were largely between competing core groups of activists, who chose to run initially for steward positions, and then for local executive roles. The policy debates within the local were consequently conducted within an active minority that also constituted the core group of activists.

Some members, in specific circumstances, would comment on the local’s internal ideological debate. For example, members of a community group called the Militant Co-Op picketed the Eaton Auto plant as its closure approached. Most of the remaining workers signed a petition opposing the demonstration out of concern that it would jeopardize their severance packages. The co-op’s involvement was coordinated by Al Campbell and the London Labour Council. Campbell was still Local 27 president at this point, but his successor as Eaton Auto plant chair, Don Watt, told the Free Press that he did not want the closure to be “used as a political platform for groups such as the Militant Co-Op or the NDP Waffles and certainly not the Canadian Communists.” Rank-and-file members and activists were willing to support a leftist like Campbell in his capacity as a union officer, but they did not necessarily want to be associated with any Left political movements.
Women’s Issues Are Union Issues

Women became key activists in Local 27, and gender consequently played an important role in its development. The local was predominantly male, and, even in the case of women members, the vast majority of members were either Canadian born or European immigrants. Two-thirds of the faces looking proudly out from a photograph of six charter members of the local (see figure 1.1) are male, the exceptions being Gladys Scott and Elta Efford. They are all white, but with some obvious variation in age. Scott and Efford, both employed at Eaton Auto in production jobs, were among the five women of the fifteen original charter members. Collective agreements available from the 1970s onward illustrate the number of men and women found in each bargaining unit, with women occasionally outnumbering men. GM had few, if any, female production workers in the 1950s and 1960s, but some were hired in the 1970s and 1980s. 3M employed women as early as the 1960s, and they became more numerous during the 1970s and 1980s. Kelvinator does not appear to have had any women production workers from the time of the plant’s certification until its closure in 1969.

FIG 1.1 Founding members of Local 27. Left to right, back row: Ed Brennan, René (Joe) LaPorte, Ernie Axon. Left to right, front row: Gladys Scott, Archie Wrench, Elta Efford. Source: CAW Local 27, Fiftieth Family Album.
Northern Telecom had by far the highest proportion of women workers of any of the bargaining units. Other smaller units such as Central Chevrolet were overwhelmingly male. Workplace relations between men and women also differed depending on union membership. Shirley Martin, who worked as a secretary in the local office, remembered only one instance of dealing with a belligerent man at the local hall. He was inebriated and a member of a different union. 71 Rose Hurt, a non-union administrative employee at Kelvinator, remembered male production workers stopping work to call out something like “boom-boom-boom” whenever a woman walked out on the factory floor wearing heels. 72 She found this behaviour “innocent” and did not consider it offensive. Maida Miners, who also worked at Kelvinator as a payroll clerk, recalled male production workers jokingly asking her to add some more hours to their timecards, but otherwise did not remember them doing or saying anything inappropriate. 73

Although male unionized workers may not have said anything overtly offensive to women working in administrative positions, they did view women as occupying a separate workplace sphere. The local’s first employee, Olive Huggins, retired on July 21, 1966. She was duly presented by the local with a gift valued at $50, a fairly substantial sum at this time. 74 An account of the event noted that “after the presentation and unwrapping the officers eagerly lined-up for kisses from Mrs. Huggins . . . the Recording Secretary was his usual bashful self.” 75 Olive Huggins may have been “some kind of secretary” in the eyes of a woman co-worker like Shirley Martin, but Martin developed an eye twitch obviously brought on by the stressful work pace that was partially set by Huggins. 76 The men who worked with Huggins saw her differently. Kissing her goodbye was not degrading in their eyes, and perhaps not in hers. Rather, it symbolized their view of her as a maternal figure who had earned a generous retirement gift and with whom they felt an emotional connection, but who also occupied a different workplace sphere than them despite sharing an office.

