Labour Builds Brock: Unions and the University

While strikes, lockouts, and picket line confrontations undoubtedly garner the largest labour headlines, the labour movement’s role in giving back to the community, through its commitment to social unionism, represents an underreported, yet equally important, dimension of union activity. The key role played by Niagara’s labour movement in the establishment of Brock University well illustrates this point.

In the early 1960s, community leaders in Niagara floated the idea of building a university that would serve the peninsula. Early on, the committee responsible for raising funds for the project identified organized labour as an important source of support. At the time, there were roughly 40,000 unionized workers in Niagara, earning an average weekly wage of $95. These workers, who belonged to 175 locals of fifty-two national and international unions, were considered essential to a successful fundraising campaign.¹

Workers were understandably attracted by the prospect of job creation, but they were also aware that a local university would make post-secondary education more affordable and keep families closer together, while at the same time opening doors to higher education for more of their children. As a fundraising analysis conducted by Brakeley G. A. and Company pointed out, “Many girls whose families might otherwise be able to educate only their sons will have the opportunity to attend Brock.”² Such an argument was particularly appealing to trade unionists with a traditionally strong sense of social justice.

In a bid to solidify support from organized labour, Lynn Williams, a staff representative for the USWA, was named organized labour’s representative on the Brock University Founders Committee. The committee believed that financial support in the form of
payroll deductions and in-plant solicitations was the best approach to fundraising among union members. It was estimated that, given a participation rate of 30 percent, unionized workers could be counted on to contribute between $400,000 and $700,000 to the project. However, local unions raised expectations on 22 January 1965, when roughly 125 union activists were invited to a dinner hosted by the Founders Committee. The union activists toured the newly opened Glenridge campus before voting unanimously to support the university’s Founding Fund. Local unions agreed to recommend to their respective memberships that each member donate a day’s pay to the project each year for the next five years. Organized labour had set a goal of $1,000,000 for itself, far exceeding earlier estimates.

University official Edward Mitchelson explained labour’s contribution in an article that appeared in the 1968 edition of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council’s Labour Review.

Back in the days when the Niagara Peninsula Joint Committee on Higher Education was the only visible sign of the coming of a university, Labour gave its wholehearted endorsement of the founding of Brock. Since then, Labour support in the development and life of the University has continued undiminished.

During the campaign to raise the Founding Fund for Brock, Lynn Williams gave his utmost in leadership. He was assisted by John Ideson of UAW, St. Catharines; Ron Seebach, Steelworkers, Fort Erie; Wilfred “Hap” Hague, Carpenters, Niagara Falls; Fred Butler, Steelworkers, Port Colborne; Arthur Riseley, Public Employees, St. Catharines; Michael Bosnich, UEW, Welland; Howard M. Ashenden, Atlas Steels, Welland, and other leaders and thousands of workers throughout the Peninsula. The success of the Founding Fund bears witness to the interest and dedication of the community-minded people who built the idea of Brock into the real University.
As Williams later recalled, convincing workers to contribute to the establishment of Brock University was easy. “Why wouldn’t we do it?” he asked. “This would be a great thing to do for the children of working-class families in the Peninsula. It would allow them to stay in Niagara.”

McKinnon workers’ contributions to the Brock University Building Fund. Courtesy of the Brock University Library, Special Collections and Archives.
By 1970, organized labour had surpassed its target, raising $1,410,500 for the university’s Founding Fund. This amount represented 21.7 percent of the total amount raised by the Founders Committee. Workers at McKinnon Industries, members of UAW Local 199, led the way with a donation of $518,000. At the time, this amount represented the largest contribution by workers in any single industry to any university in Canada. In return for its generous support, organized labour was given a voice in how the university would be run, in the form of a seat on the university’s Board of Trustees.

Labour’s seat on the Board of Trustees was originally filled by Lynn Williams, who had himself had the benefit of a university education. After completing undergraduate studies at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Williams went on to pursue graduate studies at the University of Toronto in economics and industrial relations. Before completing his degree, he accepted an assembly line job at the John Inglis plant in Toronto, where he joined Local 2900 of the USWA. Williams went on to work for the CLC and eventually joined the staff of the USWA. It was while he was servicing USWA locals in Niagara in the 1960s that Williams became organized labour’s representative on the Founders Committee of Brock University. During his time on the committee, Williams was instrumental in successfully encouraging workers in the Niagara region to contribute, through payroll deductions, to Brock University’s Founding Fund. As a member of Brock’s first Board of Governors, Williams initiated the Brock Invitational Lectures. He left Niagara in 1973, after being elected district director of the USWA. In 1977, he became international secretary of the union and, in 1984, was elected president of the international union. He was re-elected twice to that position before retiring in 1994. The first Canadian to occupy the USWA’s top spot, Williams was awarded an honorary degree from Brock in 1985.

