Labour Relations

Over the course of the postwar decades, the official methods of challenging employers through collective agreement grievance language were accompanied by a range of other unofficial tactics on the part of workers that were intended to challenge management. Discussions of workplace history sometimes portray employers as monolithic entities. Not uncommonly, accounts of labour-management relations emphasize the importance of senior executives like GM President Charlie Wilson, while frontline managers and supervisors remain largely anonymous figures.1

In this chapter, I explore the nature of the postwar labour relations system, especially in terms of the extent to which labour and management compromised their demands.2 I suggest that discussions of postwar labour relations should consider the importance of union resistance to employers outside of the bounds of collective bargaining, as well as the manner in which unions were able to use the labour relations process. The chapter addresses some key questions: How did Local 27 activists challenge management? Were their efforts frowned upon by staff representatives and national union leaders? What did the local and its members think of management? Why were unofficial means used to challenge management? Exploring these issues shows that what occurred outside of collective bargaining and the official labour relations process was often as important as what occurred in formalized collective bargaining.
Foremen and Managers

An analysis of Local 27’s relations with employers affords an opportunity to see who assumed junior- and middle-management positions, how they behaved, and what the union thought of them. Overall, the local and its members did not like management: they were portrayed as morally lacking, laughable, or both. However, distinctions were drawn between levels of management, particularly between supervisors and senior executives. From the 1950s to the 1970s, frontline supervisors, universally called foremen (and they were always men), were generally drawn from the unionized workforce. The workers therefore knew them and their capabilities.

Although it did not change overall impressions of management, their habit of promoting supervisors out of the bargaining unit drew approval from the union. This process began early in the local’s life when Lloyd Lansing — an Eaton Auto worker and member of the early executive — was promoted from the union ranks to be plant personnel manager.5 Indeed, he announced his promotion, along with his resignation from the union executive, at a membership meeting. By selecting foremen from the union ranks, especially from the executive, management chose men who were familiar with the collective agreement and who would already have won the confidence of rank-and-file workers. Archie Baillie, having worked in a sprawling GM facility, thought that unionized workers made “pretty good” foremen and questioned the idea of using foremen hired from outside of the firm.4 Foremen selected in that manner, therefore, brought considerable credibility to their jobs. Becoming a foreman would also have seemed like a rational career move for rank-and-file workers and for activists such as Lansing who were interested in doing something other than manual labour.

Specific criteria used to select supervisory staff seem to have been lacking, but the process of selecting and promoting supervisors was probably more comprehensive than that used for choosing production workers. Former Local 27 members who were hired during the 1960s remembered a fairly simple process of completing a brief application form
at a personnel office. For instance, Peter Hensels was quickly hired at Kelvinator even though he admitted to the person who interviewed him that his English language skills were poor. However, as Sanford Jacoby notes, other employers, such as Kodak, rigorously selected and trained supervisory staff in the postwar decades. Although not all employers who negotiated with Local 27 may have been as rigorous as Kodak, they would have chosen supervisors who could maintain control in the workplace.

The fact that supervisors were drawn from unionized ranks should not suggest that they interacted collegially with the workers. Workers, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, were expected to obey the foremen and maintain production standards. Russ Mackison, who was a production worker and foreman at Kelvinator, made it clear that workers were expected to be able to do their jobs properly without any excuses, an expectation that he believed changed later in his working years. Foremen were also encouraged to directly confront workers who were thought to cause headaches for management. Frank May, who worked in drafting at Kelvinator and later as a production supervisor at 3M, recounted how he was instructed by plant management to target and single out from his peers one worker who was thought to have a poor attitude. After this action resulted in May’s car being vandalized, he continued to receive full backing from management and glowing performance reviews.

Rank-and-file union activists occasionally found themselves the objects of management hostility. For example, a 1970 letter from Local 27 to Northern Electric management accused the company of “initiating a program of harassment of Union representatives in order to curtail most Union activity.” Management also sought to indirectly challenge the union’s representational capacity through a range of methods, such as the continued operation of the London Works Council, and by limiting the amount of time that the London plant unit chairperson could devote to union business. The Works Council was composed of workers from different levels of the London plant’s organization, and the rank-and-file representatives were not chosen by the union. Although claims of harassment by management are often subjective, engaging in practices such as
operating a works council that was intended to operate separate from the union, and limiting how much time a union representative could devote to union business, were obvious examples of management continuing to challenge the union’s role as worker representative.

