Occupation in Thorold

Down the road in Thorold, CEP members working at the Gallaher Thorold Paper Company (formerly Abitibi Provincial Paper) were bracing for a bombshell announcement from the plant ownership. On 25 May 1999, Gallaher Paper declared bankruptcy and shut down operations. Three hundred members of CEP Local 290 would be left jobless, but the workers were not prepared to go down without a fight.

Bankruptcy trustee Ernst and Young and creditor Toronto Dominion Bank became targets of the workers’ anger when Niagara Centre NDP MPP Peter Kormos suggested that the creditor was favouring bids by companies that wanted to liquidate the plant rather than run it. In the early morning of Monday, 18 October, a group of union members occupied the plant. The workers moved quickly to secure the plant by locking all gates and doors with chains. Heavy machinery was strategically placed in front of bay doors, but not before a large supply of coffee, clothing, and communications equipment made its way into the mill. CEP representative Mike Lambert told the media that the workers would stay until “smoke is once again coming from the stacks.”

The workers used masking tape to spell the words “SAVE JOBS” in an office window and hung a large banner from the mill that read, “Toronto Dominion Bank $1.48 billion profit. What About Us?”

The plant occupation became an overnight media sensation, with the workers being featured on the front cover of the Globe and Mail. By shedding light on the impact of the manufacturing crisis on workers’ lives, CEP members inspired labour activists across the country to hold companies accountable to the communities in which they operate. Members of Local 290 addressed town hall meetings and picketed TD Bank locations to gain support and educate the public. They even kept the machinery working, conscious of the fact that if it were left dormant, the new owner would
be required to spend millions of dollars to get it working again. Meanwhile, the community of Thorold rallied to support their neighbours, locked inside the mill, by delivering cooked meals and other essential supplies. In response to the overwhelming support showed by the community, the workers unfurled yet another banner: “Your total support has been a hit. CEP Local 290 will never forget.”

Members of CEP Local 290 occupy the Gallaher Thorold Paper Company in October 1999. Courtesy of Denis Cahill, St. Catharines Standard.

Twenty-six days after the occupation began, the workers emerged from the plant after a purchase agreement was finalized. On 11 November 1999, a letter of intent to buy Gallaher was signed
by The Butler Group, which signalled its intention to restart the mill. By the following spring, the deal had fallen through.

Cec Makowski, an Ontario vice president of CEP, looked back at the occupation and considered its importance for the labour movement. “When all other avenues have been closed there are still opportunities to achieve a successful outcome by taking a different approach, even if it’s illegal. People often say, ‘Hey, that’s illegal.’ I often say, ‘Yeah, it’s illegal. But your forefathers did a lot of illegal things for the labour movement. In fact, unions themselves were illegal at one time.”

On the surface, most of the key labour struggles of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s discussed in this book could be characterized as defeats for the unions and the workers involved. Autoworkers held out for several extra weeks in 1970 and gained very little in return; workers at Eaton’s walked picket lines for over five months without winning any substantial contract gains; a handful of striking journalists opted to leave their jobs rather than live under a new contract; and the occupation of the Gallaher paper mill did not ultimately result in a new buyer. These examples may even provide fodder for those who contend that unions have outlived their usefulness. However, to treat these labour disputes as outright labour defeats would be to ignore the deep impact that these struggles had both inside and outside of the workplace. Fighting back does make a difference. If unions consistently succumbed to the inevitability of the corporate agenda, workers would eventually give in to the lie that they have no control over their working lives or the political and economic imperatives that inform them. The reality is that workers who stand strong and take part in pivotal labour disputes almost always help prevent further attacks on unions in other workplaces. And not fighting back at all could leave workers worse off than they were before. Labour struggles can also have a profound impact on public opinion and, as the Eaton’s strike showed, result in public policy changes. The success of a strike must therefore be measured by what the union gained in the longer term, rather than what it sacrificed in the shorter term.