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
pressed to work harder and faster for patriotic reasons, employers were profiting from war.

McKinnon Industries responded by intensifying its anti-union campaign. Management fomented suspicion of “foreign” workers, both because employers often saw immigrant workers as radicals and because management believed that pointing to immigrants’ role in the UAW would create divisions among workers. The company’s hiring policies indicated its distrust of non–Anglo-Celtic workers. When it requested machinists trained by the Dominion Provincial Wartime Emergency Training Programme, it specified that such men should be between the ages of twenty-six and forty, should weigh at least 150 pounds, and should be “of Anglo Saxon origin if possible.”

But the company also promoted suspicions toward non–Anglo-Celtic workers more actively. In a signed affidavit, Donald Schoures, a McKinnon worker, described the activities of Major Carmichael, also known as “Digger,” another of the company’s employees:

I, Donald Schoures, hereby testify to efforts by one known to me as Digger in attempting to form a secret organization of employees of the McKinnon Industries Limited, St. Catharines. Early in Sept. 1941, I was approached by a group leader in the plant, Arthur Othen, and requested if I wished to attend a meeting on government business. I was taken to a meeting of other McKinnon Group leaders and employees of the Co., employees who had attended upon the invitation of various group leaders. The person known as Digger but has been identified as one Colonel Carmichael was the leader and principle [sic] speaker. The people present at the meeting were informed by Digger that they were there to combat any forms of sabotage. In his speech the speaker advised all present to watch the McKinnon employees of foreign extraction while in the plant for possible sabotage by them. The Digger stated he was in favour of unions but that Local 199 UAW-CIO was dominated by foreign born people and the leaders of the union would be guilty of sabotage if strike action took place at the McKinnon
plant. He requested all members of his organization the Inner Circle Counter-Sabotage Committee to keep the wheels of industry turning whatever the cost. Included in the membership of the Inner Circle Counter Sabotage Committee were members of Local 199 UAW-CIO. Statements made by Digger at this meeting proved he was in receipt of decisions made at union meetings. He condemned the union in the taking of the strike ballot declaring it was not properly conducted, members being forced to vote in favour of strike action which was untrue. He further declared any strike action would be illegal which was untrue. Throughout the meeting he dwelt on the functions of the union which he criticized, rather than forms of sabotage the organization he had set up was supposed to discuss. In my opinion the Inner Circle Counter Sabotage Committee was set up as an anti-union organization rather than an anti-sabotage group.  

In the name of patriotism, the federal and provincial governments and the mainstream local press sided with management against the union. In a radio address, C. D. Howe, Canada’s powerful federal minister of Munitions and Supply, urged St. Catharines workers to keep working. He sent two hundred RCMP officers to St. Catharines, claiming that they were needed to ensure that those who wanted to keep working would not be harassed by picketers, despite the fact that local police reported that picketing was peaceful. Premier Hepburn described the strikers as “just as big an enemy as the Germans.” The St. Catharines Standard backed the government. “Every hour of the strike here,” one of its editorials stated, “helps the dastardly beast, Hitler.” The editorial worried that striking workers would tarnish the image of all St. Catharines workers by showing that they were more concerned with “a few cents more an hour” than they were “to do their bit to help humanity.” The Standard did not mention that McKinnon workers were earning less than autoworkers in Oshawa and Windsor. Instead, it denounced them for being unpatriotic and selfish and for causing layoffs in other plants.
Most striking workers did not lose their determination in the face of such opposition. They had no doubts about the importance of their contribution to the war effort. As “Just Another Worker” wrote to the *Standard*, when the government declared its plans to cap profits, manufacturers “went on strike,” claiming that they would not make enough profits. The government altered its plans in response. The absence of labour representation on any war boards no doubt helped. “Why can’t we have decent men in Ottawa,” the worker asked, “instead of having a group of Canadian Manufacturers’ Association puppets who are always thinking in terms of profits rather than sacrificing?”

