THE NATIONAL UNION

Local 27 was ultimately the creation of grassroots activists, but the UAW and later CAW national and international offices played an important role in its development. Representatives of the Canadian UAW office were with the local from its initial founding through its expansion from the 1950s to the 1980s. The local often interacted with the national and international union offices regarding broader policy issues, negotiations, and constitutional matters. What was the nature of those interactions? Did the local generally follow broader union policy? To what extent was Local 27 shaped by the national and international offices, and how did the local take advantage of UAW and CAW training programs? These are some of the questions addressed in this chapter. Although they were not the most important aspect of the local’s development, the national and international offices and their representatives did have a major influence on Local 27.

Staff Representatives

The staff representatives, starting with George Specht, were the principal contacts between Local 27 and the broader UAW administration. Although officially employees of the national office, they more often occupied a middle ground between the local and the national office. Their jobs were therefore complicated by the need to represent the local’s interests while also promoting the overall UAW agenda.

Staff reps, hired by the national and international offices out of local unions, generally had some years of local leadership experience and had
expressed interest in joining the paid union staff. They were mandated to work closely with the officers who led the locals that were part of their servicing assignments. They were also the principal spokespersons during contract negotiations, handled grievances at third step, and were often present at labour-management meetings. These official staff functions were augmented with an expectation that they would handle any other issues that either the local or the national office wanted addressed. Local officers and rank-and-file members would occasionally complain directly to the national office about staff rep performance. Conversely, the national office — often through directives from George Burt — could exert enormous pressure on a rep to bring locals into line. This situation was further complicated by demands on reps to keep both sides happy should they wish to be promoted in the union hierarchy. Working as a staff rep was thus a difficult job that required superior leadership and political skills.

George Specht, a Russian immigrant who joined the UAW in 1941 through Local 200 at Ford, served as staff rep for Local 27 from its founding until 1969. Specht's involvement in union affairs was atypical of the non-English-speaking immigrants who worked with Local 27. He serviced other locals, such as 1380 in St. Thomas and 1325 in Stratford, although Local 27 was his principal assignment. He handled routine duties and devoted considerable effort to responding to correspondence from Windsor and Detroit. Local 27 leaders and rank-and-file members may have been unaware of the degree of control exercised over staff reps by the national office. For example, Specht was required to have yearly physicals and had to obtain written permission from Burt prior to scheduling them. Burt evidently kept close watch over local spending because Specht had to obtain written permission before purchasing basic items like office supplies. Vacation scheduling also required written approval from Burt's office. Roland Parris recalled that staff representatives from different unions attended labour council meetings in the 1960s, and Specht was certainly in attendance in the 1950s and 1960s. He was the UAW's public face in London.

The UAW added an additional staff rep to the London area in 1969 on
a temporary basis. Bob Nickerson was the appointee and he immediately became involved in bargaining at Northern Electric, having originally worked in a Duplate factory in Windsor, Ontario. He was young when appointed to the UAW staff, and he approached issues differently than Specht. He was, by his own admission, somewhat confrontational when he arrived in London to service Local 27, finding himself in major conflicts at Northern Electric, Eaton Auto, and Kelvinator. In 1974, he also led 3M workers into the only strike in their history. In fact, in fairly short order after his appointment, he led strikes at almost every plant that he represented.8

Nickerson still looms large in the memory of current and former local members. Archie Baillie recalled that “if he [Nickerson] thought that there was another nickel to get out of GM — he’d get it.”9 He also made considerable efforts to be visible in the workplace, such as entering Northern Electric during a contentious negotiation in 1969 to address the membership.10 Rank-and-file members listened to him, and management noted his influence. When Northern Electric workers went on strike by calmly leaving the plant and taking up picket positions without violence or rancour, management commented to Nickerson on how disciplined the striking members were.11 He also had a considerably heavy work assignment as staff rep, including twenty-one plants for Local 27, with a total of 4,855 members.12 He had a further 2,175 members spread across six other locals. In addition, he led the Northern Telecom Inter-Corporation Council and was active in the London Labour Council.13

Bob Nickerson was appointed assistant to Canadian Region UAW president Bob White in 1977, a path already followed by his predecessor, George Specht, who had become an assistant to UAW Canadian Region Vice-President Dennis McDermott.14 Specht and Nickerson both had bargaining assignments in addition to Local 27, and their appointment to senior leadership positions began a process of promotion into the union hierarchy for local or unit executives or staff representatives. Other staff reps followed Specht and Nickerson into the UAW Region 7 leadership, including Burt Rovers and Al Seymour. Seymour was with Local 27 during

The National Union / 51
the 1980s but had joined the UAW staff during the 1970s. He was part of the same generation as Nickerson and was one of the staff employees, along with Bob White, who would lead the departure of the Canadian Region of the UAW from the international union in 1985. Seymour’s union experience was rooted in his early employment in a furniture factory in Woodstock, Ontario. He obtained a staff position just before George Burt’s retirement and Dennis McDermott’s election as leader of the UAW Canadian Region.15

George Specht, Bob Nickerson, and Al Seymour shared some common experiences despite their generational differences. Specht experienced employer harassment during his early days of organizing at Ford. Nickerson and Seymour were both involved with the bitter 1977 Fleck Industries strike. Fleck workers were not part of Local 27, but the strike still had an impact on the local. Seymour and Northern Telecom plant chairman Rene Montague were both arrested by the Ontario Provincial Police during the strike, and Nickerson was involved in getting them out of jail.16 Both Seymour and Montague subsequently went on trial for blocking a road leading to the Fleck plant.17 Montague referred to Fleck as a “wake-up call,” presumably because of the coercive behaviour of the employer and the provincial government.18

Al Seymour was monitored in much the same fashion in which George Burt watched George Specht. Seymour was required, like other staff reps, to send in regular activity reports that discussed servicing and organizing. He also had to obtain written approval for medical leave and vacation. The staff rep role was clearly challenging since it could potentially place a person under duress — facing the police on a picket line, for example, while also working under the watchful eye of the national and international offices.19

