Women and Workers of Colour
in the 1950s and 1960s

The immediate postwar period was one of prosperity and growth in the Niagara area. As local industries switched back to manufacturing consumer goods, their labour needs were filled in part by new waves of immigrants from Britain and continental Europe. In these years, when so many workers enjoyed secure jobs and decent wages, the labour movement throughout Canada directed considerable energy to fighting racism through anti-discrimination legislation. Thanks in no small part to labour’s efforts, starting in 1944 the Ontario government passed laws forbidding discrimination based on race, religion, colour, or nationality in public signs, employment, the provision of services, and the sale of property. No law, however, addressed discrimination in apartment rentals in the province.

A case of housing discrimination in St. Catharines in 1959 pushed the St. Catharines and District Labour Council to the centre of labour’s fight against such discrimination. The case, covered by newspapers across the nation, involved a family of four by the name of Summers. Charles Summers, a truck driver, his pregnant wife, Ada, and their two young children were told to leave their apartment on Ontario Street because, as the *St. Catharines Standard* put it, “they were Negroes.” They had been living in the apartment for a mere two months when, in September 1959, their landlady asked them to leave. She had received a number of anonymous letters from Ontario Street residents complaining that they did not want “colored people” living there.¹ A group signing itself as “McKinnon customers” sent a similar letter to Jack Woods, owner of the Cof-fizon, a restaurant located on Ontario Street near the McKinnon plant. Woods rented his premises from the owner of the building in which the Summers lived. His racist customers threatened to stop spending money in his restaurant unless he put pressure on his landlady to evict the Summers family.²
Charles Summers, a native of St. Catharines, refused to leave. When his landlady first approached him, he asked her for a written notice. Having obtained the documentation, he contacted the St. Catharines Standard to publicize this racist incident. “I felt that if I didn’t take a stand now,” he told the paper, “my children and in turn their children would have to face the same discrimination during their lives. I want this kind of thing to stop now.” Summers’s stand encouraged African Canadians and other local residents to speak out against discrimination. Russell Thompson, a member of the Meliorist Club, an African Canadian service club, told reporters that up to 80 percent of young African Canadians in the area were unable to find work, that few barber shops in St. Catharines would serve African Canadians, and that there had been earlier attempts to prevent them from settling in certain parts of the city.
The labour movement rallied behind Summers. Having received a number of complaints about similar discrimination in Toronto, the Toronto and District Labour Committee for Human Rights was campaigning to convince the Ontario government to pass legislation that would outlaw discrimination based on nationality, race, or religion in rental housing. However, they found it difficult to document specific cases of discrimination. Understandably, very few members of minority groups had the courage to publicize the humiliation that they suffered in their daily lives; some were even afraid that publicity would expose them to greater hostility. Consequently, when Charles Summers brought his experiences to the public’s attention, the executive secretary of the Toronto and District Labour Committee for Human Rights, lawyer A. Alan Borovoy, took note of his courageous stand. Borovoy believed that if the St. Catharines City Council could be persuaded to pass a by-law against such discrimination, the provincial government would be more willing to pass anti-discrimination legislation. He contacted John Ideson, president of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council and a strong supporter of anti-discrimination legislation, and they worked together to prevent the eviction of the Summers family and to establish a deputation to the city council. 5

Responses to this campaign suggest that, by the late 1950s, many residents of Niagara were upset by the open racism in the area. When Borovoy circulated a petition opposing the eviction of the Summers family, most of their neighbours on Ontario Street signed it. One of them, Mrs Kalagian, an Armenian Canadian, called on the family and said, “I want to tell you, you’re the best people we have seen in ten years. . . . We want no part of this letter business.” 6 Jack Wood of the Coffizon Restaurant angrily responded to racist customers who pressured him to urge the family’s eviction: “I would rather go out of business than have a part in persecuting innocent people.” 7 Letters of protest appeared in the St. Catharines Standard. Others expressed their support for the Summers family by telephone, and some even offered them alternative housing. A doctor from Niagara Falls sent money to help with a down payment
Newspaper coverage of the Summers case from places as distant as Sydney, Nova Scotia, suggest that many Canadians outside Niagara also opposed racist discrimination.

