Royal Commission. Showing little understanding of the demands of the double day on female heads of family, Hamilton unwittingly confirmed Fasts’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.
The strength of the Unity caucus was not necessarily attributable to the political and ideological orientation of its leadership but rather to its commitment to an adversarial brand of union-management relations that routinely paid dividends for workers. The Walter Reuther Administration caucus, named after fiercely anti-communist UAW President Walter Reuther, was made up of union activists, mostly social democrats, who rejected the radical anti-capitalist ideology promoted by the leadership of the Unity caucus.²

After the sudden death of Walter Reuther in May 1970, his successor, Leonard Woodcock, led UAW members in a historic strike against GM. The autoworkers had not struck GM for over two decades, but resentment between the workers and the company had been simmering beneath the surface for years. Production at GM was stopped on 15 September 1970 when 6,600 UAW Local 199 members in St. Catharines, and 350,000 of their counterparts throughout North America, walked off the job in a legal strike.³

In the United States, the strike, which lasted ten weeks, led to an improved contract that included cost-of-living allowances and a pension plan that gave workers the option of retiring after thirty years of service, regardless of their age. When, south of the border, the UAW strike against GM ended on 20 November, the Canadian section of the UAW refused to settle and continued their strike. Gord Lambert, a fiery communist, leader of the local 199 Unity caucus, and chair of the UAW’s Master Bargaining Committee in Canada, was the driving force behind the decision to prolong the strike in Canada. Canadian autoworkers were seeking, among other things, wage parity with their American counterparts.⁴

To qualify for strike pay, autoworkers were required to picket two hours per week and to attend union education courses that, according to the St. Catharines Standard, ranged from “trade union history to an explanation of the Canada Pension Plan and highway safety.”⁵ Single men received $30 per week strike pay; married men received $35; and married men with children received $40 per week.⁶ (The local media omitted information about strike pay
The extended strike in Canada came to an end on 16 December 1970. Although local autoworkers endorsed the contract by a vote of 5,101 to 377 a few days later as part of a ratification meeting, the settlement failed to win immediate wage parity with American autoworkers and included a cost-of-living concession. The prolonged strike in Canada had a profound impact on internal union politics at Local 199. Most local autoworkers viewed it as a failure. Gord Lambert began to lose support in the plant for the way in which bargaining had been handled at the national level. Lambert was a strong rank-and-file leader who served as plant chairman for eighteen years, vice president of Local 199 for eighteen years, head of the UAW’s Master Level Bargaining Committee for GM in Canada for eighteen years, and later as president of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council for five years. Immediately after the 1970 strike, Lambert’s opponents from the Walter Reuther Administration caucus managed to convince the majority of rank-and-file workers in the plant that Lambert’s ideological brand of militancy was outdated and ineffective. Rumours even circulated suggesting that his drive to prolong the strike in Canada had been influenced by the Communist Party.

Lambert was defeated in his bid to be re-elected to the plant chairman position by John Washuta, who later became president of Local 199 and a St. Catharines city councillor. Washuta was a member of the Walter Reuther Administration caucus which was renamed the Blue Slate caucus after the 1970 strike. The Blue Slate caucus gained control of the Bargaining Committee in the 1971 elections and of the local’s executive in 1972; both had previously been dominated by the more radical Unity slate.

The events of the early 1970s had a paralyzing effect on the Unity caucus. Internal dissent and growing ideological schisms marginalized the left and led to its eventual decline over the course of the next two decades. By the 1990s, the slate system for Local 199 elections had all but disappeared, with candidates preferring to run as independents. Local 199 had been one of the last bastions of left politics within the autoworkers union; it never managed
to recover from the fallout over the 1970 strike. Most Unity caucuses activists eventually drifted to the St. Catharines and District Labour Council, where they proved to be a far more formidable force throughout the 1970s, organizing a local boycott of California grapes to help raise the wages of farm workers, building international solidarity with anti-colonial struggles around the world, aggressively pursuing an anti-racism agenda, and forming a union of the unemployed.12

The ideological shift that took place within Local 199 in the 1970s had been well underway in the rest of the labour movement, as evidenced by organized labour’s postwar effort to rid unions of communist leadership and its growing support for social democracy as the dominant political orientation of the Canadian labour movement. While radical forces within the autoworkers union unquestionably lost control over the ideological direction of Local 199, they continued to play an integral role in building union power on the shop floor, organizing and mobilizing rank-and-file support for political action campaigns and future strike actions.

**Strike Wave: 1972–76**

The right to strike, although controversial, is unquestionably the most powerful form of leverage available to union members given the power imbalance inherent in the employment relationship. As we have seen, work stoppages triggered by strikes are designed to disrupt business production or the provision of services in an effort to exert pressure on an employer to come to an agreement with the union on the terms and conditions of work. Strike action, which in the postwar period became regulated by a strict legal framework, normally takes place in response to a critical impasse in collective bargaining and is best understood as a last, but often