Al Seymour was held in high regard both by local leaders and by rank-and-file members, but they, like their predecessors who had worked with Specht, may have been unaware of the challenges facing someone in a staff rep position. Jim Wilkes, who helped organize London Motor Products in the early 1980s, remembered Seymour mentoring younger activists, a role at which he was particularly adept.20 Julie White remembered Seymour
making efforts to promote women’s involvement in the union and being sensitive to the need to promote issues that were not always popular in the 1980s, such as same-sex benefits at 3M.21

Local officers and rank-and-file members usually supported the staff reps, but there were occasions between 1950 and 1990 when they did not. By the 1960s, the local had grown to a sufficient size to have a cadre of experienced leaders who were capable of challenging the same national office that had instigated its founding. By the early 1960s, Local 27 activists and members had enough union experience to show a willingness to challenge Specht occasionally. For instance, in January 1963, a Local 27 executive board member wrote directly to UAW International President Walter Reuther to complain that Specht had run for election as labour council delegate.22 He demanded that the UAW Public Review Board examine what had occurred during the nominating process. The complaint was based on a belief that delegates should be drawn from the rank-and-file membership, not from the union administration. Reuther responded by saying that the matter would not be put before the public review board until the international executive board had reviewed the situation.23 George Specht remained a labour council delegate, which suggests that the complaint did not go far in Detroit.

Relations between Bob Nickerson and the local leadership and membership were generally good, but Nickerson occasionally experienced the same type of challenge faced by Specht. For example, thirty-three members of the Northern Electric unit submitted a petition in 1971 (it is unclear to whom) demanding that Nickerson be removed from their plant bargaining committee.24 Members also complained directly to Detroit over local issues, an example being Joe Abela’s 1973 letter to Leonard Woodcock to complain about a decision made by the Local 27 executive board.25 Nickerson, like Specht, found himself caught between the local and the national office. In late 1974, Sam Saumur, who had become Local 27 president, complained to Bob White about the service that the local was receiving from the national office. White replied:
I received a telephone call from Bob Nickerson indicating that at your executive board meeting yesterday, there was some discussion about a lack of reply from me based on our meeting of November 1, 1974. . . . You should be aware that I have assigned a staff member to handle the negotiations in Hughes Boats and Dualine, in Centralia in order that Brother Nickerson can fulfill his obligations relating to arbitrations, etc., in the units of Local 27.26

This letter seems like a commentary on how difficult it was for Nickerson to cover all of his various work assignments. In fact, Nickerson indicated that he may have very well induced Saumur to write the letter in order to get another staff rep into the London area.27 The letter had the desired effect on White, who had received other correspondence on the same topic. In 1974, White wrote to Dennis McDermott outlining the challenges facing Nickerson in the London area. White felt that another rep should be added to London and argued that the city and surrounding territory was of vital importance to the UAW.28

The staff reps also sought to influence who led the local because the national office had a clear interest in identifying leaders who would follow administration policy. George Specht utilized a typed form indicating who among the local executive was pro- and anti-administration.29 Bob Nickerson used a similar document, saying, “That was a form that we used to use internally.”30 Nine candidates for UAW Canadian Council delegate were listed on the form, with two of them — Tom McSwiggan and Al Campbell — identified as anti-administration.31 The reasons why McSwiggan was identified in this manner are unclear, but Campbell’s left-wing politics marked him as anti-administration. One candidate, Timothy (Jerry) Flynn from Tecumseh Products, was not identified as either pro- or anti-administration. However, the fact that the remaining six candidates were considered pro-administration illustrates that the local was viewed as primarily friendly toward the UAW national office. It probably also reflected past successful efforts by the ever-present Specht to ensure that local and unit officers agreed with the administration’s agenda.
Bob Nickerson remembered working well with Al Campbell on union matters despite the view that Campbell was considered anti-administration. Differences between the local and the national office were thus not always strictly defined and could be fluid, depending on the situation. Efforts to identify who was pro- and anti-administration may have ultimately had little effect, as the membership could still surprise the UAW Canadian office. Jerry Flynn, who was Local 27 president by the mid-1970s, wrote to Dennis McDermott in 1975 to apologize for actions taken by local delegates at a spring leadership conference. The local’s delegation had risen and publicly left the hall as soon as McDermott began to speak. The delegates subsequently said that they left because they judged the subject of his speech to be useless to them. However, McDermott’s speech included references to then-federal Finance Minister John Turner’s plan for voluntary wage restraints. The UAW was in the midst of an internal debate about how to respond to wage and price controls in 1975, with the Left supporting a general strike and McDermott opposing it. Local 27’s delegation would have included Left delegates; hence, it is likely that the wage and price debate prompted the walkout.

There were times when the staff reps depended on local support, such as when Nickerson tried to obtain more servicing for London. The reverse was also true. One instance when local officers benefited from the assistance of the staff reps and the national office involved Jerry Flynn, who was unit chair at Tecumseh Products in 1970. A member of the unit approached Campbell, who was Local 27 president, to report that Flynn had misappropriated a total of $50. Flynn resigned his position and repaid the $50. This episode was reported to Emil Mazey, the UAW international secretary-treasurer, who wrote to Dennis McDermott:

My immediate reaction was that I am opposed to taking Brother Flynn off the hook. If he has misused money he may do it again. He could not be bonded by our bonding company as a result of the recent misappropriation of funds, and can, therefore, not serve in a capacity in the Union where the handling of money is an essential part of the job.
McDermott wrote to Bob Nickerson, asking him his opinion on the situation. Nickerson responded:

Following a discussion with Al Campbell, and Edith Welch, they feel that since proper steps have been taken by the Local to correct this situation, that the subject should be dropped, and we are in agreement that Brother Flynn should never hold a position where he could handle funds. In my opinion the misappropriation of funds was very bad judgment on his part, but I feel that he is, and can still be, a good union member.38

Nickerson remembered the entire Flynn episode as being a “tempest in a teapot.”39 Flynn had acknowledged his mistake, and he eventually was able to regain his position in the local since he became president and, later, a staff rep. Nickerson did not appear to overtly influence Mazey, instead endeavouring to fully communicate what was happening with Flynn to the international union office. This was an isolated incident, but it showed that staff reps supported the decisions made by the local’s leadership regarding such matters.