Women, who entered factories such as McKinnons in growing numbers, were among the most outspoken defenders of the strike. One “girl employee” wrote to the *St. Catharines Standard*:

I am not so good at composing a letter of this kind, but I believe I can convey my meaning. I am one of the girl employees on strike at McKinnons. I have worked there a good number of years and every time I have ever asked for a raise, have been told the company could not afford it. . . . As for being patriotic, I have a kid brother overseas and I certainly would like to see a decent set wage for him to come back to. He quit McKinnons on account of receiving 25¢ per hour. . . . If the so-called big names feel they would like to sacrifice and be patriotic, they can take their own sons and daughters out of college and let them do their share of slaving. McKinnons and the government have their representatives and we picked Bob Stacey as ours. As far as I know I certainly was not forced or coerced into joining the union. I joined because it stands for democracy, which is what we are trying to fight for. There are plenty of millionaires being made out of this war and they sure do not care who gives their lives as long as they rake in the money. We don’t want Hitler here, but we are being run by a few “would-be” Hitlers. The working man of McKinnons should be able to live not merely exist and have the right to save a dollar and send their children to college the same as G.M.’s executives.
do. The workers are the ones that count and should not be treated as ignorant dogs. If I did not have my parents to live with I would have gone short many a day on McKinnons’ pay. . . . Here’s hoping the government realizes we have to live too!5

That this young woman understood her low wages and general inequality solely in terms of class, and not gender, tells us a great deal about widespread acceptance of gender inequality even among workers, including militant female workers.

The strike was well organized and peaceful. A female picketer brought a “camera-type” radio to the picket line. Girls and youths distributed song sheets and harmonized strike songs and “current tunes” as they walked the line, at times accompanied by a mouth-organ playing picketer.6 The workers’ relaxed approach reflected not only their position of relative strength in the context of serious labour shortages but also their refusal to see a contradiction between their rights to organize and receive fair wages and their loyalty to Canada and the war effort. The “democratic Canada” they hoped to establish as workers on the home front would clearly offer equal opportunities for the members of all classes.
The strikers’ views were shared by workers throughout Canada and by a large segment of the local community. The St. Catharines Trades and Labour Council, the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL, founded in 1940 as a merger of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour and the Canadian branch of the CIO), the Toronto Trades and Labour Council (affiliated with the AFL), the Toronto Labour Council (affiliated with the CCL), the Montreal Labour Council, and workers from Halifax, Sydney, Winnipeg, and Port Arthur sent messages of support. About sixty workers belonging to unions ranging from Cape Breton miners to the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) in British Columbia came down from nearby Hamilton, where the CCL was holding its annual convention, to join the picket lines. To feed the strikers, local farmers donated fruits and vegetables, merchants gave other food items, and restaurants sent food to the kitchen run by Local 199’s women’s auxiliary. The strike ended when the company agreed to a closed shop and to negotiate wages.

Fomenting ethnic discord was not the only anti-union tactic on which Niagara employers relied during the Second World War. Throughout the peninsula, employers who had learned that their workers were in the process of organizing made a point of promoting company unions, which had no affiliation with the broader labour movement. Such campaigns against industrial unions were very much in evidence in Welland in 1942, when the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union (UE) was making inroads in several plants. Management at the Electro-Metallurgical plant called together representatives from each department and showed them a wide range of possible contracts it was willing to sign provided they formed a company, or “independent,” union. The workers rejected this offer and were the first group in Welland to join the UE. The president of the UE, C. S. Jackson, recalled that when he arrived in Welland to help with the Electro-Metallurgical organizing drive he found that it actually required little input from him, as rank-and-file enthusiasm propelled the drive. So many people had come to a meeting at the Welland Hungarian Hall that Jackson had to fight his way inside. When he finally got to the front,
he realized that “there was no point in wasting time.” He gave a five-minute speech and started handing out membership cards. “The demands for the cards were coming from outside as well as inside the hall. Cards were going across this way and coming back with two dollars attached to them.” That night, when the union’s treasury contained a mere fifty dollars, Jackson took in between $700 and $800 in initiation fees.8

Mike Bosnich, a Welland worker of Croatian origin and later the UE’s local business agent, ascribed the union’s tremendous success at its inception to support from immigrant workers. They supported the union because it “overrode nationalities,” enabling immigrant workers “to have a say in their wages, working conditions, and have some modicum of control over their futures” and ultimately to avoid “the discrimination that existed for many years, to manage to build job security.” For them, the union was an organization “that was long overdue—that would give them the chance for self-respect and decency.” That, Bosnich believed, “was more important to them than even the money or the union security.” 9

