In 1984, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) actively began organizing retail service workers at Eaton’s locations across Ontario. The growing service sector, dominated by women and part-time workers, was seen as the labour movement’s greatest organizing challenge in the postwar period, largely because of the high level of turnover and relatively small number of employees working at individual locations. Despite these obstacles, the RWDSU helped workers at six Eaton’s locations, including one store in St. Catharines, to win union certification in the spring of 1984. Workers were generally upset at the working conditions in Eaton’s stores but were particularly motivated by their employers’ unwillingness to provide job security or pensions.

Eaton’s refused to negotiate a master agreement with the union, which would have covered all Eaton’s workers at every unionized outlet, preferring instead to negotiate separate contracts at each unionized store. This decentralized approach favoured the employer because it divided workers by location. However, the union was able to unite the predominantly female workforce around common issues, and union members agreed to a coordinated bargaining strategy that would force Eaton’s to bargain with them as a group. Unionized Eaton’s workers at six locations in Brampton, Toronto, London, and St. Catharines walked off the job on 30 November 1984. The plan was to disrupt normal business operations at the six stores and picket unorganized stores.

At a 4 January 1985 rally outside the Eaton’s store at the Pen Centre in St. Catharines, CLC official Shirley Carr declared, “I hope Fred Eaton choked on his Christmas or New Year’s turkey.” The demonstrators then moved from the picket lines into the mall to take their message directly to shoppers. Labour activists and community groups returned in February 1985 to bolster picket lines.
Picketers from Niagara-area unions demonstrate their displeasure with Eaton’s at the Pen Centre in St. Catharines. Courtesy of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council.
and once again bring their case to consumers. This time, however, Eaton’s was ready with beefed-up security and police. Chanting, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Eaton’s scabs have got to go,” demonstrators made their way past security and through the halls of the Pen Centre.\(^2\) The Niagara Regional Police waited until after the demonstration to charge Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 199 President Gerry Michaud and an RWDSU organizer with trespassing.\(^3\) Despite the militant actions of the labour movement, Eaton’s workers continued to enjoy strong support from the community. Welland-Thorold NDP MPP Mel Swart endorsed the strike, likening the labour dispute to a battle between David and Goliath.\(^4\)

On 12 March 1985, a group of women workers from the St. Catharines Eaton’s store began a protest walk to Toronto, dubbed a “trek for fairness.” Draped in several layers of clothing and fitted with running shoes, Shelley Adams, one of the striking workers, told the St. Catharines Standard, “We’ve been out now for four months. We want a pension and some job security. It’s been a tight battle.”\(^5\) The half-dozen women participating in the trek for fairness arrived in Toronto three days later, where they joined a rally at Queen’s Park calling for the government to pass first contract legislation. Under such law, a neutral third party would be granted the right to impose a first contract when a union and an employer could not reach an agreement. Such legislation is intended to guard newly unionized (and often vulnerable) workers against union-busting. However, the union recognized that it could not rely exclusively on the law to win its struggle against Eaton’s.

On 13 April 1985, Niagara’s four labour councils organized yet another rally in support of striking Eaton’s workers in St. Catharines. The rally, which drew more than three hundred people, boosted morale on the picket line, where workers had been faithfully holding the fort for twenty weeks.\(^6\)

The “Eaton’s Fairness Campaign” became an issue during the 1985 provincial election, and union activists took the opportunity to raise awareness about the strike and its impact on the company’s primarily female, part-time workers. Strikers also took the
opportunity to press politicians on their support for first contract legislation. The RWDSU distributed hundreds of “Boycott Eaton’s” lawn signs and ran radio advertisements encouraging shoppers in Niagara to steer clear of Eaton’s. The Eaton’s strike was about lifting women workers out of the low-wage, casual service and retail sector. Unionization was seen as a way of achieving decent pensions and job security for workers in a traditionally unorganized industry. Although the union succeeded in winning support from the community, Eaton’s relentless and hard-nosed approach to bargaining with its newly unionized employees convinced the union’s leadership to give up the fight.

In May 1985, the labour dispute came abruptly to an end when the president of the international RWDSU signed a contract that was basically the same as the one Eaton’s had offered the union in November 1984. Rather than ask union members to ratify the agreement, the union instead asked its members to vote on whether they wished to return to work. Under Ontario labour law, Eaton’s could decide not to rehire striking workers if their labour dispute exceeded six months. With that deadline fast approaching, workers opted overwhelmingly to return to work in order to save their jobs.

The Eaton’s strike and similar organizing drives in banks were significant because they highlighted the labour movement’s new focus on organizing women workers. That focus was reinforced in 1986, when Shirley Carr, a CUPE activist and Niagara Falls native, succeeded Dennis McDermott as president of the CLC. Carr, who had played a central role in organizing employees of the Regional Municipality of Niagara, was the first woman and the first public sector union member to lead the CLC. Carr served two terms as CLC president before stepping down in 1992.

In 1993, the first contract legislation that Eaton’s workers had been lobbying for finally became law under the Ontario NDP government. But it was quickly rescinded once the Mike Harris Conservatives swept to power in 1995.