Women’s entry into unionized blue-collar workplaces has been documented by a range of researchers, and most have concluded that women faced significant obstacles. As Kevin Boyle notes, white male workers
used their masculinity as a defence mechanism against employers and against the arrival of women and people of colour in the workplace. White male workers felt hostility toward women in the workplace and did not know how to cope with their arrival. Former GM Diesel worker Roland Parris commented that men felt that their pride had been hurt when women started doing the same jobs as theirs and thought that it became a “woman’s job.” Pam Sugiman found similar patterns across the UAW; she argues that the union was a highly gendered environment and that UAW leaders, until the late 1970s, did little to advance women’s issues. Research completed in the 1950s and 1960s confirmed the difficulties faced by women in industrial workplaces. For example, Sidney Peck’s 1963 study found that blue-collar men did not consider it “natural” for women to be industrial workers.

As figure 1.2 illustrates, women who worked in production were not viewed by men in the same manner as those who worked in more traditional female occupations. This image is the only overtly sexualized image in the *Local 27 News*. Like the workers examined by Peck, men in Local 27 appear to have had difficulty accepting women in the industrial workplace. Most men who belonged to the local were married at some point, and their spouses generally did not work. If they did, it was in jobs that were not economically equal to their husbands. The exception was immigrant workers, some of whom had spouses who worked full-time. Introducing women into the union and the shop floor would have led to a substantial change in how men in Local 27 perceived women’s role in the workplace, particularly beyond the domestic sphere.

The factory floor, unlike an office, was not recognized as a female workplace by male workers, for whom the factory was a masculine environment. It was also where women first encountered the union and where those who wanted to become activists had the first chance to do so. While some women encountered overt biases, such as harassment, all of them faced structural barriers in the union that initially made it difficult for them to advance women’s issues. Beulah Harrison, who joined Local 27 through Northern Electric in 1962, clearly indicated that women suffered discrimination based on wages:

> When I started at Northern, I only made a $1.44 per hour. They had a grading system. When they hired a male he went right to the male category, which was more money than a woman — she started at the low [rate].

Harrison initially became an active organizer for the USWA because people in the plant were “desperate for a union, and wanted out from under the association.” Workers “were just as pleased” that the UAW eventually certified the plant. Women at Northern Electric had clear bargaining objectives:

> We went in with the position that they [management] could not hire anybody in the lower [wage] grades anymore. They had to upgrade them to the next grade up, and if they started a man . . . he started at the bottom, too.
It took time for women to gain leadership roles in the local despite initially playing an important role in founding it. Gladys Scott’s term was relatively short, but there was considerable change on the local executive in those early years, with all of the original members replaced by 1954.84 Joe Laporte commented that most of the people who came from Eaton Auto in Windsor eventually returned to their hometown; it is possible that both women wished to return to Windsor for their remaining employment years. Laporte also noted that Scott and Efford were “pretty old” at the time that they moved to London, a perception that may have been based on his comparative youth.85 A woman named Betty Doupe was elected sergeant-at-arms in 1954 but did not serve for a long period.86 Although the sergeant-at-arms is generally known to have little administrative authority, the person filling that position was responsible for ensuring that no one at a union meeting became abusive or violent. Local 27 members must have felt that Doupe was capable of handling those duties. Another woman, Chris Lynch, was a member of the Eaton Auto plant committee in 1960, but all other major unit and local positions were occupied by men.