The local had less charitable views of senior managers than of foremen. Senior managers substantially influenced the way in which labour relations developed in a workplace. This was particularly obvious in the response of management at Wilco and AWL to unionization. Hostile labour relations were also an ongoing feature of places like Kelvinator, where the union and the company president Bob Woxman shared little else but mutual dislike. Former activist George Medland remembered Woxman becoming so enraged at the union during a labour-management meeting that he punched the outer housing of a fridge, sending it across the room. Some Local 27 activists would also occasionally go out of their way to deliberately provoke management. For instance, in the late 1970s, the Northern Telecom unit began awarding a Turkey of the Month Award (see figure 5.1) to someone in management whom workers felt was lacking in supervisory skills. Northern Telecom’s management was incensed at this particular tactic and sent a letter to staff rep Bob Nickerson:

Articles such as: “Turkey of the Month” and “Superboss” aimed at ridiculing management do little to maintain good industrial relations. . . .

I had not received the impression from our quarterly master meetings that we have serious industrial relations problems. However, the tone of some of the union local’s “flyers” seems to indicate otherwise. Am I wrong in my impressions?

The flyers in question were produced in the plant without Bob Nickerson’s prior knowledge. They were the brainchild of Rene Montague and members of the Northern Telecom bargaining unit. The Turkey of the Month Award was posted on more than one occasion, and although similar notices do not seem to have appeared in other Local 27 bargaining units, they were obvious expressions of worker discontent. They also indicate that workers felt they had sufficient control over the workplace to cast aspersions on managerial competence.
OUR SECOND TURKEY OF THE MONTH AWARD (AND DESERVEDLY SO) GOES TO THE DEPARTMENT MANAGER KNOWN TO ONE AND ALL AS THE GODFATHER.

THIS TURKEY SEEMS TO THINK THAT GRIEVANCE MEETINGS WITH THE COMPANY ARE PETTY AND A WASTE OF COMPANY TIME.

HE ALSO FAILS TO RECOGNIZE UNION REPRESENTATIVES ON OVERTIME AND FEELS THE MEMBERSHIP SHOULD NOT HAVE REPRESENTATION ON SATURDAY AND SUNDAY.

WELL, HE’S DEAD WRONG.

SO WE SAY, CONGRATULATIONS TURKEY . . . YOU’VE EARNED IT!!

Differing union opinions about frontline management and senior executives were shaped by specific variables. A foreman, disliked though he may have been, was someone with whom rank-and-file members identified. They looked at frontline supervisors and saw working-class people who had done jobs similar to those they themselves performed. In contrast, senior managers were usually remote figures with whom average workers had little contact. This sense of alienation was exacerbated by the fact that London’s manufacturing sector included several major American branch plants, such as 3M and GM, and those facilities were often run by US-born executives. This seems to have been particularly true of 3M. In the late 1980s, when 3M Canada had already been in London for over
three decades, its outgoing US-born president informed the *London Free Press* that a Canadian would never head the company.\(^\text{18}\) His rationale for this policy was that 3M prohibited employees from running operations in their home countries.\(^\text{19}\) Rank-and-file workers were thus reminded that they were part of a branch plant economy.

The local took a keen interest in reporting what was going on in various plants to rank-and-file members. The *Local 27 News* always included reports from each unit. Some information was routine, such as a unit mentioning a discussion about creating its own social club, while other units reported layoffs.\(^\text{20}\) Health and safety issues such as poor air quality in a location were also reported, as was the state of common areas like washrooms.\(^\text{21}\) Collective bargaining objectives, such as the drive for wage parity between Canadian and American Big Three workers, were also discussed in the *Local 27 News*.\(^\text{22}\) The local felt free to comment on all aspects of the workplace in its internal communications. The bargaining unit reports did not necessarily mention specific managers or supervisors, but they nonetheless represent a public critique of how management rights were being exercised.

As discussed in chapter 2, staff representatives often occupied a space between the local union and the national and international offices. Management viewed staff reps and other national union officers differently than they did elected officers and rank-and-file members. Much of this was rooted in close interaction between them. For instance, for many years UAW staff rep George Specht attended both arbitration meetings and labour-management meetings at which E.S. Brent represented GM management at the local level. Their exchanges may not have always led to agreement, but, after years of facing each other, the two would have presumably developed a rapport. Labour-management issues were confined to regular business hours, and labor-management meetings were usually scheduled in advance. Such arrangements helped to formalize relations between staff reps and their counterparts in management. Former staff rep Bob Nickerson remembered only one occasion on which a management representative called him at home to discuss an issue — a call that the man likely regretted, as Nickerson lambasted him...
for contacting him outside of office hours. Another indication of the intermediate space occupied by staff representatives and national union officers is that they were occasionally invited to attend specific functions in various plants. For example, GM invited UAW Canadian Region Vice-President Dennis McDermott to London to participate in a celebration marking the introduction of the new Terex dump truck in 1971.

Spontaneous worker protests against management behaviour, like the Turkey of the Month Award, complicated relations between management and the staff representatives since staff representatives and national officers preferred to have peaceful, if not cordial, relations with management. The role that the union officers and staff played in regulating conflict within the workplace brought them close to C. Wright Mills’s description of union leaders as managers of worker discontent. They opposed company managers, while still forming working relations with them. They also both identified and responded to worker discontent while ultimately channelling it into formalized conflict-resolution structures.

