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
housing — especially the French Canadians, who had been brought to Welland by the company from Montmorency, Québec. According to Welland’s relief officer, once the rent was deducted from their wages, they were often left with no means of subsistence.² They were thus forced to apply to the city for relief. So unrewarding and unhealthy were conditions in the cotton mill that working-class parents in Welland sometimes used the threat of mill employment to convince their children to stay in school.³ Yet, during the Depression, the cotton mill was the only employer hiring in the city. The mill was also the main local employer of women. Given the dearth of employment opportunities, workers could not be selective about where they worked.

The frustration of mill operatives was exacerbated a few years before the strike, when the company used the introduction of new machines as a reason to redesignate a large proportion of workers as “learners,” who could be paid lower wages.⁴ Claims that the new machines were more efficient than the old ones also justified an increase in the number of weaving frames each worker operated. These new demands were so great that, according to the company’s own statement, only 40 percent of the learners on the new machines were able to meet them.⁵ Management saw their failure not as indicative of unreasonable expectations but as evidence of its magnanimity: “We are obliged to pay learners though they are non-producers. It is really a case where they are being paid for going to school.”⁶ As piece workers, that is, as workers paid not by the hour but according to the amount they produced, even those with plenty of experience who managed to operate all the machines saw their income decline. This occurred both because of the company’s increased expectations and because the quality of the cotton used was so poor that it kept breaking.

The strike began spontaneously with the walkout of night workers.⁷ Alex Welch, an organizer for United Textile Workers of America (UTWA), arrived in town shortly thereafter, and the majority of the workers signed union cards. They demanded shorter hours, higher wages, and the right to be represented by UTWA.
In the beginning, the strikers’ morale was high. Considering the group’s ethnic diversity, their unity was as impressive as that of the Crowland relief strikers. They met in different ethnic community halls. Speeches and leaflets were translated into French, Hungarian, Italian, and Ukrainian. The strikers sang songs and huddled around fires in makeshift stoves to keep warm. They were militant, but they kept strict discipline to prevent violence and to demonstrate their respectability. The strike committee appointed two men on each picket shift to maintain order. Their bulletin announced that drunkenness on the picket line would not be tolerated. Women were asked to arrange shifts so that they would not have to be on the picket line between 11:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. Only twice did strikers resort to violence. In one case, a group of strikers attacked “Red” Robinson, who was leading a group of workers to a storefront leased by the company to register their desire to return to work. In the second case, seventy-year-old “Granny” Beaulieu attacked one of the foremen. She was out on the picket line to support her striking son, daughter, and fifteen-year old grandchild when she noticed the foreman trying to sneak into the plant. To stop him, Granny Beaulieu lunged at him and sent him staggering. Moments later, three policemen came to the foreman’s rescue, but not before he “shrieked,” to the great amusement of the picketers, “Arrest that woman! She attacked me!”

Granny Beaulieu was not the only militant woman among the strikers. Mary Jary, a Saskatchewan-born daughter of Hungarian immigrants, was probably the most vocal and memorable of the strike committee members. Both she and her husband, George, a weaver from Hungary, worked at the cotton mill, but their wages were barely sufficient to support themselves and their young son. Despite the fact that women earned significantly less than men in the mill, she saw the strike in family, not gendered, terms. “If I died, my husband would have to get another woman to help him make a living,” she explained. But her acceptance of some prevailing gender norms did not extend to “ladylike” behaviour. As a native speaker of English, she was chosen as a spokesperson
by the strikers. “What do you think of our spirit now?” she asked journalists covering the strike. “Haven’t we got the light of battle in our eyes?” Angrily rejecting the company’s claims that “outside agitators” were responsible for the strike, Jary declared that the strike “had been forced on the employees by being forced down and then being stepped upon.” Although union organizers were not responsible for initiating the strike, she had no doubts about the advantages of union power for the workers:

Why is it that textile companies are so afraid of unions? With a union when we return to work there will be no need to bring kegs of wine, cakes and chicken to the bosses. You won’t have to be good looking to get a break. You won’t have to listen to some of that awful language we hear in the mill. The union would give everyone a fair chance and they would receive treatment like humans, not cattle.”

Dubbed the “Pasionaria of Welland” by the communist press, after Dolores Ibárruri, the fiery communist leader of the Spanish Civil War, Jary travelled through southern Ontario to publicize the strikers’ goals and raise support for them among organized workers.