Edith Johnston joined the local in 1964 through employment at 3M. She remembered that women in her plant became active because of the same issues mentioned by Harrison, but she was also encouraged to become an activist by men in her bargaining unit:

I wasn’t there very long . . . a few months . . . and the supply man who brought our supplies . . . wanted to talk to me about coming to a union meeting. I can remember very clearly saying, “What would I want to go to a union meeting for?” He tried to explain to me what went on at a union meeting, and I asked why he was asking me to go. He said that he had been watching me, and that I spoke to everyone in the same manner, whether it was management or a worker. I had the same way of pleasantly talking to them. He thought that would go good in doing union business. I realized afterward, years later when I looked back on that situation, [that] there had been a need in most of those [Local 27] units who had union meetings and in Local 27 meetings for women to attend — and apparently women didn’t go to union meetings in those days.
Johnston eventually rose up though the local’s activist ranks and served as financial secretary from 1966 to 1975. Her duties prior to leaving the local to join the UAW staff included meeting with other local unions in the UAW to advance women’s issues; as she remembered, “I used to talk to the presidents about getting [their] women together into a women’s committee . . . so I did a lot of that work.” 87

Johnston did not describe many obstacles to women’s progress within Local 27, but she dealt with problems encountered by other women when she joined the UAW staff:

3M was a decent plant to work in. To begin with, I think that 3M’s commitment began with what kind of business they wanted to run. They would not have allowed their foremen to allow rough stuff to go on with women like what happened in some of those plants in Windsor. For instance, when I was put on staff, it was amazing how immediately I got phone calls from women telling me some of the awful things that were going on and some of the awful things that would get put on the assembly line . . . how humiliating it was. Then I also had women who came to me and told me how hard they were working in their local union and how put down they were in their local union meetings. . . . Even when I was in Local 27, I began dealing with some of those things [going on in other locals].

Johnston benefited from being part of a Local 27 bargaining unit. When considering how men in Local 27 behaved in contrast to men in other locals, she commented:

[It was] probably the different type of people that they had in leadership roles. If I think of Local 222 and 195 and 444 . . . macho, big-time men, full-time . . . always at the mike shouting away about stuff, and when I look at Gordon Parker and Bill Froude and Al Campbell — very intelligent people but much quieter. 88

Neither Harrison from Northern Electric nor Georgina Anderson from Bendix remembered experiencing overt discrimination or harassment from male co-workers. 89 Regardless, Local 27 women, like those discussed by Sugiman, realized that they needed to challenge established practices
in the union if they wanted to work in factories. According to Edith Johnston, women “wanted to go to a union meeting and be recognized.” There were no women’s caucuses or conventions when she and Harrison joined the union. The “main thing,” Johnston said, “was to get women to bring their bylaws book and constitution book, and go over it and over it.” They had to pursue their objectives in opposition to social expectations of how women should behave. Johnston, who separated from her husband before working at 3M, faced the difficulties of raising her children alone while working to advance women’s issues in the union. She recalled:

At that time, if you talked about being separated, or even wanted to talk about unhappiness in marriage, other women — your friends — would say to you, “What did you do, Edith, to make it all [so] that it wasn’t right?” If you said to someone that maybe your husband was going to hit you, they would say, “What did you do to make him want to hit you?”

In contrast to the women who preceded her, Julie White, who joined 3M in the early 1970s, felt that her workplace had been sexist. White (not to be confused with sociologist Julie White) is the youngest in the group of women activists interviewed for this book. A member of the baby boom generation, she wanted well-paid industrial work. While she was not unlike the women who came before her in the local — issues of basic fairness in the workplace spurred them all to become activists — she benefited from the earlier efforts of women like Johnston and Harrison, both of whom were established activists when she became a Local 27 member. White particularly noted Harrison’s ability to present arguments in membership meetings, even when dealing with men:

Beulah, when I look back, she was kind of a mentor for me when I first went on the women’s committee. . . . My first real exposure to the local union was through the women’s committee. The chair at the time was Beulah Harrison. I remember going to membership meetings and watching Beulah, and boy, she challenged things. I thought, “Oh my gosh,” she had so much tenacity; she was up challenging the boys sometimes at the general membership meeting. She was really respectful and knew her
stuff — really researched it. So she was a real leader, at least for me, and I think for a lot of other women.93

