agricultural and cannery workers they hired were of southern and eastern European origin. Although in Niagara there were few openings for year-round farm help, immigration officials went to great lengths to recruit agricultural workers from Great Britain to fill them. The recruitment of seasonal farm labour was generally left to the farmers. Because such jobs involved backbreaking work for long periods, at times up to sixteen hours a day, for wages that were lower than those for almost any other type of work in the region, farmers could not always find enough workers locally. Before the First World War, some farmers traveled to Buffalo in the harvest season to find immigrant women to work as fruit pickers and in canneries. According to the 1911 census, 80 percent of those employed in the canning industry were female, some of them girls as young as twelve. Accommodation for these workers, if provided, was generally primitive. Gender-based paternalism, moreover, placed serious limits on the freedom of female workers. Some of them were housed in compounds, in bunkhouses built right next to the canning factories, and were not allowed to leave the compounds after eight o’clock in the evening. A 1915 survey on the condition of female agricultural workers, prepared by the Department of Social Service and Evangelism of the Methodist and Presbyterian Church, likened the terms of their employment to slavery.

Labour Revolt in Niagara

Although immigrant sojourners were more likely to put up with working and living conditions that workers with greater options disdained, there were limits to what they were willing to endure. Since their goal was to earn as much money as quickly as possible so that they could return to their homelands with savings, they reacted especially strongly when employers attempted to reduce
their wages. In 1903, for example, eight hundred workers employed by the power development works in Niagara Falls — mostly Hungarians, Italians, and Poles — responded to notices of wage cuts for common labour by striking. To prevent the resumption of work, they marched up and down the work sites along the Niagara River, their radical sympathies expressed by the red cloth attached to a pole that their leader carried. After the strike was quelled by the militia, hundreds of strikers continued their protest by leaving Niagara, mostly for the United States.¹

Although such immigrants left few written records of their aspirations, we have some indications that their protests were not simply spontaneous reactions to the actions of their employers. A few of the immigrants had sufficient command of English to express their views to Anglo-Canadians. The language of Andreas Muellers, who described himself as a “shack lodger” in a letter to the Daily Record following the deadly Falls View fire, may have been grammatically imperfect, but his allegation of criminal negligence in the housing of immigrant workers was well informed and convincing:

Do you know mister editor that they puts 25 mans in a shack and the windows don’t open and the door opens in. When the mans go to get out, no door open, men all burn. I wants to say every shack here is breaking the rule and all the doors open in. They some so small only 1 mans can go out at once. Theys got a shack with 65 people here, windows so high no man can reach only one door it open in. Do you allow that kind of things to go on, do you allow that to go in your churches, in your theatres, your schools. My country got to have things right or no allow to build.²

In his testimony before the 1920 Ontario government commission to investigate labour conditions on the Ontario Hydro-Electric Power Commission’s Chippawa-Queenston Canal, a Bulgarian labourer spoke for many immigrant workers. He explained that because he spoke several languages, other men came to him with their complaints. They compared their work and wages with those of railway
construction workers and concluded that the wages paid by the publicly owned Hydro Commission were unfairly low. Canal workers believed that the work they performed as pick and shovel men was much harder than work on railway lines and should therefore garner higher wages. They also protested that their wages were not enough to live on. The Bulgarian witness pointed out that, although he himself wanted to stay in Canada and bring his wife and children from Bulgaria to join him, he could not afford do so on his current wages. Crowland’s “Austrians,” who informed a census taker in 1911, only two years after they arrived in Canada, that their religion was “socialist,” most likely developed their ideological views in their country of origin. The same may have been true of the Niagara Ukrainians who attracted the attention of the police in 1920 by subscribing to anarchist newspapers.

