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
a legislated dues check-off would redress the balance by strengthening the position of unions vis-à-vis employers. The Rand formula did not establish the closed shop, because Justice Rand believed that compulsory union membership infringed on the individual rights of workers. But it did require all workers — even those who did not want to join unions — to pay union dues on the grounds that they benefitted from union representation.

Even this new postwar legality did not, however, put an end to employers’ campaigns against unions affiliated with the wider labour movement. Company unions remained key components of these campaigns. Amidst the vehement anti-communism of the Cold War years, red-baiting also became a strong feature of the postwar anti-union campaign.

The short-lived success of the AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers of America at Welland’s Plymouth Cordage Company in 1948–49 illustrates how employers used both company unions and red-baiting to combat the organized labour movement. During the years of World War II, the company had again been forced to recruit new workers, mostly women and racialized Chinese, as it had done during World War I. The company’s welfare plan had proved insufficient to counter the lure of higher wages offered by other wartime employers in Welland, and many workers had expressed their discontent with Plymouth Cordage by leaving. Not until 1948, however, did Cordage workers choose to buttress their position by forming Local 174 of UTWA. Both the growing number of younger workers at the Cordage factory and a strong campaign by the union, which had built a foundation in Welland in 1936–37 by organizing workers at Empire Cotton Mills, were responsible for UTWA’s gaining a foothold at Plymouth Cordage. Yet, after the first contract expired, a majority of Cordage workers voted to return to their employee association. What explains this about-face?

That the experiment with the international union was short-lived can be attributed to a number of factors. Most importantly, when the contract with UTWA ended, the company laid off about a hundred younger workers, some of whom were union activists. In
contrast, to judge from the leadership of the employee association, its base of support lay among older employees, who, with some reservations, continued to see the Plymouth Cordage Company as a “good employer.” Moreover, on the eve of the vote to choose a union to represent them, workers were offered the opportunity to buy lots from the company at advantageous prices. As the cartoon below suggests, the company also conducted a campaign to discredit the union on the grounds of its communist leadership. Finally, and somewhat ironically, in part because of the competition from UTWA and other unions eager to represent Cordage workers, the employee association had some success in obtaining better terms for its members.1

![Cartoon from a Plymouth Cordage Employee Association publication, 1949. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada (Madeleine Parent and R. Kent Rowley fonds).](image)

A similar contest took place between a company union and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union at the American Cyanamid Company in Niagara Falls. The Cyanamid Independent Union, established in 1943, represented the workers
until 1953, when the UE conducted a successful organizing drive at the plant. Cyanamid workers went out on strike six months later, when the union and the company failed to reach agreement on the initial contract. This was the first strike in the company’s forty-five years of operations in Niagara Falls. Both the company and the union valued and worked hard to win community support. Both camps purchased centrefold advertisements in the Niagara Falls *Evening Review* to present their side of the dispute. The company declared that, until union supporters demonstrated a willingness to conduct themselves in “a responsible manner,” it would not contribute to union security in the form of a dues check-off and a closed shop. It also claimed that union security and control over grievances would not benefit Cyanamid employees; rather, only the UE stood to benefit. The company reminded Niagara Falls residents of its standing in the community as one of the foremost employers for forty-five years and stressed its commitment to progressive employer-employee relations, as evidenced by its ongoing concerns about working conditions, health, and safety and its insurance and pension plans. It accused the UE of “fantastic” and “impossible” economic demands, “devious purposes” in entrenching itself not only at the Cyanamid plant but in the wider community, and of establishing “a beachhead” in the chemical industry in Canada. Cyanamid declared its empathy with workers’ families and local businesses for the economic losses they would suffer because of the strike. As a *coup de grâce*, it closed the company swimming pool — the only public pool in Niagara Falls — on the grounds that picketing threatened the safety of anyone wishing to enter company grounds. “One does not invite guests to one’s home,” it declared in a large advertisement in the Niagara Falls paper, “when the possibility of embarrassment and the threat of bodily harm are present.”

The UE, for its part, levelled various charges against the Cyanamid Corporation, not least that it had benefitted greatly from tax breaks. Despite these advantages and its considerable profits, it refused realistic wage increases. The company’s demands concerning management control were unreasonable, as it wanted to allow
foremen to decide whether workers were performing adequately without permitting workers to file a grievance if they were disciplined. The UE also condemned Cyanamid for refusing to conform to the practices of other employers in Niagara who followed the recommendations of conciliation boards concerning wage increases and seniority rights.4

The Cold War was fought not only between employers and workers in Niagara but also within unions. Here, as elsewhere in Canada, the conflict within the labour movement concerned partisan politics. Having witnessed the success of the social-democratic CCF in federal and provincial elections, some labour leaders wanted to lend formal union support to the party. Communist labour activists, however, who did not themselves refrain from advocating union support for Communist Party candidates in ridings where they stood a chance of winning, recognized that communists enjoyed limited political support and therefore called for union neutrality in elections. The split within Local 529 of the UE in St. Catharines offers a clear example of the fissures that politics created in the labour movement. The local represented workers at the English Electric and the Yale and Towne companies. CCF supporters began their campaign by trying to oust communists from the local’s leadership.
American Cyanamid Company swimming pool high diving boards, circa 1940s. Courtesy of the Niagara Falls (Ontario) Public Library (D421215F).

Workers sympathetic to the Communist Party accused those who called for closer ties with the CCF of injecting “narrow partisan
politics into the Local.” Other members pointed out that all of the local’s officers had been democratically elected and could therefore not be removed from their positions. Eventually the conflict led to the division of the local. English Electric workers left the UE to support the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), which had strong ties with the CCF. Yale and Towne workers remained within the UE. At the national level, the UE was expelled from the Canadian Congress of Labour, one of Canada’s two large labour federations, thanks to pressure from the US-based CIO and from both conservative and CCF supporters within the labour movement in Canada, on the pretext that it had not paid its membership dues on time. All the same, anti-communist propaganda failed to persuade many of Niagara’s workers. Electro-Metallurgical, Page-Hersey, Yale and Towne, and International Silver workers continued to adhere to the UE, even after the union was expelled from the CCL and despite raids from CCL unions, especially the USWA. Radical workers belonging to or sympathetic to the Communist Party remained active within UAW Locals in St. Catharines as well. Labour historians generally believe that politics was not, in fact, the main reason for workers’ loyalty to the UE. Rather, workers remained loyal to the communist-led union because it was a “fighting union.” The union’s democratic structure and close ties to rank-and-file members were also important. In the ethnically diverse Niagara Peninsula, the ties between radical ethnic organizations and the UE were central to its success.

During the 1950s and 1960s, even non-unionized workers benefited from the strength of the UE in the region. Employers in non-unionized plants such as Atlas Steels kept a close eye on the collective agreements signed by the UE and generally matched the wages and benefits they offered in order to keep the union out. Thanks to union power, by the mid-twentieth century Welland’s workers were among the best paid in Canada. UE locals, along with other unions active in the area such as the UAW and USWA in St. Catharines and the Pulp and Paper Workers in Thorold, obtained advantageous contracts for their workers.