Gord Wilson, who began his involvement in the union while working at the London 3M plant and later joined the Canadian UAW staff, felt that a larger local would exert more autonomy and be able to handle its own operations but a smaller local was much more reliant on staff reps to handle grievances and other servicing functions.40 Local 27 became less dependent on staff reps as its membership grew and its leaders developed more expertise. Local activists and leaders became an additional level of representation for the membership. Staff reps benefited from their experience working with a large local since it raised their profile within the national and international union structure. Nickerson eventually became national secretary-treasurer of the CAW, and Seymour became a regional director. However, the staff reps also sought to influence activity in the local. Making efforts to identify who was pro- and anti-administration is the most obvious example of this, but so too is the decision to support Flynn over the misappropriation issue.
The National Office

The UAW Canadian office, and later the CAW national office, played a different role than that of the staff representatives. Virtually everyone who worked in either the Windsor UAW or the Detroit international offices, except the staff reps, was collectively considered somewhat different from people who were active in the local. This was evident in the distinction that past and present members made between “Our Union” and “The Union.” “Our Union” meant the local, while “The Union” meant either the Canadian or the international office. This distinction was not deliberate, but it was a crucial aspect of how local activists and members thought about the broader union.

The UAW international office in Detroit (called Solidarity House) had little direct interaction with Local 27. It mailed many directives to the Canadian office in Windsor and later Toronto, and took an interest in the financial activities of Canadian locals, but otherwise—in the case of Local 27—the Canadian office dealt with most correspondence. Offices in Windsor, Detroit, and later Toronto officially handled broader policy issues. Unofficially, the national office sought to influence local attitudes—particularly with regard to political ideology. In the case of Local 27, local autonomy was permitted, especially when it came to financial funding, but ideological diversity was not always welcomed.

Much of the formal contact between Local 27 and Solidarity House in Detroit related to constitutional and financial questions. These queries were usually routed through Burt’s Canadian office before being considered by someone like Emil Mazey or Leonard Woodcock. The international office responded to constitutional matters but rebuffed appeals for financial aid: the local was on its own economically. Strikes, which gave locals access to the union’s strike fund, were approved by the national office but little other direct assistance was offered. National officers, such as Burt and McDermott, generally did not become involved in negotiations unless an employer was extremely intransigent or violent. They instead relied on the staff reps. For example, George Specht regularly updated George Burt on the 1964 Wolverine Tube strike—a struggle that
ended in decertification.\textsuperscript{42} Staff reps were expected to report negotiation progress and obtain strike authorization if needed.

Local 27’s relationship with the national and international offices of the UAW became more contentious in the 1960s than it had been in the 1950s, and more stable in the 1970s and 1980s. Strained relations were partially due to the growing ability of local officers and members to assert themselves when they interacted with the UAW administration, but they were exacerbated by efforts from the Detroit and Windsor offices to exert more influence over the local’s operations and leadership. During the late 1960s to the early 1980s, relations between the national and international UAW offices changed. Dennis McDermott replaced George Burt in 1968 as the UAW Canadian leader and began pursuing a more independent agenda in the Canadian region, which was still formally called Region 7 at that time.\textsuperscript{43} He moved the Canadian office to Toronto and created a newspaper and research department separate from the international office.\textsuperscript{44} Interaction between Local 27 and the UAW national and international offices thus happened during a period in which greater overall Canadian autonomy within the union was pursued.

Relations between the local and the national and international offices also reflected the political Left’s continued influence in the local in the 1960s. The Reuther faction, which dominated the union, brooked little dissent within locals, as illustrated by the systematic purging of Local 248 at Allis-Chalmers in Wisconsin and by Stephen Cutler’s analysis of UAW Local 600 at Ford in Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{45} The relationship between the Left and the administration was more complex in Canada than in the United States. George Burt resisted the politically motivated firing of staff members in 1947 and was subsequently part of a committee that conducted a trial of the 1955–56 GM bargaining committee.\textsuperscript{46} In the aftermath of those events, Burt undoubtedly felt a need to try to keep any remaining left-leaning groups in the Canadian UAW quiet. He faced a particular challenge in Local 27.

The Local 27 Left coalesced around Al Campbell, who had once been a member of the Communist Party of Canada and had attempted to join the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion during the Spanish Civil War. He regretted
that he could not serve in the regular forces during World War II owing to a bad foot, but he did serve in the reserves. His wife, Jeanie, confirmed that he had belonged to the Communist party and had left it in 1956 in response to the Soviet Union’s repression of the Hungarian Revolution that occurred that year. She also stated that he was proud to have been a Communist and still adhered to his beliefs long after his association with the party ended.47

Many members of the Communist party reacted to the events of 1956 much as Campbell did. Norman Penner and others have recounted the grievous impact of suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and Nikita Khrushchev’s acknowledgement of Stalinist Brutality.48 Canada did not have a public anti-Communism spectacle on the scale of the hearings conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the United States, but Igor Gouzenko’s revelations about espionage had an impact in Canada, and purges of the civil service did happen.49 Large numbers of Communists went underground because of the purges, but, like Campbell, they still adhered to and acted on their beliefs.

