Canallers Fight for Work and Fair Wages

The right to work and fair wages have been workers’ goals since the earliest development of commercial capitalism in Niagara. Large numbers of waged workers first came to this area during the construction of the Welland Canal, which began in 1827. A few of these workers were skilled, such as the stonemasons who built dams and masonry locks, but the majority were unskilled labourers. Their work was both physically demanding and dangerous, much of it still completed by hand with the aid of such traditional tools as picks, shovels, axes, and wheelbarrows and animals for hauling. Accidents, especially those resulting from the use of explosives, could lead to injuries and even death. Canallers worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day, six days a week, in extreme heat in the summer and bitter cold in the winter. But the work was not steady, and if bad weather prevented them from working, they were not paid at all. Furthermore, the availability of work shrank during the winter months, and the resulting surplus of workers allowed contractors to force down wages. Some contractors paid their workers not in cash but in vouchers, redeemable only in overpriced provisions from stores run by the contractors themselves. Having underestimated the cost of building their section of the canal during the course of intense bidding with competitors, some contractors ran out of money and fled without paying the workers. But even those canallers who were able to work fairly regularly lived near subsistence level, most often in shacks along the waterway. When this phase of building ended, many of them migrated to other public building projects in search of work.¹

By the time work on the second canal began in 1842, a reduction of canal construction in the northeastern United States created a huge surplus of canallers, many of whom came to Niagara in search of work. Their number was increased by new immigrants,
primarily from Ireland. As a result, thousands of these workers could not find work, and they were so destitute that they were unable to leave Niagara to look elsewhere for work. In the absence of a public relief system in Upper Canada, they turned to begging and, in desperation, even to stealing from more established area residents. Soon the area’s permanent residents began to suffer from what we would describe today as compassion fatigue. Although locals understood that the labourers’ extreme poverty motivated their begging and petty theft, they increasingly viewed them with suspicion.2

Common labourers were vulnerable to exploitation because, lacking specialized skills, they were easy to replace. Sometimes the labourers reacted to the shortage of work by fighting for scarce jobs among themselves; at other times, however, they united to demand work and fair wages. In the summer of 1842, for example, they withheld their labour, demanding work for all. They put up posters along the canal reading, “Death and vengeance to any who should dare to work until employment is given to the whole.” To reinforce these threats, bands of workers patrolled the canal and drove off anyone who tried to work.3 Several thousand labourers took their complaints to nearby St. Catharines, parading through the streets bearing a red flag and a sign demanding “Bread or Work.” On this occasion, the superintendent of the Welland Canal responded by providing additional work by expanding construction. A year later, in July 1843, canal workers went on strike again, demanding — and winning — higher wages. But, given the fluctuations in canal work, such successes could not last. By November of that year, wages had been rolled back, and the competition for scarce jobs led to such violent fights among canallers from different parts of Ireland that the militia was called in. The St. Catharines Journal described the belligerents as “strange” and “mad factions . . . thirsting like savages for each other’s blood.”4 Canallers, who threatened to attack passengers on boats passing through the canal, also interfered with navigation. The government of the United Province of Canada and the board that oversaw canal construction perceived the
canallers’ actions as such a serious threat to the local economy that they joined forces with the contractors to suppress labour protests. They compiled blacklists to prevent the hiring of labour activists. The government passed legislation forbidding canallers to carry arms, and the board hired mounted police to keep labourers in line. During the early stages of capitalist development, in short, unskilled workers occasionally acted together along class lines, but their collective strength was insufficient to counter employers backed by the state. They were not yet able to secure significant improvements in their condition.

The Early Labour Movement

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Niagara Peninsula became a hub of manufacturing. Water power, increased settlement, rich agricultural surroundings, closeness to American markets, and the construction of railway lines all contributed to the area’s economic development. Following Confederation, when John A. Macdonald’s government imposed tariffs on American-made goods to protect the development of Canadian manufacturing from competition, branches of American plants were also established in the area. Canners, flour mills, breweries, and tanneries processed the district’s agricultural products. Farm implements factories, foundries, machine shops, and basket makers provided local farmers with tools and containers. Sawmills and paper mills relied on wood transported to the area by rail and water. Textile and rubber factories, carriage and bicycle makers, shipbuilders, and cigar makers constituted other early manufacturing establishments in the Niagara region. Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Thorold, and Welland developed as the larger manufacturing and service centres of the peninsula.