Nelson Batchelder, general manager of Empire Cotton Mills, kept insisting that provincial policemen be called to Welland. According to him, there would be “loss of life if we don’t get adequate police to stem the mob.” In fact, picketing remained orderly. The strikers also enjoyed broad support in and beyond Welland. Local merchants supplied them with food and heating materials. Ethnic organizations held fundraisers for the strikers. Organized workers throughout southern Ontario donated funds as well, and both CCF and communist activists spoke out in their support. O. C. Jennette, an industrial standards officer sent by Ontario’s Department of Labour to investigate the situation in Welland, also sided with the strikers. He found the wages paid by Empire Cotton Mills shockingly low. Teenagers, working at the mill because the wages earned by their parents were insufficient to support their families, earned
less than $8.00 for fifty-five hours a week. Jennette highlighted the case of Henri Dorval, aged fifteen:

When I questioned this boy as to what would be the reason that he would have to go to work so young, he informed me as follows: that his [father is] employed as a roving pilot at $14.45 for a 55 hour week, from which $3.75 was deducted for house rent, and that his father had eight children, the oldest being himself and the youngest seven months, and gave me some of the following expenses which he was forced to pay to exist. His light bill for two months $2.89; his gas bill $2 per month; his grocery bill $13.50 for a week; and that his mother was sickly; his father had not been able to purchase an overcoat in the past eleven years and a suit in the past four years; his little sisters and brothers needed shoes and he himself had no overcoat.15

L. B. Spencer, a Welland lawyer, blamed what he called the “deplorable conditions” at Empire Cotton Mills on the general manager. According to Spencer, quite apart from the question of wages, Batchelder’s treatment of his “help” tended to “undermine the whole fabric of democracy and the establishment of government by reason, and is a definite influence over the long range to communism or fascism.”16 These reports convinced David Croll, Ontario’s minister of Labour, to speak in support of the strikers. Pointing to the company’s pay sheets as proof of exploitation, he denounced the “shameless underpayment and brutal exploitation” of workers and declared: “If ever a company seems deliberately to ask for labor trouble it is the Empire Cotton Mills. I have every sympathy for the strikers.”17 Local MPP E. J. Anderson, a Conservative, reported to his Ottawa counterpart that the people of Welland considered the strikers’ demands reasonable.18 The city’s welfare board provided relief for needy strikers despite company accusations that the board was being too sympathetic to the strikers.19

On 11 January 1937, Batchelder announced the indefinite closure of Empire Cotton Mills. Meanwhile, company representatives did
everything in their power to break the strikers’ ranks and convince some of them to return to work. The company placed advertisements in local newspapers, including foreign-language ones. One of these advised its employees that because the company would not recognize the “American” textile workers union, “possession of its membership card will not give you any right to negotiate with the company.” As the ad went on to say, “It is not necessary for you to pay dues to any union in order to get a square deal from this Canadian-owned company.” Another ad called on all workers who wanted to return to work to send their names to the company, adding that if enough names were submitted the company would guarantee protection when they returned to the mill. Company agents visited workers’ homes to entice them back to the mill with verbal assurances. The company’s lawyer approached Father László Forgách, the priest serving Hungarian Roman Catholics in Welland, and offered to pay him one thousand dollars to persuade his striking parishioners to return to work. But if the lawyer was counting on Roman Catholic antagonism to radicalism to sway the priest, he miscalculated. Father Forgách turned him down. He believed that the “strikers had every reason in the world to go on strike. The wages they earned were outrageous.”

On 18 January 1937, the company presented new proposals to the strikers. It agreed to review the wages of the lowest-paid adult males and promised to increase wages in future if it could. However, the company refused to recognize the strike committee, claiming that it represented a minority of extremists. It also refused to recognize UTWA. The strikers voted on the company’s offer by a secret ballot under the supervision of the Welland city clerk and O. C. Jennette of the Ontario Department of Labour. The offer was refused by 653 of those who voted, 130 accepted it, and 6 spoiled their ballots. Company officials nevertheless insisted that the strike committee did not represent the majority of workers, most of whom, they claimed, wished to return to work but were prevented from doing so by intimidation. The strike continued.

Gradually, however, the company’s intransigence and threats to
close the plant weakened the strikers’ resolve. On 8 February 1937, Batchelder finally agreed to the recommendations of Louis Fine, of the Ontario Department of Labour, to increase the wages of the lowest-paid employees, to establish shop committees to take up grievances with management, to recognize the right of employees to belong to any organization of their choosing, and to allow all former employees to return to work without discrimination. The next day the workers accepted the offer. Batchelder immediately reneged on his promise to reinstate all striking workers. Father Forgách, who knew what hardship awaited unemployed workers, went to Batchelder and begged him to take back the strikers, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Many of the strike leaders were blacklisted and consequently could not find work in any plant in Welland. Only a decade later, in November 1946, would cotton mill workers finally succeed in winning recognition of their right to be represented by UTWA Local 155.

The Monarch Strike

In 1938, workers employed by the Monarch Knitting Company in St. Catharines also walked off the job. The 1936 Royal Commission established by the federal government to investigate conditions in the textile industry had already deemed that protest by textile workers was well warranted. It discovered, for example, that textile manufacturers were cutting wages, despite making healthy profits. As a result, the income of a growing proportion of textile workers, in St. Catharines and elsewhere, declined below the minimum required for survival.

Monarch Knitting Company workers responded to wage cuts and speed-ups by organizing Local 5 of the Canadian Full-Fashioned Hosiery Workers’ Association. The intense anti-unionism of