The final report of the Brock University Founding Fund contained the following passage assessing the contribution of Niagara’s labour movement to the development of the university:
With the endorsement of Trades and Labour Councils, and a majority of the individual union locals throughout the Peninsula, the Founding Fund had the full support of organized labour. Of equal importance was the willingness of management in most major industries to permit not only an on-the-job canvass of employees, but to arrange for payroll deduction of contributions over a five-year period. In almost every instance where management undertook a strong supporting stand, while encouraging the participation of labour in the plant campaign, success was achieved. Exceptions to this rule developed where plants were undergoing labour difficulties and where relations between management and labour were strained. The only areas where Industrial Employees failed to well exceed were ones in which management refused permission for a thorough in-plant canvass and payroll deduction.

The overall quota of $1,000,000 was well over-subscribed, largely as a result of the splendid example set by the employees of McKinnon Industries Ltd., and the general acceptance of labour of the formula of one day’s pay per year for five years as a reasonable gift for each employee.

The Headquarters staff activities of John Ideson, President of the St. Catharines Trades and Labour Council, who served as full-time director of this Division, and the Government and Institutional Employee Division, contributed greatly to the continuing excellent relations with organized labour.9

“Managing is too important to leave to the managers,” said Williams, who firmly believed that workers ought to have a voice with regard to what goes on in their industries and in their workplaces.10 In much the same vein, Williams believed that labour’s participation in the building of Brock University was integral to ensuring that labour would continue to play an important role in the university’s future development. For Williams, education was essential to building a strong labour movement. As he saw it, the university could serve the labour movement by fostering research that would help the local economy to prosper. He also believed that the existence
of Brock University would help to diversify Niagara's economy.11

In a 6 December 1982 lecture at the University of Toronto, Williams elaborated on his vision for the relationship between universities and the labour movement:

My ideas about the relationship between the University and the Labour Movement, both in terms of the extent to which there has or has not been a relationship, and of the extent to which there ought to be one, have always revolved around the idea of access.

My view of the university sees it as a wondrously privileged place, the custodian, if you will, of the sum total of the intellectual and cultural accomplishments of our society. Custodians in the nature of things become more than that title may imply — they aren't simply the keepers — they become as well the principal users and interpreters of that for which it is their privilege to be responsible. . . .

. . . My deepest and longest held conviction, with regard to the relationship between the university and the labour movement, is, therefore, that workers and their organizations ought to have equitable access to the storehouse of knowledge and expertise which the university represents, and that, by and large, they do not. . . .

. . . While some progress has been made in terms of the accessibility of working people’s children to the university, the sad reality seems to me to be that progress in this direction has been declining in recent years. There are, of course, and unfortunately, a multitude of social and cultural factors involved in this circumstance, and dealing with them is a complex and difficult problem. However, the economic factor of cost is clear and self-evident, and the facts are that, on that basis alone, many people, otherwise qualified and interested, are prevented access.

A few years ago it seemed to me that we were moving well in the direction of providing a much greater equality of opportunity in regard to cost at least. That was the principal reason why those of us active in the labour movement in the Niagara Peninsula at the time of the establishment of Brock University at St. Catharines
encouraged significant labour and community support for that institution. Although I have no statistical evidence one way or the other, I do believe it helped provide more access, as presumably did all the regional universities. . . .

. . . These developments, along with more generous funding by government of loans and scholarships, brought great hope. Regrettably, the days of austerity have produced a number of cutbacks in educational assistance, not the least significant of which have been in the area of student assistance and tuition fees, the result of which must inevitably be to push the university into a more elitist, less open, position. . . .

. . . Limited access has been compounded by limited outreach. If the labour movement and working people have been lacking in access to the university, so too has the university community not reached out to involve itself with working people and the labour movement in any manner equivalent to the level of its involvement with and recognition of other institutions and social groupings. . . .

. . . The gap between the university community and the labour movement, has meant that many in the university have little understanding of what the labour movement is really about. Perceptions of the movement are often very unrealistic, from the classical economists and the business schools on the one hand, who frequently view the trade union as an unnatural and improper interference with the market place, to the radical theorists on the other, who often appear to believe that they have a better appreciation of what the trade union movement is and what it should be about than does the movement itself.

