Introduction

“Who’s got the power? We’ve got the power! What kind of power? Union power!” This call-and-response chant could be heard loud and clear at a 16 June 2007 rally in support of hotel workers in the heart of the Niagara Falls tourism district. Unite Here Local 2347, the union representing room attendants, servers, cooks, and bellhops working for three area hotels owned by Canadian Niagara Hotels, was locked in an intense and prolonged dispute with hotel management over intimidation of union activists, the unfair imposition of split shifts, and the non-payment of salary increases and negotiated bonuses.

Autoworkers, steelworkers, teachers, public service workers, postal workers, and university workers from across Niagara and throughout the province converged on the Sheraton on the Falls hotel in solidarity with the hotel workers to send a message to the hotel owners that the union was not going to back down without a fight. Union members and their allies peacefully marched through the streets waving flags and carrying banners demanding respect and dignity for hotel and hospitality workers. Different unions at the rally pledged their unwavering support for Local 2347 in its struggle against hotel management, emphasizing the need to stick together, stay strong, and keep up the fight.
Individually, workers have little bargaining power at work and little political power in their communities. When workers join together in unions, however, their collective voices have greater potential to shape and influence both the terms and conditions of their employment and the broader political, social, and economic spheres in which their employment relationships are embedded. Unlike corporate power, union power is not built on profit, status, or prestige. Instead, at its core, union power relies on the twin concepts of struggle and solidarity. Union and working-class solidarity is premised on the idea that workers have shared class interests and must struggle together, as a class, to achieve their goals. Where solidarity is strong, and the struggle is intense, union power is enhanced.

Niagara’s rich labour history is full of examples of union power. In some cases, as in Local 2347’s fight to defend its existence, workers managed to combat corporate power effectively. In other cases, especially when employers have been able to exploit divisions internal to the working class, whether based on ideology, race, or gender, union power has been weakened considerably, and the labour movement has lost ground. This book recounts and reflects on some of the pivotal union struggles and displays of working-class solidarity, past and present, that have shaped the character of Niagara’s labour movement. Although, on occasion, workers from across the peninsula have acted collectively on their own behalf, more often union struggles have taken place in individual workplaces and communities.
The Niagara region, 2011. Courtesy of the Brock University Map Library.