Campbell came from Cape Breton, and his family included other Communists. His ideology was heavily influenced by the deprivation that he experienced as a child, and later as a migrant during the Depression. During the Depression years, he paused to rest on a park bench in Hamilton, Ontario, one day and was approached by a stranger, who began to talk with him about Communism. He was subsequently an associate of notable Canadian Communists like Bill Walsh and Tim Buck, and was involved in Communist organizing in northern Ontario following his initial involvement with the party in Hamilton. He belonged to other unions before joining the UAW, including the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, which was strongly identified as Communist. He was thus a seasoned organizer and activist who could operate without guidance or interference from the UAW staff reps or administration.50

Campbell’s role in Local 27 was somewhat comparable to the role played by Communists in other local unions. Stephen Meyer’s study of Harold Christoffel’s activism in the UAW local at Allis-Chalmers shows similar activity.31 Roger Keeran also reveals the important role of Communist organizers in the autoworkers’ union in the United States, as do
Judith Stepan-Morris and Maurice Zeitlin. A common theme in the experience of Campbell and of other Communists in industrial local unions is that they performed the often-mundane but essential organizing work that built a local union. Campbell almost single-handedly compiled and wrote the *Local 27 News* for many years in the 1950s and 1960s.

Aware of the negative attitudes about Communists in the UAW, Campbell began his activism in the local by organizing social events such as family picnics. There was some evidence of anti-Communism within Local 27’s ranks, with comments made during a 1960 GM unit meeting that Charlie Brooks from Chrysler in Windsor and Gordon Lambert from GM in St. Catharines were thought to be “taking direction once again from the Commie Party in Canada.” While this view was expressed during a GM Diesel unit meeting, that unit was known to be on the Right of political debate in Local 27, and Campbell would have known where GM’s membership stood on Communism.

Campbell thus did not initially widely proclaim his political allegiances. He moved to London in the early 1950s since his political activities had made working elsewhere difficult. Eaton Auto became the base from which he gradually espoused his political views and where he routinely won unit elections, including those for plant chairperson. He also developed a network of left-leaning supporters in Eaton Auto and in other units. Bill Harrington, another Eaton Auto worker and an associate of Campbell, became active in Left politics and eventually became president of the London Labour Council. Campbell was also well-known as an activist in the Waffle movement in the NDP, which was committed to a left-wing program for the party in the early 1970s. UAW Canadian Region Vice-President Dennis McDermott had a somewhat ambivalent opinion of the Waffle, alternating between publicly attacking it and privately praising its value before finally firmly opposing it. Campbell was out of Local 27 by the time the Waffle’s influence peaked in the NDP, but despite the absence of references to the Waffle in Local 27 literature, he was likely not the movement’s only supporter in the local.

Campbell’s influence was duly noted by both staff reps and administration. Nickerson felt that he wielded considerable influence over Bill
Harrington, saying that Harrington had been “right in Al’s pocket.” Nickerson also noted that Campbell was careful about being overly vocal in expressing his political views within Local 27 but that he more overtly expressed his beliefs at labour council and UAW Canadian Council meetings. Campbell may have felt that labour council meetings were less contested terrain than the local hall and that a national gathering was an appropriate venue in which to challenge the administration. He may have also found the local to be a less useful forum for expressing his views since it tended to focus on collective bargaining issues. Broader social issues were on the agenda at labour council meetings, and the agenda for the UAW was tabled at national meetings. For example, Bob Sexsmith recalled that there was a major debate within the labour council in the 1960s over support for charities like the United Way, with the social democratic Right urging support and the communist Left arguing that the state should provide citizens with a living wage. Similarly, Campbell was an early supporter of an independent Canadian autoworkers’ union and would have pressed for greater autonomy at national meetings.

Campbell also helped other leftists come to leadership positions in the local. Seymour and Nickerson believed that Sam Saumur, who worked at Northern Electric was aligned with Campbell. Seymour described him as a “fellow traveller,” while Nickerson was more specific in calling him a Communist. Both Nickerson and Seymour commented on how Saumur had initially been active in the United Electrical Workers organizing committee at Northern Telecom. Saumur was a protégé of Campbell, and his political ideology and union activity undoubtedly benefited from Campbell’s experience.

The division between the Left and Right caucuses naturally affected leadership relationships. Bill Froude from the Kelvinator unit was local president by the late 1960s. He was ideologically different from Campbell and wrote approvingly of supporting the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)/NDP in the Local 27 News. Campbell actually supported Froude in at least one local election. They shared some common experiences despite their ideological differences because their lives, like those of all their contemporaries, had been shaped by the Depression.
years. Shirley Martin described Froude as a decent man but “funny” in the sense that he did not want to spend any money. He was personally frugal and similarly careful with the local’s funds. Campbell was less frugal and willing to devote financial resources to local operations like construction of the local hall.

Froude does not appear to have engaged in many conflicts with Burt or Specht. Campbell, on the other hand, was the focus of considerable angst within the Canadian UAW leadership. Much of this centred on the UAW Canadian Council because the UAW administration became convinced that Al Campbell — a council delegate — embodied the Left in Local 27. While the council was a venue for discussing policy, it was also a space for local leaders to challenge the national leadership. Former Local 27 activist and 3M worker Gord Wilson recalled that a handful of people on the UAW Canadian Council in the 1960s could really challenge George Burt:

For a five- or six-year period before Dennis [McDermott] got elected . . . there were about a dozen people who could control debate on our council. There were about two hundred members at that time. The guys who Burt was terrified of and Dennis had a great deal of respect for were Al [Campbell] . . . [and] Charlie Brooks. Al was a smart guy, very measured. Campbell, and others like him, played an important role in the UAW Canadian Council. Wilson further indicated that “it was a good schooling. The debate on what was then the UAW Canadian Council was really great. . . . It was one of the real strengths of the union.”