Anglo-Canadian workers initially responded with hostility when large numbers of southern and eastern European immigrants arrived in Niagara. Fears that employers would use the immigrants to deskill labour and reduce wages intensified Anglo-Canadian working-class racism. A letter signed “Laborer,” written to the Welland Telegraph in 1903, after Italian and Hungarian workers were brought from the United States to work in the local quarry, illustrates such concerns:

Why is it that foreign workmen are allowed to come to Canada and dispossess Canadian laborers, and are even given the preference over them? . . . Why is it that alien recruits are brought here in troops from Buffalo and other American cities to work on Canadian soil — a people who are strangers to our language and our laws; who have no sympathy with our institutions; who desecrate our Sabbaths and are notorious for their bibulous propensities.

“Laborer’s” attitudes toward immigrant workers formed an integral part of his class consciousness — one that excluded “foreigners.” He believed that Canadian law protected the “wealthy railroad corporations, grasping monopolists and oppressors of the poor” but failed
to protect the worker by enforcing the Alien Labour Act. In 1908, the District Trades and Labour Council of St. Catharines demanded the punishment of two local canning companies for violating the act by bringing their workers from the United States. Gradually, however, many Anglo-Canadian labour activists realized that, to be effective, they would have to cooperate with the “foreign” workers. In 1916, six hundred unorganized workers on the Welland Canal — Russians, Bulgarians, Italians, and Austrians — struck for higher wages, and the federal government sent in soldiers “with fixed bayonets” to put down the strike. The *Industrial Banner*, a labour paper based in London, Ontario, pointed out that while the government did not hesitate to use the militia to protect employers, it never did so to defend workers’ rights. The paper added that the government could act this way against foreign labourers because, unlike Anglo-Canadian tradesmen, they were ignorant and consequently “without organization or vote.” Toward the end of the First World War, however, when labour shortages improved the bargaining position of both native and immigrant workers, they joined unions in increasing numbers. Formed in 1918, the Niagara District Trades Federation represented both Canadian and foreign-born skilled and unskilled workers in the region. The secretary of the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) of Niagara Falls explained the inclusion of foreigners:

It is quite true that most of the men engaged on the hydro canal are foreigners because they do the work Canadians and Englishmen will not do. We have got to have them in these big works. Some criticism has been heard as to us taking them into the union. But we couldn’t do otherwise seeing they must be employed. Further, eighty per cent of them are Italians — there are very few Austrians etc., and I have found that a majority of them are married men and are very anxious to bring their wives to Canada, but they are not making enough money to do so. Our idea is to get them enough money to bring their wives to Canada, establish homes and good Canadians can be made of these men.
Workers throughout Canada asserted themselves in politics as well as in the workplace at the end of World War I. In St. Catharines many of them supported the Independent Labor Party (ILP), which emerged thanks to the notion — earlier advanced by the Knights of Labor — that only men from the working class could and would truly represent workers’ interests at various levels of government. In the provincial election of 1919, St. Catharines sent Frank Greenlaw, an ILP member and trades council president, to the provincial legislature, now dominated by farmers and workers. They came close to sending another worker, an unemployed machinist, to Ottawa as well. Niagara Falls workers elected ILP candidate Charles F. Swayze, an accountant with labour sympathies, to represent them in the provincial legislature.9

Women exercising their newly won right to vote played an important role in the election of labour candidates. With the aid of Rose Henderson, a Montréal socialist, working-class women in St. Catharines organized political meetings where women without prior experience in public speaking spoke eloquently in support of political representation. Dozens of baby carriages and go-carts parked at the door of such meetings revealed that, if they had no child care, women simply brought their young children along. They also participated in the campaign by canvassing door-to-door and arranging child care on election day so that women could cast their votes at the polls.10