But unions did not always succeed in defeating company initiatives. In Welland, the Atlas Steels Employees’ Association, which had been responsible for social and recreational activities among the workers since 1935, transformed itself into the Atlas Workers’ Independent Union by issuing a new constitution in 1942 that empowered the association to bargain collectively with their employer. While the Independent Union claimed to have been formed by “the more stable and highly skilled operators and mechanics in the plant of Atlas Steels . . . entirely on their own initiative,” the records of the UE attribute the initiative for its formation to the employer. Support for the UE among Atlas workers came from the semi-skilled and unskilled, who challenged the Independent Union’s right to represent them and called in officials from the Department of Labour to oversee a vote by the workers. In a process deemed fair by the department officials, 1,263 workers supported the UE, and only 110 voted against. The company, however, refused to recognize the UE as the bargaining agent for Atlas workers. Instead, it
signed a contract with the Atlas Workers’ Independent Union and conducted a vote on that contract. The company could disregard its workers’ decision with such impunity because, although the wartime government recognized the right of workers to be represented by a union of their choice, it did not compel employers to negotiate with such unions. Frustrated by the company’s blatant disregard for the democratic process, the UE urged its supporters to boycott the vote, and the new contract was approved by only a narrow majority. Despite the company’s failure to respect the initial vote, Ontario’s labour court validated the contract with the company union.10

Other companies adopted similar tactics. North American Cyanamid, the largest employer in Niagara Falls, responded to an organizing drive by the United Gas, Coke and Chemical Workers of America in 1943 by drafting a Company Union Agreement and getting its employees’ Improvement and Development Committee, renamed the General Plant Committee, to sign the document. According to Cyanamid workers, the agreement, “which was signed and then revised by the Company,” was not submitted to the employees for ratification. Nor were the employees ever asked whether “they wanted this agreement or even wanted this committee to act on their behalf on such matters.” 11 The Welland Chemical Works, a crown corporation operating under Cyanamid management during the war, similarly designated an employee association to represent its workers and refused to negotiate with the CIO.12

Despite these anti-union efforts, Niagara workers joined industrial unions in growing numbers and fought for higher wages and better conditions. Their ranks included seasonal agricultural labourers and workers in canneries and in the service industries, all of whom had historically found it difficult to organize. In 1941, striking McKinnon workers helped increase the wages of agricultural workers. Excused from strike duty, automotive workers from low-wage groups picked peaches for local farmers desperately short of workers. They used their experience in the labour movement to win an extra five cents per hour of picking. Women employed
by Canadian Canners struck for and won higher wages and better working conditions at the Niagara-on-the-Lake plant. Waiters and waitresses at the General Brock Hotel, walking out when two of their ranks were fired, demanded that management recognize their union, Local 299 of the International Hotel and Restaurant Employees’ Union.

Crowland-Welland and the UE constituted the nucleus of Niagara’s labour movement, largely because of the ethnic make-up of these communities. Crowland, in particular, had a much higher percentage of non-Anglo-Celtic residents than any other community in the region — or, for that matter, anywhere else in Ontario except in northern resource communities. The township’s small size prevented the emergence of exclusive ethnic enclaves among these residents, most of whom belonged to the working class. As the actions of Crowland’s unemployed demonstrated, daily contact across ethnic lines in Crowland’s foreign quarter and in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs in factories and on construction sites contributed to an awareness of shared grievances and goals among minority workers. The strongest integrative force among them, however, was the discrimination they all faced.

The particular ethnic mix of these workers helps to explain their militancy. Radical Ukrainians, Hungarians, Croatians, and Serbians — the members of ethnic groups with strong communist-led factions in Canada — played a key role in the wartime and postwar unionization drives in Crowland, in Welland, and beyond. Many immigrant workers who were not themselves communists accepted their leadership, because local communists seemed to be the most committed and capable advocates of their cause.

The UE’s efforts to extend union power beyond the shop floor appealed to Crowland and Welland workers, whatever their ideological inclinations. In Crowland, UE activists were regularly elected to Crowland Council, where they fought to extend better municipal services to workers and to pay for them by ending tax exemptions and free services for the large companies within the township. The UE also created a twentieth-century version of the type of
working-class culture the Knights of Labor had created in Niagara in the nineteenth century. It hosted social occasions such as picnics, excursions, dinners, and Christmas parties for its members and their families, sponsored local baseball and hockey teams, and supported local charities such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and a children’s shelter.\textsuperscript{15}

