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
their employers to address the decline in real wages, the giant paper companies refused to budge and, in some instances, hid behind the federal government’s Anti-Inflation Board, arguing that they were prohibited from meeting workers’ demands.2

In Thorold, seven hundred members of CPU Local 290 at Abitibi Provincial Paper legally struck their employer on 17 July 1975. In late August, Abitibi suspended premium payments for striking employees’ life insurance.3 During a campaign stop, Ontario NDP leader Stephen Lewis, flanked by local candidate Mel Swart, addressed the striking workers and accused Abitibi of bargaining in bad faith. Lewis declared that Abitibi “is deliberately and methodically attempting to destroy a new Canadian union and no government worth its salt should permit it.”4

Workers went for six weeks without any strike pay. To make up for the shortage of strike funds, the 55,000 members of the newly minted union voluntarily donated a minimum of one hour’s pay each week to the striking workers in Thorold. The St. Catharines and District Labour Council pledged both moral and financial support. Gord Lambert, the Labour Council’s president, told the media, “If Abitibi thinks they can starve the strikers into submission then they . . . are only indulging in wishful thinking.”5

By mid-September, five thousand CPU members in Ontario were on strike. The dispute that had started in Thorold had spread industry-wide. CPU members at Kimberly-Clark of Canada, Domtar, and Beaver Wood Fibre, all located in Thorold, were walking picket lines along with workers in several northern Ontario communities. Pulp and paperworkers in Québec also hit the picket lines. In all, the labour dispute directly affected two thousand paperworkers in Niagara and indirectly crippled the economy of Thorold, where small businesses were largely dependent on the wages of CPU members.

The Holy Rosary Credit Union extended $500 a month loan credit to striking CPU members, and residents delivered food to the picket line on a daily basis.6 The community’s support for the workers in the labour dispute between the paper mills and the CPU helped deliver a decisive victory to NDP candidate Mel Swart in the
18 September 1975 provincial election. Swart, a vocal supporter of the CPU and a fixture in local politics in Thorold, had run under the CCF-NDP banner in federal and provincial elections on eight separate occasions before finally topping the polls in 1975. His breakthrough represented the NDP’s first electoral victory in Niagara.

At the 1 October 1975 meeting of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council, a representative from CPU Local 290 updated delegates on the labour dispute and thanked UAW Local 199 “for its excellent financial and moral support at the plant gate collections.” More than $5,000 was raised for the paperworkers. As the strike lengthened, Local 199 offered to advertise odd jobs for CPU members in the union newsletter. In December 1975, the Labour Council made a $1,000 contribution to the strikers, and one of its affiliates announced that it would be donating one hundred Christmas turkeys. A second round of plant gate collections followed.

In February 1976, the industry-wide pulp and paper strike finally came to an end when 3,800 members of thirteen CPU locals in Ontario and Québec cast their ballots 83 percent in favour of ending the labour dispute. In the end, the workers won a modest wage increase and an indexing formula to prevent skyrocketing inflation from reducing wages.

Corporate Restructuring and Labour’s Decline

While Niagara’s labour movement was able to demonstrate a degree of social, economic, and political power in the community throughout the 1970s, toward the end of the decade anti-union employers and their allies in government set out to reverse organized labour’s gains in an unprecedented way. A combination of high