George Burt had concerns about Al Campbell, but he had to consider carefully how to handle him. Campbell was overheard making critical comments about the Canadian administration in 1960 at a UAW council meeting. Burt erupted in a confidential May 1960 letter to George Specht about Campbell and the problems that Burt felt he confronted in the Canadian region:

When I wrote to you on April 6th regarding the statements of Brother Campbell at the District Council I meant you to keep my letter confidential and to make your own inquiries. . . . I am also enclosing a copy of a
letter from Brother Simpson which is a clear indication of how Brother Campbell is elected to the District Council and the C.L.C. convention. . . . You can see that our charges against Brother Campbell’s statements at the District Council have been almost completely ignored by the Executive and that he has apparently sufficient support from the Executive of Local 27 to get himself elected anywhere.

Burt continued:

May I also add that Brother Campbell immediately contacted our opposition in Montreal at the Convention and as far as I know he attended all of their caucuses and voted with them in all of the issues at the Convention. . . . I sincerely hope that you believe me when I suggest to you that Brother Campbell is part of our political opposition which he has a perfect right to be, but we also have the right to use what methods we have at our disposal to see that our policies are exposed to our friends in London.68

George Specht shared Burt’s initial inquiry about Campbell with the Local 27 executive, which led to the aggressive tone of the letter. The local sent a letter to Burt supporting both Specht and Campbell: “We believe he is the finest and best Int. Rep. of the UAW in Canada” and “[Campbell] has been one of our most conscientious workers and has served well on Recreation, as a delegate to London District Labour Council and as Editor of our Local Newspaper.”69 Burt was not placated by this correspondence. He sent another anxiety-ridden letter to Specht on 10 May 1960:

Having watched Brother Campbell at the recent C.L.C. convention I am more than ever convinced that something should be done with Local 27 and its political situation. . . . You must remember, George, that I am in a terrific fight in this region and pride myself on having enough organizational ability to win, but I can only do so with the assistance of all the staff members and because of the seriousness of this situation, it is going to be necessary for all of our friendly locals to stay friendly. . . . You heard Brother Spencer from Oshawa take me over the coals on Sunday and you can understand then that your personal feelings have to be discounted in order to cope with the problems that we have in hand.70
Burt’s correspondence and the local’s response reveal much about interaction between the UAW Canadian administration, staff reps, and the union’s main London area local. Burt, clearly under some duress from independently minded Canadian Council delegates like Campbell, sought to quell dissent. As Charlotte Yates notes, the Canadian Council was a crucial deliberative body, but it was a forum in which internal union battles were waged, particularly in the late 1940s. Burt was thus accustomed to such conflicts, but he did not welcome them. The local executive stood by Campbell regardless of what anyone in the national office thought of him. George Specht, faced with the need to work with the local while also placating George Burt, found himself caught between two contending forces.

The local’s defence of Campbell went beyond the UAW. He became involved in the Northern Electric organizing campaign before the broader UAW effort to organize the plant. Campbell spoke on a local radio station in favour of Northern Electric workers joining the United Electrical Workers (UE), but he later threw his support behind the UAW once it started organizing. In 1966, he was attacked by building trades representatives on the London Labour Council over his initial support of the UE. While the minutes of labour council and Local 27 meetings rarely contain lengthy detailed descriptions of what occurred, there is a comprehensive entry from the local’s meeting on 27 October 1966. Unit officers rose to support Campbell against defamatory comments by other labour council delegates. A motion was made to send a letter to the labour council:

That Brother Campbell was a delegate from Local 27. That we of Local 27 sent him down there and we have all the faith in him that 2,300 members have in a man . . . and we don’t like what Bro. Reader did because he was not going with the London Labour Council. He’s not just fighting Bro. Campbell, he’s fighting Local 27 and the London Labour Council.

Froude agreed that a letter should be sent to the labour council in support of Campbell. Internal politics would not be brought beyond the internal local structure, and local leaders and members chose to unite behind one of their activists when he was under attack.
The national office, despite its anxiety about the Local 27 Left, chose to accept its presence. For instance, in 1966, a rank-and-file member named Joe Abela — whom Bob Nickerson described as a “pain in the ass” — took it upon himself to complain directly to George Burt about Al Campbell.\textsuperscript{74} He and the four co-signers of his letter requested that the entire Local 27 executive be put on trial over their support for Campbell during the UE controversy.\textsuperscript{75} The main crux of Abela’s argument was that Campbell was supporting a union — the UE — that had been expelled from the Canadian Labour Congress. Burt, following consultation with Specht, informed Abela, “Your suggestion that we institute trial proceedings against the Executive Board of Local 27 is without foundation and is utterly nonsense and we cannot contemplate it under any circumstances.”\textsuperscript{76} Abela, displeased with Burt’s reply, appealed directly to UAW president Walter Reuther, saying that the Local 27 executive board had commended a brother who was a Communist.\textsuperscript{77} Reuther’s reply is unknown, but Abela’s letter would have at least alerted Solidarity House to the political situation in London, if not confirming suspicions that were already held about Local 27. Burt, in order to avoid further exacerbating the situation, probably did not want to counter the local executive’s decision to support Campbell.

The response of Local 27’s activists and leaders to the attacks made on Al Campbell by other labour council delegates clearly shows that they would not stand for anyone outside of the local union attacking one of their members. Members such as those who were concerned about picketing by possible Waffle and Communist sympathizers at the closing Eaton Auto plant may not have always agreed with Campbell’s politics. However, he contributed more than a different ideological perspective to the local. Many members at all levels of the local would have known him for his work on the Local 27 News as well as for his contributions on the shop floor, and they responded accordingly when he was criticized.\textsuperscript{78}

The staff reps and the UAW Canadian office continued to be the main points of contact for the local during the 1970s and 1980s. The international office continued to be remote, with the exception of responding to incidents like that involving Jerry Flynn. The local had learned not to ask
too much of Solidarity House, especially when it came to monetary assistance, as such requests were always firmly rebuffed. For instance, Saumur wrote to UAW treasurer Emil Mazey in 1974 to ask for a $500,000 loan to help finance expansion of the local’s hall. Mazey responded that “the International Union found it necessary to suspend loans to Local Unions a number of years ago and no money is available for this purpose at this time.” Mazey then suggested that Saumur meet with him in order to review the expansion plans and advise him accordingly. In other words, Mazey felt that the local could not be trusted to handle its own finances since it appealed for assistance. Saumur travelled to Detroit to meet with Donald Rand, Mazey’s assistant, on 7 May 1974. Rand mailed a detailed summary of their meeting to Saumur and rejected the local’s expansion plans. On another occasion, Edith Johnston wrote to Solidarity House asking for financial assistance. She cited difficulties with declining revenue from dues as the main reason for the request and shortly thereafter received a response indicating that no money would be forthcoming but that the international office would provide assistance to the local on how to better manage its finances.