**Labour-Management Meetings and Grievances**

While shop floor protests against management behaviour were one aspect of the ongoing labour relations process in plants represented by Local 27, routine labour-management meetings of the type attended by Brent and Specht were a formal method of handling disputes and were preferred by both staff representatives and management. Although such meetings were usually not mandated by collective agreement language, they were as crucial to the bargaining process as negotiations over collective agreements or grievance arbitration since it was at these meetings where many issues were first discussed between the union and the employer. Labour-management meetings’ agendas also included discussions regarding ongoing grievance issues.

Discussions at the GM unit, especially during the Brent-Specht era, provide considerable insight into what the union brought to the table at meetings and how management responded. For example, George Specht noted during a 1958 meeting that there was overcrowding at a particular
time clock, with the implication that an additional clock was needed.\textsuperscript{26} E.S. Brent quickly replied that overcrowding around the clock was the fault of those using it.\textsuperscript{27} Similar issues were raised in 1959, including a demand for doors on the toilet stalls and better distribution of paycheques.\textsuperscript{28} A 1960 meeting included a question about the prices charged in the cafeteria.\textsuperscript{29}

Meeting agendas usually included such mundane issues, but they also reveal an ongoing union desire to question how the plant was run — specifically, management’s right to control the work process. A 1960 meeting between the GM shop committee and management focused on twelve agenda items, including the following seven grievances: time study, inspection of work, job operating in the general group, two instances of salaried employees performing hourly rated work, violation of an agreement on a junior employee being transferred during a work reduction, and a foreman doing hourly-rated work. All of these issues were at the core of management’s ability to run the plant. This approach is especially noteworthy in the case of GM Diesel since its parent company was instrumental in establishing the postwar bargaining framework. GM Diesel was intended to be the pattern for other Local 27 contracts, and its unit executive and membership continually challenged the bargaining rules that its international office had helped to establish.\textsuperscript{30}

Grievances and other labour-management issues fell into several broad categories in the 1970s. A labour-management meeting held at Northern Telecom in 1976 covered the following nineteen items:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Problems with skilled trades
  \item Letter on apprentices
  \item Vacation pay grievance
  \item Requirement for a forklift driver on the second shift
  \item Adjustment to employee’s continuous service date
  \item Election committee refused access to the plant
  \item Managers’ comments on the new contract
  \item Appendix 2.1B of the contract that pertained to London
  \item Bob Cree grievance
  \item When will 0.35 cent increase be paid?
\end{itemize}
· Re-opening of south doors to the plant (also included was a discussion of the need for bicycle stands)
· Discussion on a room in the plant becoming a “clean room”
· Requirement for written notification of scheduled overtime
· Rate protection
· Safety program
· Unauthorized entry of a security guard into the plant union office
· Downgrading of established jobs
· R.J. Saumur benefits while on sick leave
· Application of Article 12.3 of the bargaining agreement

What does this list reveal? Clearly, labour-management meetings involved discussion of a range of workplace issues that went beyond the grievance process. Several of the agenda issues related directly to managerial authority: skilled trades, apprenticeship, overtime scheduling, job downgrading, and managerial comments on a new collective agreement. Others, such as the union election committee being denied access to the plant and a guard entering the union’s office, were efforts to maintain the union’s legitimacy in the workplace. Some issues remained the same as years passed. For example, a 1977 labour-management meeting focused on similar issues related to skilled trades jobs. The agenda also included lines of demarcation between trades, qualifications required for roles, and apprentice seniority.

Labour-management meetings often dealt with the same issues, regardless of the bargaining unit in which the meetings were held. In the late 1950s, the list of agenda items at GM was similar to the list at Northern Telecom. Some issues, such as door access, seem relatively innocuous; others, like questions about how skilled trades would be trained and accumulate seniority, were more significant. So, too, were questions about how management in the plant commented on the collective agreement. Close to twenty years elapsed between the time when UAW staff rep George Specht sat in a meeting room and questioned E.S. Brent about GM’s behaviour and the time when Bob Nickerson sat and grilled Northern Telecom management. But the union’s decision to challenge the way in
which those plants were managed remained constant. The same pattern
was found at mid-sized bargaining units. For instance, a list of grievances
from Sparton in the early 1970s shows that ten people grieved that they
were denied appointments to jobs in the plant.\textsuperscript{33}

The union’s constant challenging of how plants were operated certainly
did not induce management to adopt the union’s positions. Nineteen
grievances, all dealing with job posting issues, were filed at Northern
Electric between the summer of 1972 and early 1973, and management
denied all of them.\textsuperscript{34} The grievances and management’s decision to deny
them reflected both management’s determination to control the hiring
and promotion process, and the union’s equal effort to challenge that
aspect of managerial control. What is quite evident from the proceedings
of the labour-management meetings in the 1970s is a consistent union
effort to question how management operated. At no point did the union
ever stop and declare a topic to be ineligible for discussion because it fell
under management-rights provisions in a collective agreement. Instead,
the union basically ignored the management-rights provisions and tried
to extend its sphere of influence over how workplaces were run.

