to recover from the fallout over the 1970 strike. Most Unity caucus 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.\textsuperscript{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
necessary, resort when a union and an employer cannot reach a negotiated agreement.

Between 1972 and 1976, a total of 4,751 strikes and lockouts, each involving, on average, eight hundred workers, were launched in Canada.¹ In Niagara, workers at Court Industries Limited, members of Local 268 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), walked picket lines in 1972 along with Local 582 of the International Chemical Workers, who were engaged in a dispute with their employer, Exolon. Labour disputes also took place at Seaway News, Red-D-Mix Concrete, and Kimberly-Clark of Canada over the course of the year. In 1973, UAW Local 199 struck Aimco Industries, and the USWA struck Foster Wheeler.² In the same year, moving picture operators, members of International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), walked picket lines to settle a contract dispute with local theatres, and a Canada-wide railroad strike had a profound impact on St. Catharines. In 1974, workers at GM, Columbus McKinnon Limited, Hayes Dana, Aimco Industries, Kelsey-Hayes, Eaton Yale, W. S. Tyler Company, Foster Wheeler, and several credit unions walked picket lines. The next year, painters and allied workers, postal workers, sheet metal workers, paperworkers, autoworkers, and plumbers were all engaged in labour disputes with a variety of employers across the Niagara Region.³ Strikes continued in the paper industry in 1976 at Abitibi Provincial Paper, Domtar Pulp and Paper, Beaver Wood Fibre, and the Ontario Paper Company. Steelworkers at Ferranti Packard walked picket lines along with members of Local 1263 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) working for the Regional Municipality of Niagara. In short, between 1972 and 1976, thousands of workers across Niagara were involved in prolonged and bitter labour disputes with their employers.

This strike wave in Niagara, and indeed across Canada, had immediately preceded a recession in the early 1970s that saw unemployment increase substantially along with inflation. Workers looked to the collective bargaining process to ensure that they could maintain a decent standard of living amid economic crises,
but their employers were equally determined to make certain their profit margins remained high.

The strike wave also coincided with a shift in the way the state handled labour relations. A key aspect of repressive government policy was back-to-work legislation, an ad hoc law that forces an end to a labour dispute. Back-to-work legislation was used much more frequently by federal and provincial governments during this period. In fact, during the 1970s, federal and provincial governments ended a large number of labour disputes by handing down no less than forty-one back-to-work measures. This compared to thirteen back-to-work measures passed in the 1960s and just three in the 1950s. On 14 October 1975, much to the delight of Canada’s business elite, Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal government announced the introduction of a program of wage-and-price controls in an effort to curb inflation. Prime Minister Trudeau’s Anti-Inflation Program, which suspended free collective bargaining for workers, signaled the introduction of neoliberalism to Canada. A new right-wing, anti-union, political and economic ideology, neoliberalism, strongly promoted in the United States by President Ronald Reagan and in Britain by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, favoured the weakening and gradual elimination of the social safety net, as well as a reorientation of government policy to meet the needs of corporations. Privatization, deregulation, and free trade all represent important policy pillars in the neoliberal playbook.

In many ways, Trudeau embraced neoliberalism through his anti-labour policies such as the “6 and 5” program, so called because it limited wage increases for civil servants to 6 percent in the first year and 5 percent in the second, despite high levels of inflation in the early 1980s. The federal government also temporarily removed the right to strike for public sector workers and passed a number of other pieces of legislation that restricted union rights.

Canada’s provinces took their cue from the federal government and quickly implemented their own coercive policies aimed at organized labour. These actions included the virtual removal of the right to strike in some sectors and continued wage restraint.
Governments of all political stripes used words like “voluntarism” to hide their real agenda of coercion. This shift in government policy also resulted in a fundamental reversal of roles. In the post-war era, the demands of labour unions were appeased in order to maintain capitalism as a viable economic system. The new ideology shifted the focus by forcing unions to take responsibility for maintaining capitalism.⁶