Former staff reps Bob Nickerson and Al Seymour both recalled that the responses received by Edith Johnston and Sam Saumur were typical of what to expect from Solidarity House. The American international office did not distinguish between Canadian and American priorities. Relations between the Canadian and American UAW offices changed with the election of Dennis McDermott as UAW Canadian Region vice-president in 1968. Nickerson was part of a delegation led by McDermott that travelled to the Soviet Union in 1974 (see figure 2.1). He indicated that the trip was planned with the full knowledge of Solidarity House, and it was also subsequently publicized throughout Local 27. The trip coincided with a strike at Pratt and Whitney in Toronto that McDermott had authorized. Nickerson remarked that as soon as the delegation departed, Emil Mazey cut off strike pay to the Pratt and Whitney workers and that approving the trip may have been a ploy to get McDermott out of Canada in order to enforce policy from Detroit.
Local leaders also felt the effects of Solidarity House’s efforts to exert control over policy. For example, former GM worker and activist Archie Baillie recounted a trip that he took in the 1970s to a UAW convention in Washington. Those whom the international leadership perceived to be in opposition to official policy, Baillie included, found themselves sitting in an area of the convention floor that was roped off from the rest of the delegates.86 The international office was surely aware of McDermott’s tolerance of the Left and the Canadian Region’s independent views, and worked to oppose dissent in the union if the opportunity arose.

Relations between the local and the national and international offices were complex and shaped by a range of factors. Internal political debates over issues like auto trade agreements and protectionism were central to this relationship. The local, in terms of internal operations, was not controlled by the national and international offices. In fact, local leaders and rank-and-file members had no reluctance to express their views to the national and international offices — even if this meant writing directly to the international president. On the other hand, ongoing internal political struggles did not prevent the local from supporting broad international and national policy positions, such as the Canadian UAW’s opposition...
to wage and price controls in 1976. The *Local 27 News* devoted a special edition to the topic. The local similarly supported efforts by organized labour in Canada to oppose the 1988 Free Trade Agreement with the United States (see figure 2.2). Support for initiatives such as these showed a desire within the local leadership to promote an overall national union agenda as well as a willingness to challenge the national and international offices on issues that were more specific to the local.

![Free trade protest](image)

**FIG 2.2** Free trade protest. Local 27 activists, including Roland Parris, attended this anti-free trade rally along with other union members from across southwestern Ontario. Source: Local 27 Archive, *Local 27 News*, March 1988.

The international leadership’s behaviour caused further resentment among Local 27’s rank-and-file membership and its leadership. Similar sentiments would undoubtedly have been held by members of other locals whose delegates had been treated like Baillie. Such feelings of resentment helped foster what became the defining moment in the post–World
War II history of the autoworkers’ union in Canada: the creation of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) in 1985. Local 27’s experience with Solidarity House was not unique. Frustration with the way in which the American head office operated manifested itself most dramatically when 1982 negotiations with GM and the creation of a separate Canadian wage agreement gave momentum to the separation of the Canadian Region of the UAW. Baillie, who came from GM, felt that an independent Canadian union had long been necessary. Similar views were expressed by other present and former members of Local 27. Shortly after the CAW’s founding, two Local 27 activists, Jerry Flynn from Tecumseh Products and Peter Kennedy from 3M, assumed prominent roles in the new union: Flynn became a staff rep and Kennedy became secretary-treasurer of the new CAW Council. Nickerson, whom Local 27 activists viewed as a de facto member of the local, became the first secretary-treasurer of the new union. Beulah Harrison nominated him at the CAW’s inaugural convention.

The creation of the new union made the new national administration much less remote than Solidarity House had been. Local activists who had never met people like UAW international presidents Owen Bieber or Doug Fraser could truthfully say that they personally knew CAW President Bob White or Secretary-Treasurer Bob Nickerson. Local 27 members who were delegates at the CAW’s founding convention conveyed opinions and emotions suggesting that they felt they had participated in a historically significant event. Because of their long association with Nickerson, they also felt that their local played an important role in founding the new union.

**Education: Informing and Shaping Members**

The UAW made worker education a priority in both the United States and Canada, and the role of its education programs in shaping Local 27 merits analysis separate from other discussions of the national and international UAW and CAW. While Local 27’s rank-and-file members and leaders may have had ambivalent feelings about some of the policies of the UAW/CAW
national offices, and certainly about Solidarity House, they always placed great faith in the union’s worker education programs, which were established in Canada during the early years of World War II. The most visible manifestation of this effort was a collection of cabins that constituted the worker education centre in Port Elgin, Ontario. “The camp” (so called by more than one former local member) gradually grew in size and sophistication as years passed. Local 27’s members became regular visitors to Port Elgin and felt that they benefited from its programs.

The UAW shifted its training in the late 1940s from general labour education toward more specific union education to train stewards and other local leaders as part of an effort to support the Reuther administration. Pro-Reuther elements further strengthened their grip on education programs in the 1960s through the introduction of programs like orientation kits for new members. Within the American context, worker education became “a spearhead” for recruiting people in the Reuther caucus in the late 1940s. Local Union Discussion Leaders were specially trained to provide education in newly organized locals.