A similar set of attitudes and a similar lack of realistic understanding often apply to working people themselves, as well to their unions. Workers, too, often are seen on one extreme as numbers, for the purposes of the economist or the engineer, or at the other extreme, as romanticized figures in the class struggle.

The reality, of course, is that workers are people, real people, with all the same needs, hopes, dreams and problems that everyone else experiences. . . .
There can be no doubt that the arrival of collective bargaining on the campus is a positive development in terms of the university’s awareness of the labour movement, and its long-term relationship with it. Although I recognize that it could not realistically have happened otherwise, I do regret that it is essentially a craft model of collective bargaining which exists on the campus, not an industrial union model.

Jean Gérin-Lajoie, the retired Director of District 5 of our Union which represents our members in Eastern Canada, has recently completed a history of our Union in Quebec. In it he makes the point, which he says emerges clearly from his research, that the industrial union structure, in which all levels of employment are in one organization, requires an examination of the total picture, a concern about the circumstances of all who are involved, in a different way than does the craft approach. His thesis suggests that this is one factor in explaining the traditionally greater concerns of industrial unions, as compared with craft unions, with the broader social and political questions in society. The fact that their bargaining and other union initiatives require them to be concerned with a broad array of problems and issues, not the narrow concerns of one particular group, encourages a more sweeping perspective on other questions as well. A University bargaining group that involved all their employees might be more than a university administration would wish to contemplate, but it surely would require the trade union representatives to develop a knowledgeable understanding of the needs of the total university community.

The view of the university as civilization’s storehouse, which I expressed at the beginning of these few remarks, obviously leads to the question, what should the role of the storehouse be?

As I suggested then, it clearly requires those who must care for its contents, and those who must ensure that it receives the additions which are necessary for its currency, and those who must study and reflect upon their meaning. It does not, however, achieve its full purpose if it does not also serve — clearly it does
this in the training of its students, and as I have indicated, in its outreach to some elements in the community.

One of my purposes this evening is to suggest that it should continue to improve and expand upon its teaching of labour-related matters to its students and upon its outreach to the labour section of the community.

I am also tempted to suggest, in passing, that the need to reach out more effectively to the labour community might well be viewed as part of the need to reach out in new ways to the problems of society in general, as differentiated from those of particular elites. Is the university, as the resource centre of our accumulated scientific and cultural knowledge, really serving us as well as it should with regard to the critical issues of our time — unemployment, and the horrendous condition of the world economy — the quality of life and the future of our planet — the population explosion and world development — war and peace — in the words of a title of a recent lecture by B. F. Skinner — “Why are we not acting to save the world?” 12

In 1989, partly in recognition of organized labour’s role in building the university, Brock launched the Centre for Labour Studies. Labour education at the post-secondary level had a long tradition in the region, with Niagara College creating the first labour studies program in Canada in 1969.13 Writing in the St. Catharines and District Labour Council’s Labour Review, Esther Reiter, a professor of sociology at Brock, provided an intellectual justification for union education at the university level:

As the universities increasingly seek support from the business community in what is called a “partnership,” students too often come to view the interests and needs of the business community as one and the same as their own.

There is another side to the story that needs to be told — from the point of view of working people and what their needs and interests are. For example, we have been hearing a great deal about
the debt crisis lately, and how we all have to tighten our belts in the new budget. But what does it really mean? Should the burden of our debt be on the shoulders of working people who now face longer waits and lower benefits if they become unemployed? Who benefits when moneys for social welfare programs such as day-care are curtailed?

Trade unionists understand why labour education is so important, and the union movement has been quite effective in educating its members. But an understanding and respect for the struggles of working people is something all can benefit from. University students need to learn about what unions are, what they do, and the rights that trade unions have won for working people. What women can look forward to when they go out into the work world, how the workplace is being restructured — these are some of the issues that need to be critically explored by all students.

Brock University was founded with your help and support. Over 100 union locals in the Niagara region contributed generously to help us get started back in the 1960’s. We hope this Labour Studies program will be but one of many bridges between Brock and the Niagara labour community.

Despite organized labour’s key role in building Brock University, however, unionization of the university’s own workforce came slowly. Maintenance and janitorial staff worked under union contracts early on, but it would be decades before a majority of the university’s workforce was unionized.