In response to these protests, the Summers’ landlady decided against eviction. A member of the St. Catharines Armenian community, she and her family acknowledged that she had acted hastily. The anonymous racist letters frightened her precisely because her own community had suffered from discrimination.

The deputation that John Ideson led to City Hall on 26 October 1959 enjoyed the support of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council, the local Ministerial Association, the United Nations Association of St. Catharines, the Unitarian Fellowship of St. Catharines, the St. Catharines Council of Women, the Niagara District Council of Human Rights, B’nai Brith of St. Catharines (a Jewish organization), and the local Bahais. The deputation called for a by-law that would make it illegal to select tenants for or eject tenants from apartment buildings and multiple dwelling units because of their race, colour, religion, or national origin. The legislation would also authorize municipal officials to investigate reported cases of discrimination and to fine violators. The proposal received strong endorsement from Alderman Joe Reid, who claimed that St. Catharines was not “very far away from Little Rock.” Reid was referring to Little Rock, Arkansas, where jeering whites, supported by the state governor, attempted to bar nine African American students from entering the local high school under federal court order.

But the Summers case also revealed that many Canadians still refused to acknowledge that racism was a problem in Canada. Such St. Catharines notables as the mayor and several aldermen condemned racist discrimination and suggested that the anonymous letters were the work of marginal individuals. The mayor added that the attempt to evict the Summers family was a “misunderstanding,” since there was no serious discrimination in St. Catharines. Some aldermen voiced strong opposition to the by-law proposed by Ideson’s delegation. According to one of them, while such a law would give “a coloured man the right he should have,” it would
take away property rights from another person. “It is unfortunate,” he argued, “but the minute a coloured person moves into a neighbourhood the fellow next door couldn’t sell his home for half what it’s worth. Why should the law make me do something that would depress the value of my neighbour’s property?” Voicing the views of many Canadian critics of anti-discrimination laws, another alderman protested that one cannot legislate against prejudice. As human rights activists and the victims of discrimination pointed out, however, legislation was designed to eliminate discrimination, not prejudice. Although such legislation did have an educational function — to publicize the state’s condemnation of discrimination — the victims of racism could not afford to await the slow change of attitudes as a result of education.

In the end, the by-law proposal was defeated by one vote, apparently because the majority of council members believed that such a law was beyond the jurisdiction of municipal government. However, they agreed to support a petition to extend the provincial Fair Accommodation Practices Act, which outlawed the refusal of services in public places on the basis of race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry or place of origin, to cover apartment rental. When the petition was submitted to Ontario Premier Leslie Frost later that year, St. Catharines organizations, the District Labour Council foremost among them, were disproportionately represented among those who supported it. The proposed change was enacted provincially in 1961.

The Labour Council was much slower to take action against gender discrimination in the workplace. Contrary to the common view of the 1950s as an era of domesticity, in blue-collar communities such as St. Catharines the number of women, including married women, in paid employment grew. Employers needed their work, and many supervisors came to believe that married women were more reliable workers than single ones. Yet, as in earlier decades, the need for their labour did not lead to improved conditions. Assumptions about women’s nature and abilities were too deeply rooted among employers and workers.
A statement by Martin Cahill, public relations director of McKinnon Industries, illustrates such assumptions. “Most of the jobs that require nimbleness and fine attention to small detail are done by girls,” he told a Standard reporter. “Girls don’t do laborious or heavy work,” he added, explaining that they had done such work during World War II only “because of the man shortage.” Evidently, this departure from the norm failed to convince him that women were capable of performing supposedly “male jobs.” Such assumptions help to explain why the sex-typing of jobs continued at McKinnon until the 1970s and why women were limited to a small number of jobs in just a few departments.