Local 27 encouraged its members to be politically active and attend events like public lectures, and the local developed a substantial link to the worker education programs within the broader Canadian union in the 1970s due to the influence of Gord Wilson. After a brief stint on the Canadian Labour Congress staff, Wilson returned to the UAW in 1972 to become Canadian Region education director. In that role, he succeeded in persuading the UAW to make paid education leave (PEL) a bargaining priority in 1976. The autoworkers became the only union to have such leave in their collective agreements, although it initially only applied to bargaining with the major automakers.

Many current and former members of the local commented on how they felt they had benefited from participating in union-sponsored training. Bob Sexsmith was able to attend a worker education program at Ruskin College, Oxford University, in England under the auspices of the UAW. Jim Ashton, who joined the local through employment at the Phillips Electronics plant in London and eventually rose to lead both the local and the London Labour Council, clearly benefited from union
education. Edith Johnston referred to how it raised Ashton’s confidence level and helped shape him into an effective leader.\textsuperscript{101}

Former GM Diesel worker and activist Hector McLellan believed that he benefited from union occupational health and safety training. He eventually served full-time as a plant health and safety representative at the GM Diesel facility.\textsuperscript{102} Tim Carrie, who joined Local 27 through Firestone (later Accuride), talked about how participating in union training programs improved his own confidence level and helped “make the union a way of life.”\textsuperscript{103} Jim Wilkes, who joined the local as a body shop technician at London Motor Products, also commented on the benefits of union training and noted that union officers and stewards were taught to argue an issue from a variety of approaches.\textsuperscript{104} Training at Port Elgin was also intended for rank-and-file workers and their families, but most of those workers eventually became activists. When commenting on the value of family education at Port Elgin, Hector McLellan remembered how his children so enjoyed the experience that leaving the education centre for home moved them to tears.\textsuperscript{105} Beulah Harrison expressed similar sentiments about her children’s visit to the centre.\textsuperscript{106}

UAW/CAW training brought several benefits for Local 27 members. It helped foster a learning culture within the local and, more importantly, exposed members to opportunities for personal growth that they would probably not have had access to in another organization. It is improbable that a line worker in a tool plant, such as Bob Sexsmith, would have been able to afford to spend several weeks in England had he not been a local activist. Family education at Port Elgin was additionally intended to be a kind of vacation, and this aspect cannot be underestimated. Sexsmith, when asked about family vacations, said that he and his family would drive down to his in-laws’ cottage on Lake Erie “if I had a car that could make it.”\textsuperscript{107} So a few days in Port Elgin would have seemed like a real luxury to workers and their families.

Not everyone in Local 27 travelled to Port Elgin or chose to participate in union training, nor did they have the opportunity. The local executive nominated people to attend, and local activists were the main participants. Often, those same activists were the ones who assumed leadership
positions in the local. Attendance at Port Elgin was also more likely if a member was covered by a collective agreement that included PEL. In 1977, its first year in operation, PEL was included in thirty-five collective agreements covering 15,480 members. PEL was designed to convey an ideological position, and it was conducted by and for union members. Union education thus had the effect of helping develop a core group of people who were capable of leading the local and its various bargaining units. However, because the national office approved the content of the training, PEL had the further effect of communicating the national union agenda, and it drew rank-and-file members and leaders closer to that agenda. For example, the UAW took strong stands against wage and price controls in the 1970s and mounted similar opposition to free trade in the 1980s. So union education could bring tremendous benefits for individual activists and prepare them to ably lead their locals, but it also meant doing so according to terms that were largely amenable to the national office.

Another limitation of union education was that it appears to have primarily benefited workers from larger units, particularly if they were covered by PEL clauses in their collective agreements. The local could sponsor someone from a smaller unit to attend union training, but discussions with past members suggest that being in a large unit increased the likelihood of attending. Members of smaller units could also, of course, attend evening or weekend courses offered by the UAW or the CLC. Regardless, being fully paid to attend a course during regular working hours would have been much easier to accommodate in a person’s schedule. Training, while beneficial, had the overall effect of reinforcing the influence of larger units in the local and the position of the officers who were based in them. UAW members took courses along with their peers from across the union in Canada and consequently learned about issues pertaining to their union, but they did not participate in these programs with people from other national and international unions. Training undoubtedly helped the union become a way of life for some local activists but not for most members since they did not have the same degree of access to it. UAW worker education also did not help members of locals like Local 27 build links with the broader Canadian labour movement.
Bureaucratization

There is a significant literature on union bureaucratization in North America in the post–World War II era, with an overall view that unions were diminished by this process. Peter McInnis suggests that labour’s acceptance of the postwar labour relations framework contributed to the bureaucratization process, while authors like Paul Buhle point to leadership sclerosis as a leading cause of the problem. Don Wells’s research on the Oakville Ford local also supports the view that unions bureaucratized in the postwar years. Much of the research on bureaucratization is rooted in a belief that unions became removed from the rank-and-file membership and otherwise suppressed dissent.

Local 27 became bureaucratized in some respects, and its size and composite form had a bearing on the process. One example of the local’s bureaucratization is that it became an employer rather than simply acting as a representative of employees in other workplaces. This process was not deliberate; indeed, the local hired its first employee out of necessity. There were two categories of workers: elected leadership roles and administrative jobs. Aside from one group being elected and the other appointed, a clear gender distinction separated the two groups: the administrative group was always female and the leadership group almost always male.

The local’s paid administrative staff had grown to three people by the end of the 1980s. The two secretaries were joined by a full-time bookkeeper, who kept track of the local’s expanding finances and union hall. The construction of the union hall in 1969 expanded the local’s paid workforce as the new building included a bar. The bar staff were usually male. Although it is not clear how all staff members were recruited, Shirley Martin was hired through a job advertisement and had no prior links to the UAW.