Johnston said that she did not accomplish her political success alone and that she needed support — particularly from the GM local.94 Her experience with local UAW leaders and with UAW Canadian Region Vice-President Dennis McDermott counters some of Sugiman’s evidence on the union leadership’s unwillingness to advance women’s issues. Froude and Campbell would have known of women’s efforts in other locals — like Local 199 in St. Catharines — to further a more inclusive union agenda.95 Former staff reps Al Seymour and Bob Nickerson also emphasized their interest in encouraging women to become more involved when they were Local 27 staff reps.96

Johnston’s support from other units was primarily rooted in her ability to perform union work. Other past members of the local and staff, including Shirley Martin and Hector McLellan, commented on how Johnston approached people about becoming local activists.97 Without doubt, support from the local executive also helped her. While her political leanings are not evident from campaign articles in the Local 27 News, her support from GM — the centre of the Right caucus — suggests that she too was part of that caucus.

The local and national leadership’s decision to promote greater female worker activism was partially based upon the realization that more women were working in industrial jobs, but it should also be viewed as a response by women like Harrison and others at Northern Electric who wanted gender biases in the workplace removed. Campbell and Froude may have been particularly mindful of the need for newly organized women workers to see some female representation on the local executive.

Johnston and Lorna Moses went on to join the UAW Canadian staff as the first female staff representatives.98 It would be several years before another woman leader came to prominence in the local: Georgina Anderson was elected the chair of the Bendix unit. Bendix was an auto part manufacturer, and Anderson worked in a line job. The Bendix workforce comprised both men and women, with the latter slightly outnumbered by
the former. Anderson nonetheless won elections in the plant with male support. This is in contrast to Northern Electric, where male candidates invariably won with female electoral support. Anderson attributed her success to the fact that she had earned the confidence of the men in her bargaining unit. They were less concerned about the sex of the person representing them than about the effectiveness of the representation that they received from the union. This is particularly noteworthy because Anderson was a woman of colour at a time when Local 27 was overwhelmingly white.99

Julie White joined the 3M unit’s bargaining committee in the late 1980s. 3M was a predominantly male work environment, although the number of women employed at the plant had begun to rise during the 1970s. White enjoyed electoral success because she too was able to garner votes from both men and women, having earned considerable respect from her unit’s membership. Steve Van Eldick, who was hired at 3M during the late 1980s, described White’s leadership ability in glowing terms because of her willingness to champion new bargaining issues like same-sex benefits. Like Anderson and Johnston before her, White’s success was based on her skill at representing workers, her ability to earn their respect regardless of gender, and the support of women in the union.100

Women’s advancement in the union occurred in the face of enormous challenges. For instance, Johnston’s success, regardless of how she achieved it, happened despite facing obstacles not encountered by men aspiring to similar leadership positions. She was a single parent raising three children when she first became involved with the union. Beulah Harrison, Georgina Anderson, and Julie White were also single parents during their years in the union.101 In contrast, no male activists appear to have been single parents. As Jane Stinson and Penni Richmond argue, union work was “greedy work” in the sense that it could quickly become all-consuming.102 Becoming an activist thus meant juggling the often-conflicting demands of mother, worker, and union leader. Men, in contrast, could rely on traditional notions of domesticity and expect their wives to handle parenting while they concentrated on the workplace, thus benefiting from having a life partner more than women activists.
did. Women, regardless of their generation, chose to take on the burden of working long hours, as they were determined to change their place in the union. They also served as mentors to each other and drew inspiration from the struggles waged by the first women activists in the local.