In October 1967, a group of female workers who lost their jobs at McKinnon Industries used the hearings of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada to publicize discrimination against women on production lines in the automotive industry. They received assistance in drafting their brief from feminist Laura Sabia, a former St. Catharines municipal councillor.

In May 1966, with no advance notice whatever, we were suddenly laid off. We were not even given the courtesy of 24 hours’ notice. Some of us with seniority of 5 to 10 years were also laid off without any explanation save that there was no longer any work for us. We were told to apply as new employees in other cities, but because of family ties, this was impossible for us. We appealed to Local 199 of the United Automobile Workers Union for some explanation and redress. We were told of our eligibility for Unemployment Insurance Benefits and Transitional Assistance Benefits. We were made aware of the government’s retraining program in various commercial and stenography courses. The U.A.W. was aware of the impending Auto Pact and its ramification for women workers, but they did little to solve these problems with industry.

We are cognizant of the government’s clerical courses for women, but girls coming out of school with a four-year commercial diploma find employment at $40.00 to $50.00 per week, which, we submit, is not adequate for us to maintain a home and support
a family. We do not want to be a drain on welfare agencies. We want only to support our families in dignity and we assure you that we are most willing to do the hard work that industry entails. . . .

We submit to you that women in industry are subject to discrimination as far as lay-offs are concerned. The first to go are women, and rarely are they called back. Unions care little of forcing an issue where women are concerned.

We ask that a thorough study be made of women workers on production lines in industry. Industry cares little of making available jobs for women when certain lines are closed off. Women seem expendable in both industry and unions.15

The twelve women who signed the brief were all self-supporting, some of them with dependent families. Their representative, Ann Fast, spoke at the commission’s hearings in Toronto. She explained that following the signing of the Auto Pact, when the automotive industry was being restructured, women were seriously disadvantaged at McKinnon Industries because the sex-typing of jobs meant that there were two seniority lists. Since so few job classifications were open to women, they were much more likely to lose their jobs than men with equal (or greater) seniority. But while the women demanded an end to such “discrimination between the sexes,” they also endorsed the ideal of the family wage by recommending that “married women, supported by a husband, should step aside to allow room for the woman who must support herself and her family.”16 The self-supporting women apparently believed that married women working for “luxuries” were not committed to their jobs. The Royal Commission was unwilling to support the rights of self-supporting women over those of married women, but it suggested that the elimination of gender-based job descriptions and seniority lists would improve the situation at McKinnon Industries.

Ann Fast also told the commission that the UAW showed little interest in women’s problems. Such complaints elicited little sympathy from D. F. Hamilton, secretary-treasurer of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), who presented the next brief to the
Royal Commission. Showing little understanding of the demands of the double day on female heads of family, Hamilton unwittingly confirmed Fast's allegations by suggesting that unions would be more responsive to women's needs if women were “willing to spend their off-hours, as men do, working for the union.”

The entry of growing numbers of married women into paid employment in the years that followed finally led to greater recognition of the right of all women, single or married, to equal opportunities in the work force. More women came to hold executive positions in unions, and unions pushed for equal pay for work of equal value, maternity leave, and access to child care.

**Ideologies Clashing:**

**The 1970 UAW Strike**

The fierce ideological divisions of the Cold War continued to colour the political orientation of organized labour in Niagara well into the 1970s. A 1970 UAW strike is illustrative of this point. UAW Local 199 was, by far, the largest union in Niagara, representing thousands of workers at General Motors (GM, formerly McKinnon Industries) in St. Catharines. In the early 1970s, internal ideological divisions in Local 199 were starker than ever before. Activists were divided into two competing factions: the Unity caucus and the Walter Reuther Administration caucus.¹

The Unity caucus was made up of communists, socialists, and an assortment of anti-capitalist radicals, some of whom took jobs at GM in order to engage in class struggle at the level of the shop floor. Before the 1970 strike, the Unity caucus was a powerful political force in the plant and regularly bested the Walter Reuther Administration caucus in in-plant elections.