The CIO at McKinnon Industries

Workers at McKinnon Industries did turn to the CIO in 1936, when they established Local 199 of the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW), the first CIO local in Niagara. McKinnon’s was a locally owned manufacturer of buggy components that moved successfully into the production of motor vehicle parts in the early twentieth century and became a General Motors (GM) subsidiary in 1929. The company had established a workers’ council, but workers who attempted to use it not simply as a forum for venting frustrations but also as a means to bring about meaningful change were disappointed. The company took no action in response to worker complaints. When the workers decided to join the UAW, they received assistance from experienced organizers, some of whom were also members of the Communist Party. But while the founding of Local 199 of the UAW, which would become the largest and most powerful union in St. Catharines, was clearly inspired by developments in the United States, the organizational initiative appears to have been wholly local.\(^1\)

The provincial government, under the leadership of Premier Hepburn, whose opposition to the CIO in Oshawa and northern Ontario was well-known, shared the eagerness of management to oust the UAW from McKinnon. Hepburn sent in the provincial police, hoping that the organizing drive could be defeated by charging union activists with inciting unlawful behaviour. In an attempt to break worker solidarity, the police interviewed workers in their homes, but they were unable to obtain information that would have allowed them to lay charges against anyone.\(^2\)

The *St. Catharines Standard* sided with Hepburn and McKinnon Industries. The paper described union organizers as “foreign agitators” whose ambition for power brought only “distress and misery” to the workers “whom they are able to exploit.” The newspaper also lamented the “economic tragedy” resulting from the “war between capital and labor” instigated by sit-down strikes in the United States,
adding that similar developments in St. Catharines would scare off prospective new industries. The paper did not hesitate to use both racism and sexism to discredit the UAW. When Sam Kraisman, the business agent of the CIO-affiliated International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), came to speak to St. Catharines workers, the Standard asked rhetorically, “What have Toronto Jewish women’s delegates with strike experience in the clothing trade to offer St. Catharines motor workers”?

Most McKinnon workers belonging to ethnic minorities responded with enthusiasm to the industrial unionism of the CIO. A disproportionate number of them signed the UAW’s first charter at the factory. As unskilled workers, they had not been eligible for membership in craft unions, and, being particularly vulnerable to dismissal, they generally feared to express grievances without an organization to defend their rights. Yet all of them knew someone who had been injured on the job, and since they had the dirtiest jobs at the plant, many of them suffered from diseases like silicosis. They resented the power and arbitrariness of foremen who expected personal favours from immigrant workers who wanted to get a job for a relative or friend, or a better job for themselves, or simply to keep their jobs during the Depression. Some supervisors pushed immigrant workers to bring them bottles of scotch or treat them to drinks after work, invite them home for dinner, clear their driveways in winter, or mow their lawns in summer. The immigrants were also angered by the company’s discriminatory employment policies, which kept non-Anglo-Celtic workers out of skilled and white-collar jobs. Older immigrant workers, with little education and limited knowledge of English, were generally not in a position to aim for such jobs, but they held such hopes for their Canadian-educated children. Yet the daughter of Armenian immigrants recalled:

No Armenian women were hired as clerical help. . . . It was hard for foreign women to get in the office at McKinnon’s. A man by the name of McCarthy ran the office and he didn’t like foreigners. . . .
also applied for a job in Fleming’s [law firm] office but I knew they wouldn’t hire us because we were Armenian. So I worked in the factory and then got married. I’m sure my qualifications were fine.  

Meanwhile, the UAW went out of its way to appeal to minority workers. To convey its message, it arranged for interpreters for those workers who had a limited grasp of English. In contrast to the company’s policy of excluding “foreigners” from white-collar jobs, the union provided opportunities for advancement to talented members of minority groups. Armenian Canadian Hygus Torosian, for example, a founding member of Local 199 of the UAW and one of the most active members of the local’s educational committee, was awarded a scholarship to study at the Workers’ Educational Association Training School in England so that he could equip himself “for even more effective work in his organization and community.”

In May 1937, McKinnon workers gave their overwhelming support to the UAW when 1,190 workers voted to join the union. Only twelve workers opposed the move.

**Fighting for Democracy**

**on the Home Front, 1939–45**

During the war, when serious labour shortages developed, workers were again in a strong position to promote their interests. Men and increasingly women as well joined unions and demanded higher wages, the right to organize, and worker representation on government boards. McKinnon workers were no exception. In 1941, when they struck for higher wages and the right to organize, they justified their demands not simply in terms of need but also on the grounds of equity. They maintained that while workers were being