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
green, and supervised playground on the company grounds. At an annual fair, prizes were awarded to the company’s workers for the best shade trees, vines, kitchen and flower gardens, poultry yards, drawing, photography, basketry, cooking, and for sporting achievements. The Plymouth Cordage Company also reached beyond its own employees. It demonstrated its commitment to the wider Welland community by donating land for a school site, to the local parks commission, and to the Methodist and Greek Orthodox churches, as well as by contributing funds for a local hospital.

The welfare plan, imported from the United States, was decidedly paternalistic. As a company welfare official explained, encouraging workers to keep gardens, for example, was a way of encouraging good working habits: “Contact with the soil is healthy, it makes men constructive, because they see how much work it takes to produce, and how easy it is to destroy by neglect or badly directed effort.”

The irony of purporting to rely on agricultural work to instil good
working habits among workers of rural origin, who were all too familiar with such labour, completely escaped this official. He, like other managers of corporate welfare at this time, believed that “foreign” workers were especially in need of guidance. They attributed unrest among such workers to their “simple and childlike” nature, which explained why they were “easily led and stirred for good or for evil.” Their plans perpetuated existing class, race, and gender inequality. The Plymouth Cordage offered cooking classes for the daughters of its workers “to teach young girls how to prepare good food economically.” The company encouraged the participation of foremen, overseers, and workers in its men’s club to promote harmonious relations and to help “make real men of all of us.”

While company housing and industrial nurses offered clear benefits to employees and their families, such policies also enhanced the company’s ability to control and discipline workers. The threat of eviction could be invoked when management disapproved of a worker’s conduct. A worker of Italian origin whose father worked at Plymouth Cordage recalled, for example, that the plant manager called him when his father’s drinking started to interfere with his work. “Look,” the manager told him, “you live in a company house, if he keeps this up we’re gonna fire him.” When his father continued drinking and the manager openly threatened to evict the family, the son saw no choice but to enter the company’s employ himself. The company’s industrial nurse visited employees who stayed away from work partly to look after their health but also to ensure that they were not feigning illness.

A 1916 strike by Plymouth Cordage workers in Massachusetts brought changes to the company’s welfare policies. It established an industrial relations department and introduced profit sharing in 1918. In 1931, it added a credit union, a sick benefit society, and an insurance plan, and, in 1934–35, a plant council, which brought together workers and management to discuss matters of concern to both parties. Company officials insisted that the new plan of industrial relations was fundamentally different from a paternalistic or welfare plan. They called it “social business.”
Yet despite all statements to the contrary, a paternalistic view of workers persisted after the new plan was introduced. C. P. Marshall, the company’s industrial relations manager, called for the establishment of a company union — a union sponsored or at least endorsed by the company itself — as the only way to prevent the spread of independent trade unionism or socialism. In Marshall’s words, the worker was “like a boy in the adolescent period” who wanted leadership to be told “why things are so.” The establishment of shop councils was necessary to take leadership away from the “professional leader” and the socialist and to make the shop, or factory, rather than class, the focus of the worker’s loyalty. The same was true of the elaborate welfare scheme. As a company memo explained:

Company housing, group life insurance, sickness insurance, wage retirement etc. are indirect wages. It would be simpler by far for the company to dispense the cost of these aids in cash but in that case the prospect of real betterment of employees would be lessened. Generally speaking if left to the working man reserves for his security would never be accumulated.

According to F. C. Holmes, treasurer of the Plymouth Cordage Company, the plant council, established in Welland in 1935, merely gave formal expression to the spirit of cooperation and fair play that had always characterized relations between workers and management. The long-term interests of the employees and the company were, according to management, “the same, and not antagonistic.” The workers elected five representatives, who met with management to discuss matters of concern to them. The council’s function was “to consider and make recommendations relating to policies.” All policies, however, were put into effect by management, subject to review by the plant council. It was also made clear that this would sometimes mean cooperation with management “in the introduction of new methods of work.” In other words, the council would not simply act in an advisory capacity to management but would
also help implement new policies, even if they were “for a time” unpopular. But there was another important reason that company unions offered workers far less power than did independent unions: they were restricted to single plants and therefore had access neither to information nor to financial aid from the wider labour movement. The absence of outside union support buttressed the power imbalance between employer and worker.