\textbf{Arbitrations}

Local 27’s habit of challenging managerial prerogatives through labour-
management meetings and the grievance process continued in its use of
arbitration, a key feature of the post–World War II labour relations system.
The grievance procedure starts at an informal level with the complaints
of individual workers; it is hoped that most complaints will be resolved at
that stage since subsequent stages in the grievance process involve more
formality and expertise.\textsuperscript{35} While forming the basis of a legally mandated
process that could end in arbitration, a grievance can be intensely personal
for a worker. It is unclear exactly what percentage of grievances actually
proceeded to arbitration, but it is generally thought to be a small frac-
tion owing to the cost of the arbitration process and the uncertainty of
its outcome.\textsuperscript{36} The average union member does not loom large in labour
history, but arbitration files allow rank-and-file voices and issues to be
heard. Arbitration decisions often reveal how well a local union interacted with management. Since the grievance arbitration process is a feature of the Wagner-based labour relations system institutionalized in Canada in the post–World War II years, arbitrations reveal the extent to which unions and their members were willing to challenge functions and rights that were considered reserved to management either through collective agreement language or because of the doctrine of residual rights. This latter right holds that management has the ability to exercise functions required to operate the business unless otherwise stipulated in a collective agreement. This matter was the subject of an arbitration board decision issued in 1966 in which a grievance over contracting out of work at Russellsteel was dismissed after an arbitration panel declined to broaden the interpretation of collective agreement language on the meaning of who could be considered an employee.37 Grievances often contain little detail about what caused them to be filed other than the existence of a specific issue that spurred workers to approach their stewards, put pen to paper, and commence the process of challenging management. Arbitration decisions say much more.38

Local 27 took eighty-four grievances to arbitration between 1950 and 1990. As table 5.1 shows, some units accounted for many more arbitrations than others. Overall, the local went to arbitration seven times in the 1950s, seventeen times in the 1960s, thirty-six times in the 1970s, and seventeen times in the 1980s. Activity clearly peaked in the local’s third decade of operation for a range of reasons, some of which are seen in the case subjects.39

A range of issues that local leaders and members felt were directly related to the collective agreement went to arbitration. The local prevailed in forty-five cases, slightly over half of the total. One company grievance was filed, but the other cases were initiated by the union. Seniority accounted for nine cases, and twenty-seven cases covered dismissal and discipline. Three cases referred specifically to management rights. Monetary issues like overtime, health plans, pensions, and inventive pay were the focus of fourteen cases. The rest covered a range of issues. All but three of the cases involved grievances filed by male workers.40

Labour Relations  /  151
TABLE 5.1  Local 27 Arbitrations by Bargaining Unit, 1950–90

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Union</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Telecom</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firestone</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3M</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eaton Auto</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unifin</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tecumseh</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvinator</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** The information in this table derives primarily from records of arbitration decisions located at reference code RG 7-40 in the Archives of Ontario. These records were supplemented by information found in *Labour Arbitration Cases*, which is compiled annually by employer, and by arbitration decisions available in the CAW fonds at Library and Archives Canada and in the UAW Region 7 and UAW Local 27 collections at the Archive of Labour and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University.

Decisions regarding the progress of grievances and whether they would proceed to arbitration were made by individual bargaining units before being pursued by the local executive. This process began early in the local’s history. Minutes of the GM Diesel unit meetings from the 1950s, for example, show frequent discussion of grievances and the progress of arbitrations. Arbitrations were attended by two groups, which presented arguments for labour and management. The cases were heard by either a sole arbitrator or an arbitration panel consisting of three members — one each for the union and the employer, and a board chair. Arbitrators were usually jurists, attorneys, or academics with legal training. The practice of drawing them from these occupations began in the 1940s, and many — such as academic and judge Bora Laskin — developed arbitration expertise as part of training that led them on to elevated positions on the legal bench.

