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.23 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.24 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.1

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
Niagara employers found expression in the testimony of J. A. Burns, president and general manager of the Monarch Knitting Company, before the Royal Commission on Textile Industries. He claimed that “agitators” sent from the United States were responsible for union organizing at Monarch. Their goal, he claimed, was to take workers’ money in the form of union dues, and he warned that if such agitators did not succeed in fomenting strikes, they would not hesitate to leave town with the workers’ funds. “They have not the employees at heart, they are thinking about their own welfare,” Burns explained. He fired members of the shop committee, two of whom were women, and threatened to close the St. Catharines plant if labour unrest continued.2
But the Canadian Full-Fashioned Hosiery Workers’ Association was — ironically, in view of Burns’s claims — almost as critical of the CIO as Burns himself. The union belonged to the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, a small, nationalist labour federation that refused affiliation with American-led international unions. Its members rejected the tactics of the CIO as unduly radical, stressing instead their desire to cooperate with employers. The firing of their shop committee, however, made such cooperation impossible. Monarch workers walked out and stayed on strike for eleven weeks, demanding that the fired shop committee be reinstated. Hosiery workers from Hamilton, London, and Toronto supported the strikers and threatened a general strike in their trade. After both sides agreed to conciliation, the Industry and Labour Board instructed the company to rehire the two female shop committee members and to help its male head find another job.3

Another irony of this strike is that, despite the presence of women in its organizing campaigns, male organizers complained about the difficulty of convincing female employees of Monarch Knitting to join their union. Their complaints were probably not without foundation. While some women supported unions, many more did not. Monarch’s male employees were quite wrong, however, to attribute the women’s reluctance to timidity. Many of the women, who generally stayed in paid employment only until they married, were less committed to their jobs and hence to organizing than their male counterparts. Their low wages, even for performing the same jobs as men, contributed to their reluctance to stay in factories. Around the time of the strike at Monarch, where both men and women were employed as knitters, adult female knitters earned only 62 percent of the wages of adult males.4 That their union took such unequal wages for granted probably did not help matters. Working women’s household responsibilities also meant that they had less time and energy to devote to union activities than did male workers.