The records of the Plymouth Cordage council suggest that workers certainly did not feel free to express their concerns openly. For example, the council was supposed to guarantee representation without regard to race, sex, religion, or nationality. Yet one issue that the workers’ representatives did not raise was the inability of non-Anglo-Celtic workers to obtain skilled positions and foremen’s jobs. Indeed, the principle of seniority, which would have benefitted such workers, was not recognized by management. Instead, promotions, transfers, and layoffs were governed by “employee merit,” on the basis of such criteria as “conduct, mental attitudes . . . adaptability, attendance, continuous service, citizenship and marital status, and personality,” which left much up to the discretion of management.11 While the council participated in decisions affecting working conditions, wages, hours of work, and employee benefits, implementation remained the prerogative of management, and decisions affecting wages were subject to revision when conditions changed. In practice, when workers requested wage increases or paid vacations, management sometimes responded that it could not afford to grant such requests and sometimes acceded to them. In the case of grievances concerning speed-ups, management justified its decisions by referring to “time studies.”12 This was probably an example of the kind of “temporarily unpopular” decisions to which Mr. Holmes referred.

At first glance, the company’s welfare plan appeared to have succeeded. For half a century, Plymouth Cordage workers did not join a union, nor did they resort to strikes. Even years after the company ceased operations in Welland, moreover, its former employees and their children described the company as a good employer and fondly recalled its recreational programs. Some of them deemed
the security of employment at the factory sufficient to make up for wages lower than those paid by other local manufacturers. “The company was known all over,” recalled a former employee of Italian descent. “If you told anyone that you worked at the Cordage, you could get any amount of credit you wanted. They were a plant that, once you got a job there, you could almost say that you had a job for life.” 13

But workers’ views of Plymouth Cordage welfare policies were not unequivocal. Housing undoubtedly provided an important incentive for staying at the Plymouth Cordage Company for some workers, even when better-paid jobs were available elsewhere. The quality of the housing should be considered in comparison to the shacks that housed so many other local workers at the time. As Welland’s manufacturing sector grew, however, offering greater employment opportunities, often with higher wages than those at Plymouth Cordage, some workers, especially the children of the original group of employees, wanted to leave the company. The hope that their ethnicity would present less of an obstacle elsewhere, as well as the lower wages the company paid, drove immigrant workers to find other employment opportunities. In order to remain in company housing, however, at least one member of the household had to continue in Plymouth Cordage’s employment. That is why one of the company’s young workers, Esch Orsini, who first described the company’s houses as “plums” and the company as having had tremendous vision in offering them to its workers, also referred to the Cordage houses as a “golden handcuff.” 14

The company’s pension plan was another reason that some of the older workers stayed at Plymouth Cordage. They were sorely disappointed to discover, however, that the company’s control over welfare plans meant that these benefits could be modified, suspended, or terminated at any time. Flavio Botari remembered that his father often mentioned “that there was a pension being put away for him by the company and that eventually, when he stopped work, that he would be collecting a pension,” adding that “this was unusual too for those days.” Despite long years of service
to the Plymouth Cordage Company, both in Massachusetts and in Welland, the elder Botari did not receive a pension. To be eligible, he needed to have worked for the company for fifty years. The company let him go after forty-eight.¹⁵

Prosperity returned by the later 1920s, and a number of new industries, such as Hayes-Dana, Foster Wheeler, Thompson Products, Empire Rug Mills, and Grout’s Silk Mills, emerged in the St. Catharines area. These were joined by Atlas Speciality Steel and Joseph Stokes Rubber Company in Welland, Fleet Industries in Fort Erie, and, in Niagara Falls, Brights Canning Company, Burgess Battery Company, and the Canadian Ohio Brass Company. The region’s labour movement, however, did not exhibit comparable growth.

Unemployment and Organization

During the Great Depression

The years of the Great Depression were not auspicious for labour organizing. Given the high rates of unemployment, if workers protested too much, employers could easily replace them. But while thousands of Niagara workers lost their jobs from 1929 onward, not all sectors of the local economy were affected equally or at the same time. Some local industries expanded their facilities and workforces, and many employers used the depression to cut wages, speed up work, and undermine organizational efforts.

Surprisingly, despite the vulnerability of workers in a depressed economy, considerable labour protest and organizing took place in Niagara communities. Liberal Premier Mitchell Hepburn and his supporters were convinced that communist agitators were responsible for the unrest in the region. In particular, they saw communists behind the inroads that industrial unions connected to the