Two Niagara strikes during the period of labour militancy and radicalism that followed the First World War, often referred to as the period of Canada’s “Labour Revolt,” illustrate both the complex dynamics within the multiethnic labour movement and the relationship between organized workers and their ILP representatives in the United Farmers of Ontario government. The first of these strikes, by hydro canal workers at Chippawa in 1920, involved skilled and unskilled, immigrant and native-born workers. They demanded an eight-hour day and increased wages for working overtime and on Sundays. Their command of English enabled the Anglo-Canadian workers to articulate the grounds for these demands. A submarine
driller told the commissioners that he believed he could do his work better and “not be cranky” with his children if he worked an eight-hour day.\textsuperscript{11} An electrical locomotive engineer maintained that there would be fewer accidents on the canal if the work day was reduced to eight hours.\textsuperscript{12} A fitter, secretary of the United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters Local, argued that the canal workers’ ambitions to improve themselves were thwarted by working ten hours a day. The Business Agent of the General Labourers and Drill Men’s Local told the commissioners that labourers were too exhausted at the end of a ten-hour day to attend union meetings.\textsuperscript{13} Although they left us no record of their motives, immigrant workers also supported these demands.

This interethnic collaboration, however, was insufficient to attain the hydro workers’ goals. One of the commissioners, ILP member Malcolm MacBride, was sympathetic to the workers’ arguments. He believed that local businesses, which had benefitted greatly from the availability of cheap power for a number of years, should be willing to pay a little more for power so that workers on the hydro projects could be paid fair wages.\textsuperscript{14} In its report, however, the commission stated that the wages paid by the Hydro Commission compared favourably with wages paid elsewhere in Niagara and that the workers’ housing conditions were “fairly satisfactory.” The report supported the principle of the eight-hour day but argued that, in the interest of rapid completion of the canal, workers should be prepared to work ten hours a day at a rate of time-and-a-half for overtime.\textsuperscript{15} The farmers’ representative on the investigative commission, W. H. Casselman, disagreed, declaring that the eight-hour day was a “vicious principle.”\textsuperscript{16} Despite the unprecedented labour representation within it, the provincial government accepted the commission’s findings. Moreover, when the hydro workers decided to strike, Niagara’s ILP Members of Provincial Parliament Greenlaw and Swayze, along with MacBride, rushed to Niagara Falls to urge workers to stay on the job.\textsuperscript{17} Concluding that the labour MPPs did not represent their interests, the workers struck. They returned to work nineteen days later, however, having won only minor concessions.
The tenuousness of the alliance between Anglo-Canadian and “foreign” workers became apparent a year later during a strike by Thorold workers. In 1921, workers of the Beaver Board Fibre Company in Thorold walked out when the company attempted to cut wages and return to an open shop (one in which union membership was not mandatory). The strike leaders attempted to unite all Beaver Board workers by recruiting interpreters to address immigrants in their own languages. Despite their effort to transcend ethnic differences, however, the workers were unable to counter the combined power of employers and the state.

The company almost immediately hired, and armed, special constables from an American detective agency, claiming they were needed to guard company property. The company also sent an agent to hire strikebreakers in the United States, despite the illegality of this practice under the Alien Labour Act. One of the strikebreakers testified that the company’s man assured prospective recruits that “there would be no trouble getting across the International Bridge. He instructed me to say ‘I am for the Beaver Board,’ and it would be all right. ‘We give them a box of cigars every Christmas.’” The company’s agent added that the Canadian government supported the company in this strike. Indeed, when the company asked for six North-West Mounted Police, the government sent seventy-two policemen.
Both the employers and state authorities, who had been happy enough to recruit “foreign” immigrants to perform unskilled, ill-paid jobs in factories and large public works in the area, did not hesitate to exploit racial and ethnic tensions to create divisions among the Beaver Board strikers. Ontario Provincial Police raided “foreign” workers’ shacks and boarding houses, claiming that “nearly all the foreigners have fire-arms, and when they get drunk, they fire them off indiscriminately.” They explained that the Thorold police were so afraid of the “foreigners” that they had become a “joke.” When they went to arrest a “Russian” in his home, the occupants threw the local officers out of the window. Subsequently, the local police refrained from taking any action against “foreigners.” Given these serious accusations against “dangerous” immigrant workers, it is noteworthy that the authorities could lodge no more serious charges against the seven picketers, a number of whom were of foreign descent, than vagrancy and calling the strike-breakers “scabs” and “rats.” In response to the strong show of force by the company and the police, and their anti-foreign propaganda, the strike leaders distanced themselves from labour radicalism and blamed “foreigners” for the “danger of Bolshevism” in Thorold.20

