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. Canneries, 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.
In contrast to the unskilled, itinerant canal workers of earlier decades, skilled workers such as cigar makers, coopers, machinists, iron moulders, printers, and shoemakers enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy in their working lives. By the 1870s, skilled workers in St. Catharines had established branches of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, and the International Typographical Union. The town was also the Canadian headquarters of the union of shoe factory workers, the Knights of St. Crispin. In Welland, printers and stonecutters established unions during the same period. Their skill and organization allowed such workers, virtually all of whom were male, to exercise some control over their hours of work, their wages, and the number of apprentices taken on in their trades. The case of cigar makers in St. Catharines illustrates the benefits of unionization. In the 1880s, when non-unionized workers toiled as long as fourteen hours a day, cigar makers in St. Catharines worked an eight-hour day. While some unorganized workers were still paid irregularly and in vouchers, these cigar makers received cash wages every week. Perhaps nothing illustrates the power of organized cigar makers better than their ability to prevent the local sale of cigars made cheaply by girls and boys in London (Ontario) and Montréal. Despite their higher
cost, only union-made cigars could be found in the city. Given that cigar manufacturers often started out as journeymen cigar makers, having completed an apprenticeship in the trade, and cigar factories were still rather small, relations between employers and workers in this industry appeared cordial. In 1887, a St. Catharines cigar manufacturer pronounced union men more reliable, sober, and industrious than their non-unionized counterparts.¹

Even during the period of early industrialization, however, there were limits to the harmony between workers and employers. When St. Catharines employers, facing greater competition in an increasingly integrated market, attempted to lower the costs of production by lowering wages or breaking down the process of production, the threat of a strike was frequently enough to persuade them to change their minds. Skilled workers, moreover, did not hesitate to lay down their tools during conflicts with employers who defied threats. Some employers responded by bringing in workers from Toronto’s immigration sheds to replace militant workers, or by threatening to do so.

The ranks of unskilled workers, among them many women and children, in textile, garment, and canning factories and in the wood and iron industries, enjoyed none of the advantages of skilled, unionized workers like the St. Catharines cigar makers. Their wages were low, their working hours long, and their working conditions at times appalling. Canneries in Grimsby employed children as young as eight. Fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys, whose income was needed by their families and who found jobs in the wood and iron industries, were forced to operate machines with inadequate training, they suffered frequent injuries, sometimes losing fingers and even hands. To make ends meet, women and girls in the garment industry often had to take work home and sew late into the night.²

Adult women’s wages were so low partly because their work was seen as unskilled. Unlike tradesmen’s skills, acquired through years of apprenticeship, women’s work in the clothing and food-processing industries, and as domestics, cooks, kitchen help, waitresses, and chamber maids in Niagara homes and hotels, supposedly required
no training. Such work was seen as a mere extension of work they performed in the home. Whatever skills such work required, such as attentiveness to detail or nimble fingers, were believed to come naturally to women. Both employers and male workers, moreover, considered women secondary wage earners. Working men aspired to earn enough so that their wives and children would not have to go out to work. They wanted to protect women and children from the harsh working conditions in factories. Indeed, the ideal of working-class masculinity rested on the notion that the male head would act as provider and protector of his family. But male workers also wanted to ensure that employers could not use women and children as low-wage competitors for “men’s jobs.” Whatever the goals of male workers, their idea of a family wage reinforced women’s financial dependence on men. Employers could justify paying women low wages on the grounds that they were merely supplementing the income of their family’s principal male breadwinner. Not surprisingly, most working-class women, once they married, withdrew from formal paid employment. Performing unpaid domestic work made more practical sense than staying in poorly paid jobs. Through careful shopping, keeping a garden and sometimes domestic animals, and preserving foods, women could stretch the wages that their husbands and children earned. Some women also sewed garments, made boxes, kept boarders, and/or took in laundry to add to their family income.3

