The Crowland Relief Strike

The longest of these strikes — and consequently the best documented — was the Crowland relief strike of 1935. Registered families in Crowland received relief in the form of food, clothing, shelter, and medical aid. In exchange, male family heads worked building sewers for the town. On 2 April 1935, upon learning that they would have to work longer hours for relief, the men laid down their tools. To understand why they resorted to striking, it is necessary to consider the situation of Crowland’s unemployed in the years leading up to the strike. Communist organizers had participated in the formation of the Crowland Unemployed Association in 1932. Local and provincial authorities tried to discredit the association’s demands by blaming outside agitators for riling up the unemployed. In fact, however, the local unemployed had their own reasons for uniting in the Crowland Unemployed Association: first, because relief allotments were insufficient to support their families; second, because relief was denied to the unemployed who were single; and, third and more generally, because the system of relief in their community and elsewhere in Canada denied their basic rights and dignity. Relief allowances were intentionally kept low for fear that the “irresponsible” relief workers might lose their incentive to work if they received more generous aid. In addition, payment was made in vouchers rather than cash, to prevent recipients from spending their relief allotments on alcohol instead of providing food and other necessities for their families.

During the three years leading up to the strike, Crowland’s unemployed and their supporters held meetings to discuss their grievances and demonstrations to publicize them. They also attempted to negotiate with local authorities. Crowland Council responded by prohibiting parades and banning the posting of signs and the distribution of handbills without police permission. The council also announced that if a relief recipient participated in such agitation, his entire family would be denied relief. Convinced
that no local politician represented their interests, the unemployed and their allies fielded their own slate of candidates in the township’s elections of 1934–35.³ Although these candidates were not elected, they enjoyed broad support in the polling subdivisions where foreign-born residents dominated. Within this context, in April 1935 the township council announced it would increase the hours of work required to earn relief.⁴ Since recipients already deemed their allotments insufficient, they concluded that striking remained their only option. The Crowland Council retaliated by ending relief assistance for the strikers and their families.

In response, the strikers, their families, and their community supporters — men, women, and children — surrounded the relief office to force Crowland Council to meet with the strikers’ delegates. When it became clear that the council would not consent to meet them, some of the strikers tried to force their way into the office, arguing that, as a public building, it could not be closed to them. The police also responded with force, assaulting some of the protesters and throwing tear gas into the crowd. The demonstrators dispersed quickly, but not before some of them vented their frustration by breaking the relief office windows.⁵ That night the police arrested the strike’s alleged leaders.⁶

The strikers did not give in. With their families and other supporters, they picketed the sewer project where they had worked and paraded through urban Crowland to demonstrate community solidarity. Crowland’s reeve attempted to lure them back to work by promising that any striker who showed “a willingness to work” would be given a relief voucher, and he posted seventeen policemen by the sewer to guarantee protection to those who complied. But the crowd remained defiant. Women and children booed and derided the police and the public works foreman, even pelting them with dirt. “I had a glass of water for breakfast,” shouted one woman in response to the foreman’s suggestion that the strikers return to work. “What did you have — nice bread and butter?” “How can we work?” cried another, “We got no shoes or stockings or food.” Acknowledging that they were hungry, they still insisted that there
were no scabs among them.7 Food and used clothing donated by neighbours, sympathetic local merchants, farmers, and workers from outside Crowland helped the strikers stand their ground. The Crowland Unemployed Association pointed to community support for the strikers to counter claims that outside agitators caused the strike:

The solidarity of all the unemployed in this strike, irrespective of their different nationalities, religions, political viewpoints, completely discredits statements that the strike is caused by a few agitators and that they are leading the strike of unemployed merely for the sake of striking. Men, women and children do not parade the streets every day because they like it. Nor do they face tear gas, clubs and midnight arrests merely to cause trouble.8

Indeed, the relief strike was a remarkable example of the sense of solidarity that Crowland’s ethnically diverse population of workers — employed and unemployed — had attained. Through their daily experiences in the small urban community’s multietnic “foreign” quarter, and on various jobs, they had become acutely conscious of their shared predicament as immigrants and workers.

Feeling helpless in the face of the strikers’ determination, township officials sought Premier Hepburn’s intervention. The premier was determined to make an example of the Crowland relief strikers so that their protest would not spread to other communities. He sent the Ontario Provincial Police to Crowland and visited the township himself, declaring that if the strikers refused to return to work, it would be a “battle to the bitter end.”9 Ultimately, concerted action on the part of local and provincial authorities succeeded in breaking the strikers’ resolve. Welland County’s crown attorney denied bail to two jailed strike leaders.10 Another leader suddenly became the chief advocate of a return to work after he received a job offer thanks to Hepburn’s influence.11 Crowland Council made modest concessions to the strikers, announcing that although relief would still be given in the form of vouchers, their value would be
increased and the vouchers broken into dollar units so that they could be used in different stores. Some of the strikers decided to return to work, and the strike petered out. But even though the gains they made were minimal, the strikers’ ability to transcend divisions based on ethnicity and to hold out for a month after they were cut off relief despite the forces aligned against them was impressive. The strike indicates that ethnic diversity was not necessarily an obstacle to working-class militancy. Rather, it could foster and aid workers’ activism. In subsequent decades, Crowland’s ethnically diverse workers would constitute a key source of union power in Niagara.

The Cotton Mill Strike, 1936–37

A strike at Empire Cotton Mills, in Welland — one of the longest Depression-era strikes by Niagara workers who managed to hold on to their jobs — demonstrated similar interethnic solidarity. On 22 December 1935, 865 textile workers, consisting of 562 men and 303 women, walked off the job and stayed out for forty-two cold winter days. Among them were French Canadians, Italians, Hungarians, Poles, and Ukrainians who protested against a succession of wage cuts and speed-ups that prevented them from earning enough to support themselves and their families despite working sixty hours a week. The strikers demanded a return to pre-Depression wage levels, shorter hours, union recognition, better quality cotton to work with, and proper ventilation in the mill, as many mill hands suffered from respiratory ailments. They also insisted that there be no discrimination against workers who supported the strike.

The cotton mill was one of the most notorious employers in Welland. Its employees worked longer hours for lower wages than any other workers in the city. Some of the workers lived in company