The exact occupations of the arbitrators who heard the Local 27 cases is not included in the decisions that they wrote, but it is quite evident that
the local and the employers against whom its members grieved chose to use only a small number of arbitrators. J.F.W. Weatherhill, a full-time arbitrator, ruled on thirteen cases over a twenty-year period. E.E. Palmer, a professor at the University of Western Ontario who often heard UAW cases, heard ten Local 27 cases during the same period. Labour and management also called on G.J. Brandt, another UWO professor, for six decisions, and on Judge E.W. Cross for eight. The remaining cases were heard by a range of arbitrators.43

Reliance on a small group of arbitrators to handle a high percentage of cases indicates that both the local and its employers were content with the overall trend of their rulings. Employers relied on the use of legal counsel in their proceedings, while the local relied on staff representatives to present cases. The fact that the union prevailed in slightly over half of the cases reveals that careful thought was devoted to choosing which cases merited arbitration, that considerable effort was put into preparing for hearings, and that the union’s national staff was skilled in presenting the grievances. Other noteworthy trends are found within the arbitration cases. Some units, such as Firestone and Northern Electric, began sending grievances soon after joining the union. As previously noted, labour relations were contentious at those two plants, and the work environment surely spurred workers to sign grievance forms. Some bargaining units are scarcely mentioned, which suggests that their members either filed a smaller number of grievances or that they had fewer grievances taken to arbitration.

The most revealing aspect of the grievances that the local arbitrated is the number of cases that continued to challenge aspects of the management-rights clauses. I offer two possible interpretations of this trend. The first is that the local was futilely challenging a labour relations system — specifically management rights and prerogatives — that favoured management and was not easily altered. An alternate view is that the local had already challenged management’s right to operate facilities in an unfettered manner in other venues, so continuing that challenge in arbitration was a logical progression. The local did not challenge the type of products that employers produced; it nonetheless devoted considerable
effort to pursuing to arbitration grievances that questioned managerial decisions on important issues like discipline, dismissal, and job assignment.

The local generally won cases pertaining to dismissal and discipline, but it was less successful in cases involving issues such as overtime allotment, seniority, or the posting of jobs. For example, in a 1963 case at Eaton Auto, arbitrator E.W. Cross reinstated a worker who had been terminated for persistent lateness. Although the worker had a previous suspension for lateness, Cross argued that there had in fact been no further lateness after the suspension. However, at the same hearing, Cross denied a second grievance filed at Eaton Auto concerning overtime allotment.44

Arbitrators generally upheld discipline meted out by management. For instance, a 1973 hearing over a three-day suspension at 3M led arbitrator G.R. Stewart to dismiss the grievance. In this case, the employee had been disciplined for “several acts of alleged misconduct” toward a supervisor. The grievor was a thirteen-year employee who had no prior infractions on his employment record. Regardless of his previous record, Stewart noted that the “objective of disciplinary action is to deter not only the subject of such actions but others who might be inclined to emulate him.” Furthermore, Stewart held that the employer imposed the suspension “only after due consideration and without malice or ill will toward the grievor.”45

In other cases, management decisions on discipline and dismissal were revoked by arbitrators. For instance, a man was terminated in 1979 by 3M management for misuse of company property, including welding metal stands for personal use. The grievor also had existing disciplinary notices on file for lateness. In her ruling, arbitrator Lita-Rose Betcherman agreed that disciplinary action was justified over the welding incident but stated that “the purpose of discipline is to correct misconduct and in the last six months of his employment the grievor appears to have corrected his lateness problem.” She therefore reinstated the grievor and imposed a five-day suspension.46

Workers often filed grievances when they were not the successful applicants for jobs they wanted. For example, in 1980, a female employee at Sparton of Canada stated in her grievance, “I protest the action taken by the company for not awarding me the job of group-leader, I request
that I be awarded the job and be made whole.” The company awarded the job to another, more junior female employee. After a somewhat lengthy analysis of the requirements of the job in question, arbitrator M.R. Gorsky concluded, “I am not satisfied that the Company properly carried out its obligations in awarding the job in accordance with the Collective Agreement.” However, Gorsky did not automatically award the job to the grievor. Instead, he held

that this is a proper case for referring the matter back to the Company for consideration, after taking into account the relevant factors that I have referred to in the Award. In the circumstance the grievor should, at the very least, be given an interview where her specific areas of knowledge and her developed skills can be assessed in relation to the requirements of the posted position.47

The overall arbitration pattern thus suggests that the local and its members demonstrated agency through the arbitration process. Most notably, the local used the grievance and arbitration process, often successfully, to protect its members and promote their interests. The manner in which management applied its right to discipline and dismiss workers was successfully challenged at arbitration hearings. On the other hand, arbitrators did not rewrite collective agreement clauses, nor did they overturn or alter management-rights clauses. Furthermore, they did not always find seniority to be a decisive factor when applying for a job. Instead, arbitrators generally ruled in a manner that allowed Local 27 members to keep their unionized jobs but that did not allow the local to substantively alter how management actually ran the workplace.

It is important to emphasize that the goal of an arbitration board is, in the words of E.E. Palmer, to “discover the intention of the parties creating the [collective] agreement.”48 Furthermore, in his decision on the Russelsteel arbitration, Harry Arthurs notes that “reliance on over-broad philosophical considerations may preclude the pragmatic and realistic solutions to particular problems which would be of most assistance to labour and management in a given bargaining relationship.”49 The arbitrators who ruled on Local 27 grievances followed the approach described by
Palmer and Arthurs, and did not attempt to rewrite agreements. Indeed, Palmer was the arbitrator on several Local 27 cases. Arbitrators sought to determine the intent behind the clauses in collective agreements and to ensure that labour and management adhered to them. Arbitration was not a method to remake collective agreements or otherwise change the collective bargaining process.

Local 27 appears to have been satisfied with the grievance arbitration process and did not often resort to using Ontario’s Labour Relations Act to resolve workplace disputes. Like all industrial unions covered by provincial labour law, Local 27 had the ability to file complaints with the Ontario Labour Relation Board, but it did so infrequently. The local appeared at hearings before the board on six occasions between 1950 and 1990. Two of the complaints that it filed pertained to Wilco; the other four involved four different employers. In 1977, the local was in a dispute with Keeprite Products over whether a collective agreement was in place following a disagreement over anti-inflation legislation that occurred during negotiations. The employer, who had terminated two workers for undisclosed reasons, argued that an agreement had not been concluded. The local asked the board to appoint an arbitrator to hear the case involving the dismissals, and the board agreed. The following year, the local appeared before the board over a dispute with London Generator Service. The company felt that the local had not given sufficient notice of intent to bargain a new collective agreement and refused the local’s request for conciliation. The board ruled that the Minister of Labour had the authority to appoint a conciliation officer in that case.

In 1983, Local 27 appeared before the board about a decision by Central Chevrolet to sell some of its assets to a subsidiary company, Complete Car Care, and to contract out work to that subsidiary. The local argued that employees of Complete Car Care should be included in the Central Chevrolet bargaining unit, but the board dismissed the local’s application to unionize Complete Car Care because the subsidiary was shown to perform work for other auto dealers in London and to not be dominated by Central Chevrolet. And finally, Local 27 filed an unfair labour practice complaint against Sparton of Canada in 1985 over management’s refusal
to grant a contractually mandated Christmas shutdown. The board ruled in favour of the local in that case.

In a few other cases, Local 27 began the procedure of filing a complaint with the OLRB, but it was withdrawn before proceeding before the board. For example, in the 1970s, three complaints against Firestone, about which no details are available, were withdrawn. Union members also began one complaint against Local 27. In 1983, an undisclosed number of members of Unit 13 — Eagle Machine Tool — filed an unfair labour practice complaint against the local, again with no available details, but it was withdrawn. It appears to have been the only complaint of its kind lodged by Local 27 members from 1950 to 1990.

The board decisions suggest that the local only chose to file complaints under Ontario’s Labour Relations Act when a dispute fell under the board’s jurisdiction, as was the case with Central Chevrolet and the question of the unionization of its subsidiary’s employees and with Sparton willfully ignoring a collective agreement clause and not bargaining in good faith. Otherwise, the local preferred to resolve disputes through the grievance and arbitration process. Local 27 applied for conciliation under Ontario’s Labour Relations Act on several occasions, all in the 1950s and 1960s. Of those fourteen applications, five were made during negotiations with Kelvinator. Conciliation, part of the postwar labour relations framework, preceded arbitration. Local 27’s interaction with the OLRB thus suggests that local leaders and staff representatives respected the Labour Relations Act and the outcomes that it brought. The local expected employers to take the same approach.

**Strikes**

To pursue their agenda, the local and its members used more than formal negotiating and challenging employers through collective agreements and grievance arbitration. They also engaged in strikes and used informal forms of confrontation in the workplace. The way in which strike activity was regulated was a key part of the postwar settlement. Legislation such as Ontario’s Labour Relations Act clearly restricted when workers...
OUR UNION

could strike.\textsuperscript{57} Such acts set the parameters of industrial legality as they pertained to work stoppages. Moreover, as Peter McInnis argues, unions operating within those parameters had to be responsibly militant and regulate their own behaviour.\textsuperscript{58}

While Local 27 settled most of its collective agreements without strikes, it nonetheless engaged in several. Strikes like those at Kelvinator, Wolverine Tube, and Northern Electric were landmark struggles that figure prominently in the local’s past. But not only were strikes enormously stressful for the local and its members; they were also events for which the local could not rely only on its core group of activists for success. Instead, mounting a strike meant that those activists had to successfully lead a majority of rank-and-file members in a workplace out onto a picket line.

Not all bargaining units engaged in strikes, and of those that did, some went on strike more often than others. Strikes were common from the 1950s to 1970s, either during first-contract negotiation — as was the case with Kelvinator and Wolverine — or during the renewal of an agreement. Since GM and Northern Electric participated in full-pattern bargaining, their strike activity was tied to broader national union bargaining objectives. In fact, there is no evidence that workers in GM’s auto assembly and parts plants went on strike over issues at the GM Diesel plant in London. Conversely, GM Diesel workers found themselves striking to support auto assembly issues, some of which directly affected their lives. In 1968, GM workers across Canada struck for wage parity with their American counterparts. This was an issue of particular interest to all workers, but those at GM Diesel wanted wage parity between workers in automotive and workers in production that was not strictly automotive. Despite not being involved in automotive production, GM Diesel workers felt that their voices were heard at GM Inter-Corporation meetings and at the bargaining table. Participating in negotiations along with other GM locals had the potential to bring the clear advantage of enjoying the economic rewards that such large-scale collective bargaining could accomplish.\textsuperscript{59} Legal strikes occurred primarily over monetary issues or because the employer was continuing to resist unionization after certification, which was the case with Kelvinator, Wolverine, and AWL Steego. For instance, workers at Sparton of
Canada went out for five months in 1981 in a dispute over a COLA clause. Similarly, the local conducted its only strike against 3M for a two-month period in 1974 over wages, COLA, and vacation entitlements. London Motor Products workers also struck for ten weeks in 1987 over economic issues, as did Northern Telecom workers in 1988 for twenty days, in that case over COLA. COLA was thus not only a major bargaining issue for the entire UAW, but also a central strike issue for the local.

Strikes took on different forms depending on the workplace in question. Every strike was both a personal and collective experience for the local’s membership. Jim Wilkes, who was involved both with initially organizing London Motor Products and with the 1987 strike, remembered how he and his co-workers developed a strong sense of solidarity among themselves and with other UAW workers in the London area. Strike appeals were made at places like the Talbotville Ford plant, and Wilkes was amazed at the money that rank-and-file workers took from their own wallets to support the London Motor Products strike. On the other hand, a prolonged strike could be a disheartening experience for workers, as was the case at Wolverine Tube.

Before a strike could commence, written approval had to be given by someone like UAW Canadian Region Vice-President George Burt or Dennis McDermott. Most strikes were officially sanctioned by the UAW Canadian office, especially since broader union bargaining objectives were the impetus for some strikes. Staff rep Bob Nickerson, for example, pursued the national office’s objective of obtaining pattern bargaining through a Northern Electric strike in 1973, having already led a strike there in 1971. Strike activity peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s: Local 27 units either officially or unofficially went on strike seven times between 1966 and 1971. The local’s activity mirrored national and provincial trends. The number of strikes in Canada increased from 582 in 1968 to 724 in 1973. Ontario experienced similar increases, with 204 strikes in 1968 and 286 in 1973.

Some of Local 27’s strikes were short, such as an afternoon walkout at Eaton Auto in 1966, while others, like the twenty-five day strike at Northern Electric in 1971, were longer. The rest of the 1970s was a period
of heightened strike activity for the local, with twenty-two conducted across fifteen bargaining units. On occasion, particularly in the early 1970s at Firestone, workers went on brief wildcat strikes over conditions in the plant. The local and national response was not to sanction workers but to encourage them to go back into the plant and operate within the framework of industrial legality and to use the collective bargaining and grievance processes to challenge their employers.

The local’s strike pattern consequently involved obtaining strike permission from the national office, which was never refused, and following the process of industrial legality established in the post–World War II years. This should not suggest that strikes were merely bureaucratic events that served to regulate worker militancy. As the foregoing discussion shows, strikes could be long and personally tumultuous events for workers as well as for staff reps. As noted earlier, Bob Nickerson led many strikes in his early years servicing Local 27, and failure could have perhaps circumscribed his career in the UAW. Al Seymour was incarcerated during the Fleck strike.

So for all parties — both on the national staff and in the rank and file — strikes were moments fraught with both peril and opportunity. Staff representatives such as Nickerson saw the usefulness of strikes when pursuing objectives like pattern bargaining. On the other hand, strikes could also have negative consequences for both a local union and the national office: as noted in chapter 3, the Wolverine Tube strike was a failure for Local 27 and the Canadian UAW. The staff representatives and other national union leaders appear to have preferred not to go on strike, but they nonetheless recognized that strikes could be a useful method of pursuing certain bargaining objectives. Interaction between the local and management was thus more than a process of negotiating collective agreements and arbitrating grievances through the post–World War II labour relations system. Strikes were also an important element of the system. They were influenced not only by the personalities of the parties involved, but also by worker agency at the plant level. Overall, Local 27 observed the boundaries of industrial legality and expected and encouraged its members to do the same.
Making Gains

Were Local 27 members and their union successful in the labour relations process? The protests that occurred in the various plants, including the grievances filed and strikes waged, were mostly driven by local priorities. Struggles over issues such as pattern bargaining were less about what Local 27’s rank and file wanted than what the national and international union offices hoped to achieve. Wildcat strikes at Firestone and Kelvinator were symptomatic of broader issues in the workplace, which in turn fuelled worker discontent and drove issues into collective bargaining.

The diverse workplaces, reflecting a range of experiences, did not necessarily conform to what may have been considered universal manufacturing working conditions. As Don Wells notes, the post–World War II Fordist manufacturing environment was not always a pleasant one. In the workplace that Wells studied, Ford’s Oakville assembly facility, workers were forced to adapt to “Ford Time,” which meant a closely regimented and monitored working environment governed by strict rules. He suggests that the union was brought into the plant at management’s behest, implying that this method of entry compromised it from the start. According to his analysis, the grievance procedure masked management power behind seemingly legitimate workplace rules. However, the lure of well-paid employment tied workers to their jobs regardless of their dislike of working conditions in the plant. Wells also identified a pattern he refers to as “little victories and big defeats.” His analysis includes a very negative interpretation of the grievance and arbitration process.

Although the collective bargaining process, a central part of the post-war settlement, imparted authority to management, Local 27’s experience with the process has been one of both agency and response. Without question, as Wells argues, the grievance process enabled management to set work rules until an arbitrator ultimately forced change. The process was still enthusiastically embraced by rank-and-file workers, as evidenced by the fact that they continually filed grievances that challenged managerial authority. Local union officers and staff representatives may have
channelled discontent into the collective bargaining dispute-resolution process, but they did not prevent challenges to management rights as delineated in collective agreements. Don Wells and Wayne Lewchuk argue that acceptance of management rights made it difficult for workers to resist management control over work processes and job design. While this may be true, Local 27 members and activists still mounted repeated challenges to management, even though these efforts did not yield many results. Furthermore, they did so with the support of staff representatives and national officers. The fact that they did not always succeed did not diminish their efforts.

Management was not monolithic despite being generally hostile toward the union. Union members differentiated between distant executives like Bob Woxman at Kelvinator and the succession of Americans who came north of the forty-ninth parallel to run 3M, and the frontline supervisors and managers who may well have been Local 27 members at some point in their working lives. Employers likewise saw differences within the union’s ranks. Staff reps were treated with some respect, and national officers were invited to visit plants from time to time. Individual workers found themselves treated much less deferentially and sometimes were even the targets of management aggression.

In some ways, the development of collective bargaining in Local 27 workplaces was guided by broader factors that were beyond the control of rank-and-file members or local leaders and staff. Pradeep Kumar and Stephanie Ross note that the Canadian labour movement showed increasing interest in social unionism during the period under examination, 1950 to 1990. Local 27’s experience with collective bargaining also happened during years of heightened labour militancy across Canada, peaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While the state never became directly involved in bargaining between Local 27 and employers, the local was part of a broader labour relations climate in which the state was less accepting of organized labour than it had been in the immediate post–World War II years.

Local 27’s post–World War II collective bargaining system does not entirely reflect the positions taken by authors like Peter McInnis and
Nelson Lichtenstein on the subject. Returning to Wells and Lewchuk’s analysis illustrates what was perhaps the main challenge to Local 27 and the rest of the Canadian labour movement: the reality that the success of unions in economic terms was linked to the overall success of the firms with which they bargained. The union could be very successful at places like Kelvinator or Eaton Automotive, plants that seemed economically viable, yet could see those plants close because of strategic business decisions taken by management. Similarly, because Canadian unions did not have an ownership stake in the businesses that they organized, they could not influence what products would be produced. For example, Local 27 members were certainly pleased that GM put a successive collection of products in the Diesel Division plant, but they could not dictate production methods for those products.

Local 27’s experience with collective bargaining took place in an area — the shop floor — that was the employer’s property. But the local and its members still considered the workplace their domain. Their workplace agenda was rooted in their workplace struggles: it did not originate in a national or international union office. Virtually every employer that Local 27 encountered mounted some form of resistance to the local, whether by doing everything possible to avoid unionization in the first place or by refusing to address grievances prior to arbitration, by confrontations during strikes, or by outright intimidation. While Grant Wilson’s hostile behaviour was obviously not normally found among managers, E.S. Brent telling the union that workers were to blame for lineups at the time clock illustrates that something as routine as clocking in at work could be a contentious issue. The same was true of the union having to ask GM to put doors on the toilet stalls. This pattern, which began in 1950 and continued until the late 1980s, illustrates that despite the seeming institutionalization of workplace conflict through the post–World War II labour relations system, employers wanted to run their workplaces without the union interfering.

The important role of a core group of activists in the local’s operations is evidence of how Local 27 operated through collective bargaining. However, the willingness of rank-and-file members to go out on strike,
file grievances, and otherwise support their local union in the workplace was also critical to the local’s success. Their use of a variety of means to challenge management, including using the grievance and arbitration process and continually bringing issues to labour-management meetings, shows that Local 27’s members felt more empowered than constrained in the workplace.