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
Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were making in Niagara.¹ Unlike the craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, industrial unions belonging to the CIO organized all workers—regardless of craft or level of skill. Communist organizers interested in expanding their influence in Canada were, in fact, active in promoting such unions in Niagara. Contrary to Hepburn’s allegations, however, the sources and goals of labour protest during the Great Depression were far too complex to be ascribed to communist organizing. The communists were able to garner support in the region in large measure because of the area’s ethnic diversity. Ukrainian, Hungarian, and Croatian immigrants had established pro-communist associations in the area earlier in the century.

Although blaming communists for labour protest suited the purposes of Hepburn and local employers, only a minority of the protesters belonged to the Communist Party of Canada. Many of them supported the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), a party strongly committed to parliamentary democracy. Unprecedented economic hardship and unemployment during the 1930s convinced many workers that the established political parties did not represent their interests. They were looking for new avenues that would permit them to participate in reshaping Canadian institutions to reflect working-class interests. Moreover, many Niagara workers who identified neither with the Communist Party nor with the CCF instead backed left-wing initiatives connected to unemployment relief and labour organizing. The gains that the CIO was making among workers in mass production industries in the United States undoubtedly added to the labour movement’s appeal north of the border. Finally, the presence of experienced communist organizers also contributed to the revival of labour activism. For example, among Canadian political and labour groups, only the communists actively sought to organize the most vulnerable members of the working class: the unemployed. With their help, Niagara’s unemployed protested against their predicament through demonstrations and strikes in a number of communities: Niagara Falls in 1934, Crowland in 1935, Thorold in 1936, and St. Catharines in 1937.²