Even when workers decided to try to overcome race-based divisions, the inclusiveness of the labour movement remained incomplete, as illustrated by the response of Welland workers to the Plymouth Cordage Company’s decision in 1917 to employ two hundred Chinese workers. The company brought the workers to Welland from various parts of Canada after losing many of its workers to better paid jobs in other Niagara factories. According to a Welland alderman, the wages paid by the Plymouth Cordage Company at this time were “almost scandalous.”21 Workers of Chinese origin were willing to work for the company, because even low-waged manufacturing jobs — denied to them before the war by racist discrimination — still paid better than the jobs in small Chinese restaurants and laundries that they customarily filled. As Welland’s People’s Press explained, “They could make more a week, working for the Plymouth Cordage than in washing shirts.”22
A large delegation of workingmen besieged the municipal council with other Welland residents to protest against the employment of Chinese workers in the city. One worker saw the importation of Chinese labourers as a continuation of the company’s prewar practices: “Before the war the Cordage Company employed foreign labour in preference to British labour. The reason why manufacturers were employing Chinese today is because they are cheap.”

The representative of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners Local argued that “it would be shameful for the boys of Welland to come back” from the front only to “find the yellow races occupying the place that was legitimately theirs.” Other citizens, whose class background was not identified by the local press, worried that the arrival of the Chinese would lead to a decline of local real estate values, create a negative impression of the city, and endanger the community’s health and the safety of Welland’s women. They proposed that the Chinese labourers be housed behind a fence on the company’s property and be allowed onto the streets of Welland only two at a time.

Welland employers responded that labour shortages, combined with their strong sense of patriotism, were responsible for their reliance on workers of Chinese origin. The treasurer of the Plymouth Cordage Company explained that there was a serious shortage of twine to bind the country’s grain crop. Pointing to the difficulty of finding labour, he offered pragmatic reasons for the company’s hiring policies: “We believe a great responsibility rests on us and our patriotic duty is to employ every one available regardless of race, creed or color. Anything less would be slacking.” John White of the Union Carbide Company advocated the employment of Chinese so that “white men” could be released for other work. F. C. Hesch of the Canada Forge attempted to relieve community anxiety by stating: “Just as soon as we can get sufficient labor to replace the Chinaman we will replace him. We do not use Chinamen to cheapen labor but because nothing else can be got.”

Despite the protests, local manufacturers continued to employ Chinese labourers. At the war’s end, most of these labourers left the area.
Labour’s political strength in Niagara was short-lived. Labour MPPs found themselves powerless in Ontario’s farmer-labour coalition government. When farmers and workers had been able to cooperate before and during the election, the differences in their goals had been muted, but tensions became apparent when their representatives assumed power. Farmers, for example, advocated free trade, whereas organized labour sought to maintain protective tariffs. As the junior partners in the farmer-labour coalition, workers had little say.

Welfare Capitalism in Niagara

Alarmed by labour radicalism, employers meanwhile joined forces to defeat unionization. In Niagara, as elsewhere in industrial Ontario, they introduced corporate welfare schemes in an attempt to reduce class conflict. The most elaborate welfare plan in Niagara, that of the Plymouth Cordage Company, predated the First World War. As we have seen, the company provided housing for its workers in large measure because of the lack of worker housing in Welland in 1905. But such pragmatic considerations cannot explain the careful upkeep of the company housing: company employees painted and repaired the houses and the fencing around their gardens regularly. In winter they cleared the snow from roads and sidewalks and sold heating coal to company employees below market rates. Company recreational programs included a community hall, which housed a library, billiard tables, and a bowling alley for the workers, sewing and cooking classes for their daughters, and carpentry classes for their sons. The Plymouth Cordage band, comprised entirely of Italian workers, practiced at the hall. Workers and their families, many of them organized in company sports teams, had use of the tennis courts, football field, lawn bowling