**Immigrants and Membership**

In addition to gender, immigration and ethnicity played an important role in Local 27’s development. Pockets of immigrant groups were found in some units, but not in others. Immigrants from varying backgrounds became Local 27 members, but their involvement in the local’s activities varied. London, like other major Canadian cities, experienced a significant influx of immigrants in the postwar decades. In the early decades of the local’s development, most of them came from western and southern Europe, relying on support networks within their own communities in order to find work, much as was done by immigrants in other communities. Immigrants from varying backgrounds became Local 27 members, but their involvement in the local’s activities varied. London, like other major Canadian cities, experienced a significant influx of immigrants in the postwar decades. In the early decades of the local’s development, most of them came from western and southern Europe, relying on support networks within their own communities in order to find work, much as was done by immigrants in other communities.103 For example, Dutch immigrants like Peter Hensels and John Groenewegen learned of employment openings at Kelvinator through other people in their immigrant community. Most immigrant members in Local 27 seem to have been primarily dues-paying, rank-and-file members who appreciated union representation but did not wish to run for steward positions or become local activists. But they were not averse to union membership: for instance, Hensels and Groenewegen both expressed positive views on the representation that they received from Local 27.

The problem was that activities were mostly geared to the tastes of white Anglo workers, and, while not overtly hostile to immigrants, the activities were not accessible to many of them. Furthermore, the structure of the Canadian labour movement may have seemed alien to many immigrants. For instance, some Dutch unions identified themselves as Christian, and the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), founded in 1952 at a meeting in London, was almost entirely the creation of Calvinist Dutch immigrants in southern Ontario. Some Dutch immigrants, dependent on their immigrant community for support, may
have consequently felt greater affinity with a union like CLAC than with the UAW.

Georgina Anderson remembered Italian women who worked at Bendix showing some pro-union militancy because they did not want anyone “messing with their money.” This meant that, even though immigrants may have chosen not to engage in union activities to the same extent as some English-speaking workers, they nonetheless valued the union’s ability to represent them if they felt aggrieved. Like the Italian immigrants described by Franca Iacovetta, familial and community ties were probably a greater influence on Italians in Local 27 than union activism. Archie Baillie confirmed that most immigrant workers at GM had an average level of interest in the union’s activities.

Of all the immigrant groups, British immigrants were the most active in local affairs. Most of them appear to have been either from Scotland or from working-class areas in England. Some, such as Hector McLellan, had prior trade union experience while others, like Roland Parris, did not. The more active involvement of the British immigrants was prompted by a variety of factors, but primarily by language. They were able to readily communicate with their Canadian co-workers, and London was not that culturally foreign to them. Like Tom McSwiggan, they were quite willing to become deeply involved in union business, and their British work experience informed their approach to unions in Canada. Neither Parris nor McLellan found their Canadian workplaces to be as rigidly hierarchical as those in Britain: McLellan remarked that it was a significant change to address his Canadian supervisors by their first names, since in Britain supervisors were always addressed as “Mister.” Parris also found much less class-based division in the workplace than he had known in England. Both quickly became involved with the union upon obtaining employment in Canada. Baillie commented on the ability of British workers to manoeuvre through the union, saying that they would “come at you from every which way,” a telling commentary on the ability of British immigrants to navigate the labour relations process and to challenge both management and union leaders.

The involvement of British immigrants like Hector McLellan and
Roland Parris in the local should not suggest that other immigrant groups were apathetic toward the union; Anderson’s comment on Italian women illustrates that they were not. Parris remembered working mostly with people of European descent, although he noted that some ethnic diversity did exist at GM. There was, however, little interaction between people from different backgrounds:

They were [almost] all European, but I worked with people from Hong Kong, India, and the islands [Caribbean]. If you were an immigrant, you stuck with your own folks. . . . I think that the most tension that I saw was when Yugoslavia [began to] fall apart. There seemed to be a lot of hostility between the Croatians and the Serbians. 