With the arrival of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor in Niagara in the 1880s, unskilled workers, including women, could join the labour movement. First established in the United States, the organization enjoyed rapid growth in Ontario, and in Niagara specifically, because of the rapid expansion of manufacturing at the time and the relative homogeneity of Niagara’s working class. In the 1880s, most Niagara workers were English-speaking, and their ranks included British immigrants with considerable prior experience in labour organizations. Some of the Knights’ assemblies (similar to union locals) were still made up of workers belonging to a single craft, some brought together skilled and
unskilled workers in a given industry, and some, the so-called “mixed” assemblies, were composed of different types of workers. In principle, the Knights of Labor was open to all workers, regardless of skill, gender, or race. In practice, its policies toward women and racialized minorities were contradictory. The Knights were genuinely committed to improving the fate of women workers, arguing that women deserved the same pay as men. The organization also supported equal political rights for women, roughly three decades before Canadian women actually obtained the right to vote. Male Knights, however, also saw themselves as the protectors of the “weaker” female sex and continued to believe that women’s proper place was in the home.\(^4\) As for racialized groups, although we have no evidence of African Canadians belonging to assemblies in the Niagara region, we know that a number of assemblies in Toronto had black members. Yet in both Canada and the United States, the Knights were also not immune to a wider racism that called for the exclusion of people of Asian origin from North America.\(^5\)

The organization’s agenda — to improve the condition of workers by limiting the hours of work, advocating temperance, promoting education through a labour press and other publications, replacing competitive individualism with the spirit of cooperation, and giving workers a voice in politics — clearly appealed to workers in Niagara. Over two thousand workers established twenty-three locals of the Knights of Labor in the Niagara Peninsula. St. Catharines had eight assemblies, representing coopers, tailors, sailors, clerks, axe makers, and wheel makers, as well as a mixed assembly, comprising various trades. Thorold, which at that time had only three hundred industrial workers, had three assemblies: one of stonecutters employed in the local quarry, one mixed, and one made up of women. Merritton’s Maple Leaf Assembly was the largest in the area, comprising five hundred cotton workers, many of them women. Sailors from Port Dalhousie and the Welland Canal, stonecutters from Beamsville and Welland, and railroad employees from the villages of Clifton, International Bridge, and York also joined the Knights of Labor.\(^6\)
Knights from the Niagara Peninsula expressed their commitment to the organization’s goals by electing one of their own, William Garson — a member of St. Catharines Fidelity Assembly, temperance advocate, and well-known Orangeman — as a Liberal-Labour member of the provincial legislature in 1886. Garson expressed the Knights’ desire to unite all workers by urging Protestant and Catholic workers to overcome sectarian divisions. On 15 August 1887, the Knights marked a civic holiday by marching 3,000 strong through the streets of St. Catharines, carrying banners that proclaimed “Rise and Defend Your Dignity,” “The Land for the People,” and “Long Hours Must Go.” In 1888, they fought to end long hours for store clerks by pledging to patronize only stores that closed at six o’clock in the evening. In the same year, respect for the Christian Sabbath, as well as concern for workers operating the Welland Canal, led them to condemn the canal’s operation on Sunday. In addition to working and fighting together for a better world, Niagara Knights also played together. Balls, dances, and roller-skating parties served not only to offer alcohol-free entertainment but also to raise funds to help disabled workers.

Like their attitudes toward women workers and racialized minorities, the Knights’ view of strikes was also contradictory. In principle, they favoured arbitration as a way of settling conflict between employers and workers. But when faced with stubborn employers, members of the organization did resort to strikes. For example, when John S. McClelland, a printer and a member of the Knights, purchased the Evening Star, a St. Catharines paper, in 1888 and refused to pay union wages, all but three of his printers went on strike. However, neither McClelland — who berated the strikers in the columns of his paper — nor the three strike-breaking printers were kicked out of the Knights of Labor. This lack of action led other workers to leave the Knights in disappointment. By then, however, the organization’s influence was decreasing in Niagara, as well as in many other parts of Canada and the United States. An economic downturn and disagreements within the organization were two of the main reasons for its decline.