But despite the growth of union power, the limits to labour’s ethnic inclusiveness in Niagara persisted. McKinnon workers, for example, had no qualms about protesting against the hiring of Japanese Canadians. As a result, the Japanese Canadians who were relocated by the government to this area were largely confined to low-paying, labour-intensive jobs in agriculture and in canneries and basket factories. Discrimination against them continued after the war as well. Harry Kurahara recalled attempting to move from a basket-making factory in Grimsby to McKinnon Industries in 1948:

I went to McKinnon in 1948 to put my name in, and the guy said they were not hiring, just like that. But you know, the same afternoon two young fellows I knew went and got jobs with McKinnon. From that day on I thought that guy was a redneck, he doesn’t like Japanese otherwise why would he say they weren’t hiring and turn around and hire two guys? So from that day on, me and General Motors, we don’t agree, from that day on I wouldn’t buy a GM product. It hurt, but you convince yourself you’re as good as that guy.\textsuperscript{16}

Union organizers showed greater awareness that their own failure to defend women’s interests may have contributed to the union’s weakness among female workers at McKinnon Industries. During a discussion of problems facing Local 199 at a meeting of the District Council of the UAW in June 1942, they explained: “We will remain weak with [women] unless we can lead the way on equal pay for equal work.” But despite the presence of such militant and clear-sighted female workers at the plant as the “girl employee” who wrote to the \textit{St. Catharines Standard}, Local 199 representatives still
maintained that it was “hard to find people with leadership potential among the girls themselves.”

Meanwhile, the strength of working-class discontent, expressed by a large number of strikes as well as CCF electoral gains, convinced the provincial government that it might have to recognize workers’ right to collective bargaining. In 1943, the provincially appointed Select Committee to Inquire into Collective Bargaining Between Employers and Employees invited testimony from Ontario workers and employers. The large delegations from Niagara reflected how polarized the area was along class lines. The largest local employers were represented: McKinnon Industries, Lightning Fastener, English Electric, Hayes Steel, Imperial Iron, McKinnon Columbus Chain, Packard Electric, St. Catharines Steel Products, Thompson Products, Welland Vale, Engineering Tool and Forgings, and the Foster Wheeler Corporation, all from St. Catharines; from Welland, Atlas Steels; from Niagara Falls, North American Cyanamid; from Port Colborne, Canadian Furnace; from Thorold, the Ontario Paper Company; and from Merriton, the Alliance Paper Company. These companies had organized a year earlier as a non-profit corporation named the Niagara Industrial Relations Institute, proclaiming their desire “to improve industrial relations between employers and employees in the Niagara peninsula and to formulate policies for proper collective bargaining relations between employers and employees in that district.” In fact, the brief presented to the Select Committee by their lawyer, J. L. Gabriel Keogh, made clear that the Niagara Industrial Relations Institute wanted to protect company unions and to limit the power of the industrial unions that had succeeded in gaining a foothold in the area.

In this confrontation, the well-represented workers and other supporters of collective bargaining were still unable to carry the day. The Ontario government listened to their accounts of employers throughout the peninsula forcing (and sometimes bribing) workers to support employee associations that purported to be independent but were, for all intents and purposes, not much different from company unions. The government apparently accepted labour’s
claim that the overwhelming majority of workers in the area supported labour unions and wanted state recognition of their right to collective bargaining, but it was ultimately unwilling to ban the formation of “independent” company unions as part of the 1943 Ontario Collective Bargaining Act. Employers continued to use company unions to block the organization of affiliated unions for decades to come.18

Niagara Labour’s Cold War

For Canadian and Niagara workers, the fight to establish their right to collective bargaining represented by a union of their choice did not end with the war. At this time, shop stewards collected union dues to secure membership stability on a monthly basis. Considerable labour turnover made this difficult even during the war. With the prospect of the type of economic recession that followed the First World War threatening to undermine their bargaining position, union officials feared that the existence of unions would again become precarious once war production ended. Pointing to the indispensable part that labour had played in the war effort, union supporters demanded legal protections. To gain financial stability, they sought compulsory dues check-offs from workers’ pay cheques. To guarantee membership stability, they wanted the closed shop — compulsory membership in the union — in all unionized workplaces. Moreover, having accepted caps on wages throughout the war, workers now demanded increases. A wave of strikes throughout the country, most famously by Ford workers at Windsor, forced the federal government to concede to some union demands. The Rand formula (1946), proposed by Supreme Court Justice Ivan Rand, was founded on the recognition of unequal power between employers and workers. Justice Rand believed that