In 1996, Brock University faculty voted 64 percent in favour of union certification, and the university’s professional librarians voted 75 percent in favour of unionization. Brock’s faculty and professional librarians chose to unionize for a number of reasons. The June 1995 election of Mike Harris’s Conservative government in Ontario filled university workers with a sense of insecurity, given the government’s aggressive cost-cutting agenda, and unionization was seen as a way of protecting job security. In addition, the university administration had made a series of arbitrary policy decisions in the areas of
workload and discipline, prompting university professors to seek formal legal recognition in the form of a union. A faculty association had existed for years, but unionization granted it additional legal powers. As association President Dawn Good explained at the time, winning certification would ensure that faculty members could protect their gains and be “equal partners” in education.15

In 1998, part-time instructors, teaching assistants, lab demonstrators, and marker-graders followed the lead of faculty members and voted in favour of union representation. These university workers, who were among the lowest paid in Canada, opted to join CUPE. The university’s administrative staff, after failed attempts at unionization in 1998 and 2000, finally won union certification in 2002. This group of university workers opted to join the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) and, in the process, helped the union break into new territory.

Heidi Klose, an administrative assistant in the Department of History at Brock University, recounted her experience with unionization:

There have been a number of attempts to organize staff at Brock University over many years. My involvement began in 1998 when I led a drive with another union. The reason I took part in this endeavour was because the teaching assistants were in the planning stages of their organizing attempt. I was convinced, because our TAs had the lowest wages in the province, that their campaign would be successful and so it was. Brock faculty, who for many years were members of a faculty association, had one year earlier seen the wisdom of forming an actual union. Trades people, cleaners and food employees, even the parking-lot attendants had their own union. This meant that the support staff here at Brock would be the only employee group without any representation. Not only did we not have the protection of a union, but we also had no voice in issues that were most important to us. We would, as always, get the scraps, so to speak, of what was left over in the budget after the administration had negotiated with all the unions.
During the 1998 union drive, our organizing committee consisted of eight people who worked very hard. Evidence that we had a lot of support was in the number of cards that were signed and we had a large verbal commitment as well. In the end, however, we felt that this was not enough for a strong majority vote. There was another drive with the same union two years later; one in which I was not involved. During this campaign the organizing committee felt that the support needed from the union was not there. The campaign fizzled out and many union supporters, as well as the organizing committees for these two campaigns, became disillusioned.

We were not even thinking of another drive when a colleague of mine, Virginia Wagg, and I were informed by another colleague that someone from OSSTF was interested in organizing Brock staff members. We had never even considered contacting this union because we thought that they represented only high school teachers. Shirley Dufour, organizer for OSSTF, met with two of my colleagues and asked if others would be interested in attending an information meeting. Shirley had anticipated five or six people but when word got out, about 20 enthusiastic people showed up. Shirley spoke about OSSTF and how professional they were and we were hooked. A vote was taken and the decision was unanimous that we would begin a drive right then and there.

There really was no formal organizing committee per se, but everyone who had attended the meeting did their part in getting others to sign cards or encourage people to come to one of three information sessions.

Lo and behold in a very short time we had enough cards signed. That was the difference with the other drives; they always took so long and just petered out. We made an application to the Labour Board and were granted a vote. Just getting to this stage was a huge success, but things would get even better. Virginia volunteered to be our scrutineer. I was both amazed and proud that she had the courage to put her name forward and then sit in the polling station for an entire day knowing that someone from Human Resources would be there as well. With great anticipation, Shirley, Virginia
and I, along with others from Human Resources, watched after
the poll closed to see the ballots being counted. And sure enough
we had won with a great majority. I wasn’t surprised because I
knew how strong the union support was within our group. I know
that with a bit of patience and a lot of hard work, we can improve
our working conditions at Brock. We are the first university staff
members to be organized by OSSTF and so it will be both a chal-
lenge and a tremendous opportunity. We have great expectations.16

In 2009, CUPE organized English as a Second Language coordin-
ators at Brock and went on to win substantial improvements in
terms of job security for these workers. As of May 2011, the over-
whelming majority of workers at Brock University — including
professors, librarians, teaching assistants, cafeteria workers, admin-
istrative assistants, and maintenance, custodial, and clerical work-
ers — belong to labour unions. Indeed, there are five separate union
locals on campus, representing roughly two thousand workers. The
high level of union density at Brock University, which reflects the
high levels of unionization in the public post-secondary sector as
a whole, stands in stark contrast to the steep decline in unioniza-
tion that unions in Niagara, and across Canada, have witnessed in
the private sector, particularly in manufacturing.

Living in a Dying Town:
Deindustrialization in Welland

On 2 September 2008, company executives from farm equipment
manufacturer John Deere called a mandatory meeting for all of
the Welland Works employees at the company’s Dain City plant in
Welland. CAW union local president Tom Napper described what
happened next: