

# CONCLUSION

## LOOKING BACK

Anyone who had belonged to Local 27 in 1950 and looked back at the local's progress in 1990 would have quickly noted that much had changed about the local since George Specht chased Eaton Auto from Windsor to London in 1950. Local 27 grew from one medium-sized bargaining unit when it was founded to include a diversity of units, both in size and type. What does this story tell us about how local unions developed in the four decades after World War II and the place that they occupied in the lives of their members? In the case of Local 27, the influences on its development included local activists, employers, and rank-and-file workers. The bargaining agenda that it sought to shape was in part the creation of the UAW and CAW leadership, but it was also formed by the hopes and aspirations of rank-and-file members and activists.

While not racially diverse, the local included an array of workers from an assortment of ethnic backgrounds. Their family roots lay in various European countries or in other areas of Canada. Most members of Local 27 grew up in the London area, however. They invariably came from working-class, although not necessarily union, backgrounds, and thus they shared similar life experiences. Many of them lived in London's industrial east end, attended schools that offered some form of vocational training, and sought industrial employment when they entered the workforce. Joining Local 27 became a part of their process of leaving school and finding work.

Because of its composite form, Local 27 was unlike many other large local unions in Canada, but despite its uniqueness, its history reveals much about what a local union did in the postwar years and the influences

that shaped it. In terms of its founding, Local 27 was a creation of both the UAW Canadian office and of rank-and-file workers. George Burt did not want to lose a plant to another union, nor did he want an employer avoiding unionization. Eaton Auto management invited Windsor workers to work in the new London plant, and they formed the nucleus of Local 27's original membership.

The local was built around a core group of activists, who became one of the primary influences on its progress from 1950 to 1990. The Eaton Auto workers were the first to engage in activism, even though few of them stayed involved in union affairs after the local was founded. Later activists, such as Al Campbell, built the local's internal structure. They helped organize new bargaining units, wrote and printed the *Local 27 News*, worked on political campaigns, and performed all of the other big and small tasks that go into building an organization based on membership. They built a financially autonomous local that did not rely on the national and international union offices for assistance. It was because of them that an effective local structure was built.

Part of wider political and policy discussions that took place in UAW Region 7 in the decades after World War II, Local 27 was an inherently political organization. While it contained a dedicated Left caucus, its activists covered the political spectrum; these politically diverse activists were the ones most passionately engaged in discussions over what the local should do for its members, a debate that unquestionably strengthened the local and made it more of a grassroots organization. The UAW leadership anguished over how to control the Local 27 Left and went to great lengths to identify who was pro- and anti-administration, but the local's membership supported local leftists. They may not have always agreed with Al Campbell's politics, but they knew that he was an effective union activist who would tirelessly defend them.

Rather than submit Local 27 to a dramatic purge, the Canadian UAW leadership sought to identify and control pro- and anti-administration groups. They gradually aligned the local's political agenda with wider UAW policies. This closer association with the national union administration coincided with more Local 27 activists joining the UAW staff.

Furthermore, local activists closed ranks around any of their members who were criticized by either the UAW leadership or by people in other unions. Nonetheless, staff representatives, who were part of the UAW administration and chose to support many of the decisions of local activists, occupied a space between the national office and the local. Despite the different agendas of the local and the national leadership, Local 27 actively supported broader national union policy goals: its members marched against wage and price controls, rallied in opposition to free trade, and ardently supported the creation of an independent Canadian autoworkers' union.

These observations are not intended to refute the views expressed by historians like Steven Meyer or Don Wells.<sup>1</sup> Severe purges did occur elsewhere in the UAW in the postwar decades, and some UAW locals, such as Local 707, were creations of the UAW national office. My point is rather that the interaction between Local 27 and the UAW administration reveals that relations between locals and the national office were not uniform. Relations could be complex and often depended on the personalities of the people involved.

The loss of the Left had a marked impact on discourse within the local. The Left caucus gradually disappeared because of a combination of job loss, the deaths of leftist activists, or a conscious decision to become politically silent. But although the nature of activism in the local changed in the 1970s, this did not mean that activism disappeared. Women streamed into many Local 27 bargaining units in the 1960s and 1970s and became the new core of activists, taking up the cause of grassroots representation. They suffered from gender discrimination, were aware of the issues found by academics like Pamela Sugiman, and showed enormous agency in their response to workplace challenges.<sup>2</sup> Women like Edith Johnston, Beulah Harrison, Georgina Anderson, and Julie White agitated for greater involvement in running the local and in determining bargaining priorities. They were supported by the Left in Local 27, which suggests that women in other local unions were similarly supported.

Debating the local's structure and policies was a common occurrence among union activists. The local built a hall that served as a forum for

debate, an administrative hub, and a place where social activities could take place. Although the hall attracted some rank-and-file members, it was more commonly the home of the same activists who had built and ran it. The importance of activists in building a local union has also been found in other studies of unions in the postwar period. This history of Local 27 thus adds to work done by Peter Friedlander, Lisa Fine, Bill Freeman, and David Sobel and Susan Meurer by showing the range of activities in which activists engaged and the way in which they shaped so many aspects of a local union's agenda and operation. In particular, it shows how activists operated in a large, composite local union that represented a broad range of bargaining units.

The local was as much the product of interaction with employers as it was the result of deliberation among people within the union. People became members of industrial unions through being hired by a unionized employer or through choosing to sign membership cards during an organizing drive. The collective bargaining process in which unions and employers interacted was central to the postwar labour relations system. Local 27 bargained dozens of collective agreements between 1950 and 1990, thus gaining much more experience with contract negotiation than locals that only bargained with one employer during the same years. The importance of interaction between local unions and employers is crucial to understanding how the post-World War II labour relations process functioned. Analyzing interaction between people like Charles Wilson and Walter Reuther is important, but so too is listening to the voices of local activists and exploring how staff reps like George Specht negotiated with company managers like E.S. Brent.

The wide range of private companies with which Local 27 bargained from 1950 to 1990 ranged in size from less than twenty workers at London Generator Service to over a thousand at Northern Telecom. The size of a bargaining unit in many ways determined the influence that it had within the local's composite structure. Virtually all of the employers with which the local bargained resisted unionization to some extent. If a treaty of any type was concluded in the postwar years, it was one that many employers violated to varying degrees. General Motors accepted Local 27 after an

abortive organizing drive by an AFL federal affiliate but firmly stood by management's right to run the plant without undue union interference. Kelvinator and Northern Telecom operated employee associations that were eventually replaced by Local 27. AWL Steego forced a strike when the local organized its workers, and Grant Wilson threatened his staff over unionization. Only the first owner of Universal Engineering and the family that founded London Generator Service actually advised their workers to approach Local 27 about organizing. Most employers would have preferred not to deal with unions.

Local 27's history provides important insights into postwar labour-management relations, particularly with respect to the postwar settlement. The local clearly operated through the official labour relations framework created by the state, thus adhering to industrial legality when negotiating collective agreements and arbitrating grievances. But local activists and rank-and-file members continually challenged management through methods outside of the labour relations framework. Those unofficial methods were as central to the workplace as formalized collective bargaining. Local 27 officers attended labour-management meetings at which they pressed employers over a range of issues from health and safety, to workplace amenities, to job posting. Rank-and-file members and activists also occasionally posted notices like the Turkey of the Month Award at Northern Telecom and enraged at least one company president to the point that he punched a refrigerator housing across a room.

As both John Barnard and Sam Gindin have shown, the terms of the collective bargaining process across the UAW were already established by the time Local 27 was founded and began to organize other bargaining units.<sup>3</sup> Many studies of unions in the postwar decades, such as David Sobel and Susan Meurer's *Working at Inglis*, emphasize the importance of strikes, lockouts, and plant closures. This is understandable, given that a strike or lockout at a workplace can be a defining moment in a union's history. In contrast to a local like UAW Local 222 in Oshawa or Local 199 in St. Catharines, Local 27 did not have one *single* defining strike, lockout, or closure. Instead, it had important strikes like the one at Wolverine Tube and notable closures such as those at Eaton Auto and

Kelvinator. On the other hand, it added new units as other ones closed. Local 27 learned important lessons from these major events and crises; as former staff rep Bob Nickerson said, “We were ready” for another closure after Kelvinator.<sup>4</sup>

The local did not feel particularly constrained by the labour relations framework associated with the postwar settlement; instead, it chose to operate within it. Local 27 respected the *Ontario Labour Relations Act* and expected employers to do the same. Labour relations varied across bargaining units, though; relations with employers like 3M were better than those with units such as Wilco. Local 27 leaders and members continually challenged a central part of every collective agreement: management rights clauses. They grieved job assignments, discipline, dismissal, and other issues. They were often successful when they pursued grievances to arbitration, although even a successful arbitration could have mixed results. For example, arbitrators did not change collective agreement wording; they could, however, alter the meaning of agreement clauses. Relations between Local 27 and employers thus took two routes: one was through the collective bargaining process and the apparatus established by the state, and the second was through continual contact in meetings, conversations in the workplace, and occasional deliberate worker protests about management behaviour. Organizing new workplaces, negotiating collective agreements, and going on strike were important events in the local’s history, but they did not constitute the bulk of what happened when the local dealt with employers. As noted in the introduction to this study, the postwar settlement has been called a “Faustian bargain.” But if Local 27’s activists and leaders felt that they were suffering from such an arrangement, they certainly did not show it through their relations with employers. They exhibited considerable agency when dealing with management.

The local’s relations with the state were not as intertwined as they were with employers. The local only rarely called on the state to intervene in the labour relations process. It railed against state efforts to regulate wages and demanded that governments at all levels provide good social programs and services. Most of these interactions with the state occurred through contact with London politicians such as Liberal MP Charles Turner.

Local 27 brought tangible economic rewards to its members, even if those rewards were not always equal. Contrary to Wells's description of UAW/CAW Local 707, the Local 27's experience was not one of "little victories and big defeats."<sup>5</sup> Local 27 members did not inhabit a "republic of consumption," but they had aspirations for a decent standard of living that were realized through union membership. Wages generally increased, and many workers had access to pensions and other benefits. Indeed, they were in many ways privileged compared to non-unionized workers: their employment terms exceeded the minimum legislated standards of Ontario's *Employment Standards Act*, which were intended to protect non-unionized employees. Being covered by a Local 27 collective agreement brought better economic rewards and working conditions.

Comparisons between unionized and non-unionized workers are often difficult to make. It is in many ways easier to study the lives of unionized workers than those of non-unionized workers in the decades after World War II. The former have archives that hold documents about them, union halls in which they can gather, leaders who try to maintain some sense of institutional memory, academics who study them, and news reporters who solicit their opinions about issues relating to their workplaces. Non-union workers are mostly found in government statistics. One of the curiosities of reading forty years' worth of *London Free Press* articles is that the paper concentrated on issues that pertained to unionized workplaces. Content about non-unionized workers is rare. For instance, even though seven hundred workers lost their jobs at Kelvinator, figure 8.1 shows that the *London Free Press* only counted the five hundred unionized families. This suggests that a person who wants his or her workplace experience to be remembered should work in a unionized job. To be non-unionized is to be virtually lost to posterity. Thus, this study has attempted to show what it meant to be a Local 27 member in London in the postwar period rather than to compare unionized and non-unionized workers in the city.

While economic rewards were important, membership in the local also gave people a sense of having some control over their working lives. Workers at Kelvinator, London Motor Products, and Northern Electric

joined the local because they did not feel that they had been treated fairly by management. This was surely a common feeling in every bargaining unit that was organized. Being able to express themselves in the workplace was a great gain for workers. It made it possible for women like Julie White to speak out in favour of workplace equity and to advance issues that concerned them.

Local 27 successfully built a durable organizational structure that attracted successive generations of activists. Members enjoyed economic gains and had a voice in their workplaces. Moreover, the local did not simply focus on the workplace and the bread-and-butter issues associated with business unionism. Instead, activists hoped to build an institution that would move into the wider London community, pursuing the type of social unionism agenda described by Pradeep Kumar and Stephanie Ross. The hall on First Street was intended to be a home away from home for rank-and-file members, and the venue from which the local would portray itself in the city. Local activists supported the UAW's objective of electing the NDP, lobbied politicians at all levels of government, hosted social events, and participated in the London Labour Council.

The union's social agenda brought only some of the results for which activists had hoped. The hall attracted some rank-and-file participation, but the same activists who were busy in various areas of the local's operations were the people who were often found at the hall. It became their recreation space. Although they may have noticed this lack of involvement of other members, they may not have been fully aware of its consequences. They may have looked around the hall and seen people attending events without noticing that they were mostly other activists like themselves.

The difficulties that Local 27 encountered were most evident in the progress of its political program. Despite the fact that NDP candidates were continually promoted in the *Local 27 News* and local members were encouraged to support the party, the NDP won no elections in London until 1990, when the provincial party unexpectedly came to power. London remained an ideologically conservative city that preferred to vote Liberal or Conservative. In fact, Charles Turner — one of the politicians

who did the most to represent the local's interests and whose background was similar to that of many rank-and-file members — was a Liberal. The local's experience with trying to promote to the NDP to its members was not unusual. Keith Archer notes that the members of a union that was affiliated with the NDP were more likely to vote for the party than members of a union that was not. Yet being part of a large national union that supported the NDP was not enough to bring it electoral success.<sup>6</sup>

Local 27 did not call itself “London's One Big Union,” but it could have been described as such. It gradually grew to constitute a large percentage of overall union membership in the city that was affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the Canadian Labour Congress. Many Local 27 activists, such as those working on behalf of women's rights, felt that they could better achieve their objectives through their union than through involvement with a group like the London Labour Council. Other activists, however, felt that an organization like the London Labour Council offered another important forum in which to pursue their agenda.

Why did the local grow in terms of membership and have success in the workplace, yet have difficulty promoting a social agenda? Part of the answer lies in the wider community. With London's growth in the post-war decades, rank-and-file union members had access to a range of social activities that may have been more convenient or enticing than events at the union hall. Local 27 members lived in a North American consumer culture that afforded a wide range of experiences, provided that a person had the income to purchase them. Local 27 members earned incomes that enabled them to participate in consumerism, but they did not live to accumulate goods. Services provided by the state were important to them. The union, perhaps without fully considering the effect of its policies, encouraged its members to participate in society as consumers and citizens beyond the workplace and union hall. Rank-and-file membership was thus not only about the union and the workplace; it was about using the union's help to get the most from work and to participate more fully in society.

The local's structure was a source of weakness as well as strength. While it was able to grow and organize new bargaining units, and to

nurture successive generations of committed activists, the diversity of Local 27 membership, spread as it was across a large number of bargaining units, created challenges for the local. Rank-and-file members, like Joe Laporte, often identified with the local as it operated in their individual workplaces before they considered the local in terms of all of its bargaining units. The local experienced major strikes, organizing victories, and plant closures; however, these were not events in which all local members participated. It was consequently difficult to rally a large number of rank-and-file workers in a wide number of bargaining units around a common struggle.

Local 27 members did, however, have common experiences. They all had some contact with the collective bargaining process and labour-management relations since they were all covered by collective agreements. They all feared the loss of unionized jobs and the upheaval caused by the loss of regular incomes. Most of them lived in the same area of London, many of them went to the same schools, and they had similar working-class family backgrounds. Those were the ties that bound them together more than strikes, plant closures, and organizing drives.

After 1990, the local enjoyed successes but also faced some challenges. Some bargaining units closed — notably Northern Telecom in 1994 — while new ones were organized. Free trade and economic turmoil had an impact on London, but Local 27 continued to hold onto its major bargaining units. For instance, GM Diesel was sold and split between two new owners: General Dynamics Land Systems and Electromotive Canada. Both companies continued to operate in the city. Most importantly, by 2011, the local had seven units of workers employed in health care, including workers at all of London's major hospitals.<sup>7</sup> This marked a major shift in the local's membership from manufacturing to service sector work. The Local 27 members interviewed for or discussed in this book took different paths. Many local activists who had come out of bargaining units like 3M, Northern Telecom, and Firestone went on to significant leadership positions in the local. Julie White and Tim Carrie both eventually became president. They also assumed prominent leadership roles in the broader CAW. White went on to head the women's

program for the union in 2001.<sup>8</sup> Carrie became president of the CAW Council in 2008, and Peter Kennedy was elected CAW national secretary-treasurer in 2009.<sup>9</sup>

Hector McLellan and Bob Sexsmith maintained their commitment to activism through the labour council. Georgina Anderson left Local 27 when Bendix closed but joined another CAW local when she found work at a factory in Stratford, Ontario. Joe Laporte enjoyed a long retirement after working at both Eaton Automotive and General Motors. Jim Ashton passed away suddenly in 1994, just as he was commencing a new role as staff rep. Bob Nickerson and Al Seymour retired after years of service to the union. Gord Wilson became president of the Ontario Federation of Labour from 1986 to 1997, a tenure that coincided with the tumultuous first term of Ontario Premier Mike Harris. Edith Johnston returned to London to retire. Al Campbell eventually retired to Cape Breton and passed away in 1995. Roland Parris and Rene Montague died in 2008.

All of the local's activists had an impact on its development after 1990, and those who assumed CAW leadership roles enhanced Local 27's profile in the national union. Membership in Local 27 was also fondly remembered by people who were no longer associated with it. Past members who had long ago moved into new jobs, like John Groenewegen, Peter Hensels, and George Medland, all felt that belonging to Local 27 had been beneficial for them. In Joe Laporte's words, the local continued to try and be "real good" for its members in the closing years of the twentieth century and beyond.

The local played a key role in organizing and leading the London Days of Action organized in 1995 in response to the policy agenda of the Harris government in Ontario. It continued to play an important role on the London Labour Council beyond 1990. Tim Carrie served as its president for two years. Although nationally the CAW shifted its political orientation away from solely supporting the NDP in the years following the turn of the century, Local 27 contributed to the party's most important federal electoral victory in London when Irene Mathyssen was elected as MP for London-Fanshawe in 2006. As always, Local 27 took a keen interest in politics and activism in the community.

Local 27, from its inception onward, was built around a core group of activists and was subsequently shaped by interaction with the national and international union offices, employers, and the community. Rather than a social institution that wanted to be involved in the workplace, it was an institution rooted in workplace struggle that wanted to have a place in wider social discourse. This was the principal reason why it was successful in the workplace and why its agenda faltered the farther it moved from its core mission and from rank-and-file issues on the job. This local union, started in one auto parts plant, became an effective representative for workers across many bargaining units. It was not simply the product of national or international union offices; instead, it was the manifestation of working-class aspirations and agency for a voice at work and economic progress at home. Local 27 was not always perfect, but it was a working-class institution about which its members could rightly say that it was “our union.”