The office and bar staff at Local 27 were unionized, but in two different locals. No strikes occurred during the negotiations to renew the various collective agreements signed with the staff, who were not necessarily paid in accordance with the contractual gains that the local made for its members. The collective agreements were not particularly long.
The staff considered the wages and benefits fair, although the national office paid more, so negotiations between the staff and the local were not acrimonious. In fact, the staff had learned some bargaining techniques from watching local officers and staff representatives deal with management in other workplaces.\footnote{115}

There was little staff turnover in either the office or the bar from the time Olive Huggins was hired in 1963 until 1990, which suggests that the staff were generally satisfied with their jobs even if the work pace was demanding. Former officers and staff representatives spoke highly of the Local 27 employees. While they did not expressly say that they were in many ways dependent on the staff — particularly in the office — for successful completion of administrative tasks, the staff evidently played an important role in the local’s operation. They managed the flow of paperwork through the office and were familiar with the administrative requirements of the UAW, and later the CAW. They also helped orient newly elected officers to the intricacies of running a substantial local labour organization. The staff thus provided important expertise and continuity over the years.\footnote{116}

Although the paid office staff provided some continuity, significant local leadership changes occurred as years passed. Both Bill Harrington and Al Campbell lost their union membership with the Eaton Auto closure in 1971. Jeanie Campbell felt that Al could have joined the UAW staff as a rep, but he instead chose to join the staff of a service workers’ union. He maintained a familial connection with the UAW through his son-in-law, Gord Wilson. Campbell was never at a loss for words and made his views on the UAW known for many years. Jeanie Campbell recalled that she and Al encountered Dennis McDermott at a wedding reception for one of Gord and Bonnie Wilson’s sons. McDermott said that he would like to keep in contact with Al since he wanted to stay in touch with the “intelligent Left.” Al responded, “When you find somebody on the intelligent Right, give me a call.”\footnote{117} Sam Saumur maintained some part of the Left in the local but died at an early age. The Left was not lost due to dramatic confrontations or purges between pro- and anti-national administration groups, as happened in UAW Local 600 in Detroit and
elsewhere in the union. Instead, it gradually diminished because of external economic factors and because of both subtle and overt efforts by the staff representatives and UAW national and international offices to align the local ideologically with the broader union.

Other significant leadership changes occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For instance, Bill Froude left when Kelvinator closed in 1969. Froude asked McDermott if he could still stand for elected office even though his plant was scheduled to close. McDermott responded that he could stand and that many locals had created a “miscellaneous unit” for people whose plants had closed, implying that Local 27 could establish such a unit. McDermott’s response also suggested that he thought it appropriate for members who lost their jobs to still have a formal association with their local. However, the local did not create a miscellaneous unit, consequently limiting membership to those who were employed in a bargaining unit or who had retired.

The aspects of the local’s development that more clearly illustrated bureaucratization came principally from the national and international offices, and to a lesser extent from within the local itself. Attempting to identify who was pro- and anti-administration is an example of bureaucratic efforts to directly shape the local. Those efforts may have had little effect since it was the members who ultimately voted and could choose candidates who did not support the national office. As Julie White recalled, anyone who attended a union training session — such as those in Port Elgin — in the 1970s invariably had an NDP membership form presented to them. This was a clear message: support the party and the political ideology that the national union supports. The gradual loss of the Left ultimately meant the loss of important internal discussion. For instance, internal local communications, particularly the Local 27 News, began to focus more exclusively on economic issues and collective bargaining in the 1970s and 1980s.

The national office drew the local closer to it through various means. Education programs were clearly part of this process, but so too was selecting Local 27 officers to join the UAW and CAW staffs. Paid full-time officers shared office space with staff reps and spent more time with them and
their peers than they did with rank-and-file workers. Full-time officers were also more likely to become UAW and CAW employees. 3M worker and activist Edith Johnston was the first woman on the UAW Canadian staff and was followed by others, including Peter Kennedy, Jerry Flynn, and Jim Ashton. Becoming a staff member meant adhering to national and international union policy, including bureaucratic efforts to control locals.

The servicing reps from Local 27 also rose in the union’s hierarchy. Not coincidentally, this became a more regular process as the Left became less influential in the local. Staff reps felt that, compared to other locals in the Canadian UAW, Local 27 was about halfway between the pro- and anti-administration groups. However, as local leaders and rank-and-file members would have noted, supporting the national administration could lead to staff appointments and an overall positive image within the broader union. Accepting some aspects of bureaucratization could thus have seemed beneficial since it led to the promotion of Local 27 activists and helped raise the local’s profile within the broader national union. Composed almost entirely of industrial workers, the local was a working-class organization that was formed by a group of committed activists who wanted to involve the broader rank-and-file membership, and who often did so by drawing on the resources of the national and international union.

**Co-operation and Tension**

Numerous challenges emerged in the relationship between Local 27 and the national and international offices over forty years. Tension developed over political ideology. Successive staff reps helped foster the local’s growth but also attempted to shape its leadership. Drawn from the ranks of working-class union members, they found themselves occupying a middle ground between the national office and the local membership and leadership. Local members and activists gladly participated in education programs and other resources offered by the national office, but they also made it clear that they did not need the national office telling them how to conduct their internal affairs. Local leaders and rank-and-file
members demonstrated little reluctance to challenge the Canadian UAW leadership. Their principal allegiance was first and foremost to their local union, and they would not accept criticism levelled against their members from either the broader UAW or other unions. On the other hand, the decision not to implement McDermott’s recommendation to create a miscellaneous unit, and thus permit Bill Froude to run for president again, limited membership to people who were either employed by or retired from a bargaining unit.

National officers and staff representatives may have been “managers of discontent” when dealing with workplace issues, but they were not in their handling of Local 27’s internal structure and membership. In many cases, they were the focus of discontent and could not always effectively respond to it. On the other hand, the local invariably supported broader union policy on issues like wage and price controls and free trade. Local members and leaders, regardless of their level of activism, had shown their first allegiance to the local union that they had built: an independent working-class structure that would support workers as they faced employers, participated in the broader community, and formed their own families.