Examination of the names that appeared at local membership meetings and on local and unit election ballots shows that workers with Anglo-Saxon surnames were the ones who took a more active role in the local. Ethnicity played a substantial role during local and unit elections. Former Proto Tools worker Bob Sexsmith indicated that someone running in an election would try to identify who led specific immigrant groups in a plant and would appeal to that person for his or her group’s votes. Former staff reps Al Seymour and Bob Nickerson noted that this was also an important method used by organizers to get cards signed. Peter Friedlander described a similar process at UAW Local 229, where ethnicity — particularly among Polish workers — shaped an organizing drive. Although Sexsmith, Seymour, and Nickerson did not recall the names of immigrant leaders in the Local 27 bargaining units, the significant point is that there were people in those units who had enough influence to bring votes in an election.

Leadership at both the local and national levels handled the arrival of immigrants in the workplace differently than they did the arrival of women. No concerted efforts were made to advance immigrants from different backgrounds into leadership roles, and no special committees or caucuses were established to serve the needs of immigrant workers, who were simply expected to adapt to the local and national union as best they could. This approach helped indirectly to promote the interests of
those with good English language skills, but it also probably dissuaded workers whose first language was something other than English from becoming more active. While reaching out to immigrant groups at election time was certainly one method of engaging them, it was not the same as making the local more accessible at all times rather than just when it was time to cast ballots.

Building a Local Union from 1950 to 1990
Local 27 evolved considerably from 1950 to 1990. From a small runaway plant, it grew to include numerous bargaining units in a wide range of workplaces. However, it was not simply a creation of the UAW Canadian office; George Burt brought the UAW to London through Eaton Auto, but he would not have succeeded had rank-and-file workers from Windsor and London not agreed to ignore the overtures of the AFL affiliate union and instead support the UAW. The local was able to maintain a viable Left caucus into the 1970s because its executive and membership supported Al Campbell. On the other hand, the national and international offices consistently worked to identify who was pro- and anti-administration, and to promote policies — such as support for the NDP — that were aligned with wider national union objectives. The local, because of its composite form and size, needed to create a small internal bureaucratic structure. It also chose to adopt a form of membership that was based on employment rather than on simple union association. The local developed a democratic structure with many opportunities for involvement but with a relatively small number of activists substantially engaged in union affairs. Democratic participation meant attending major events like ratification votes, not regular participation in the major contending political caucuses. Because the local was largely white, male, and anglophone, it drew participation from people who fit this demographic profile. Gender imbalances within the local were at least partly addressed by the advancement of some women into leadership positions. However, this happened primarily because of a conscious decision by rank-and-file women to become more involved.
Women faced considerable structural barriers not encountered by men. While women like Gladys Scott played an important role in founding the local as a charter member, they lost influence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, women like Edith Johnston, Beulah Harrison, Georgina Anderson, and Julie White brought women’s issues back to the forefront of discourse within the local. They also drew inspiration from watching each other advance as activists and helped mentor new women members as years passed.

The local included a range of people within its ranks, who chose different levels of involvement. For some, such as Al Campbell, it was an outlet for political activism; others, like Edith Johnston, used it as a springboard to a job in the UAW administration. People like Hector McLellan and Roland Parris never assumed major leadership roles but were local activists, helping to form the core group of activists who built the local’s structure and led it. However, the majority of members were like John Groenewegen, Peter Hensels, and Joe Laporte: they felt that the local had developed in such a way that it would represent them if they needed it. Laporte, who was never particularly active despite being a charter member of the local at Eaton Auto, remembered Local 27 and the broader union as “real good”—a sentiment undoubtedly shared by most rank-and-file workers.117

Local 27, organizationally, ended the 1980s as a durable advocate for its members. Increasingly grand celebrations were held every ten years to commemorate its founding. Jim Ashton, the local’s president at the time of its fortieth anniversary in 1990, commented in the commemorative book assembled for the occasion that Local 27 had grown from 180 members in 1950 to 5,800 members across 29 units in 1990. Its activists had created an organizational structure that withstood plant closures, sporadic conflict with the national and international offices, and changes in leadership. Many activists had gone on to prominent leadership roles in the national union and beyond. The local was also quite aware of its past and what had been accomplished. Local 27 had indeed been built to last.118