Many workers resisted this economic and political shift by engaging in mass strikes and mobilizations against employers and governments. For example, on 13 May 1974, workers at Abitibi Provincial Paper in Thorold engaged in a controversial wildcat strike that shut down the plant for four days. Six hundred workers walked off the job after four of their co-workers were suspended for refusing to carry out additional duties assigned by management.⁷ The incident involving the workers, who defied back-to-work orders issued by their local executive and their national representative, foreshadowed a year of labour unrest in Ontario’s pulp and paper industry. A month earlier, in April 1974, Canadian pulp and paper workers, with the help of a Thorold-based union representative named Don Holder, broke away from the United Paperworkers International Union to form the Canadian Paperworkers Union (CPU). The fractious birth of the CPU, which came about through a desire for more autonomy, was an exciting development for union activists, but the new union would not have the luxury of celebrating its birth for very long. With virtually no strike funds available to help support its members, owing to an asset dispute with the international union, the CPU would take on the pulp and paper industry in an unprecedented labour struggle that would drag on for nearly eight months.⁸

On 14 October 1976, the first anniversary of the Trudeau government’s announcement that it would implement a program of wage-and-price controls, the Canadian labour movement held a day of protest that drew tens of thousands of workers off the job across the country. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Canada’s largest central labour organization, claimed that more than one
million workers took part in industrial actions, including an estimated 400,000 workers in Ontario. Some Niagara workers traveled to Ottawa to join thousands of other workers demonstrating on Parliament Hill. Others engaged in a series of workplace actions in Niagara.

In an impressive display of union power, autoworkers led the way by shutting down production at GM, Hayes Dana, and a number of other manufacturing plants in the Niagara region. The St. Catharines Standard reported that only 190 of 3,500 day-shift workers at GM bothered to show up for work. Steelworkers managed to disrupt production at Niagara Structural Steel, Lord and Burnham, and Seneca Steel, in Beamsville. Bus drivers, caretakers, and maintenance workers who failed to report to work created disruptions for the four local school boards. The strike wave across Niagara and the rest of Canada was complemented by organizing initiatives and direct actions against rogue employers.

In 1972, in an apparent effort to avoid unionization of its part-time secretarial staff, the Welland County Roman Catholic Separate School Board fired its forty-three part-time secretaries only to rehire them all from a temporary agency. In protest, Niagara area labour councils presented the board with a brief threatening a tax transfer drive. That is, area unions would encourage their members to switch their taxes from the separate school board to the public board. Although the separate school board went ahead with its plan to fire its secretaries, CUPE, the union seeking to represent the workers, brought the case to the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB). The board ruled that, notwithstanding the peculiar outsourcing ploy used by the separate school board, the workers were indeed employees of the board. Part-time secretarial staff became the newest members of CUPE shortly thereafter.

In November 1972, the manager of the Skyway Lumber Company became a target of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council when he refused to allow fifteen workers time off to vote in the federal election on 30 October. One of the workers complained to the area returning officer that he was forced to quit his job in order
to exercise his democratic right to vote. Labour Council President Kenneth Brisbois wrote to the manager of Skyway Lumber on 2 November 1972, stating that the council “has a policy of protecting not only the organized but also the unorganized against arrogant and unscrupulous employers.” He added that “this Council will not tolerate any employer violating [the Elections] Act, or any legislation that is enacted for the benefit of all the people in this country.” Brisbois called on the manager to write a letter of apology and pay each worker for two extra hours or risk legal action. The manager, who had initially complained to the *St. Catharines Standard* that he could not afford to close his business to comply with the law, responded to the Labour Council’s request almost immediately. On 6 November, the manager wrote to the Labour Council and enclosed fifteen letters of apology with a promise to pay each worker for an additional two hours on their next pay cheque.

During this period, the Labour Council also made a habit of helping out non-union hospitality workers involved in individual disputes with their employers. The Labour Council routinely wrote letters of warning to employers who engaged in unfair labour practices and helped workers file Employment Standards appeals. This type of activity cultivated a “fight back” culture within the local labour movement and solidified organized labour’s place as a political force within the community.

**Canadian Pulp and Paper Workers Fight Back**

By the mid-1970s, inflation had been eating away at wage increases in the pulp and paper industry to such a degree that workers had lost roughly $1.75 per hour since 1973. When the workers asked