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 challenge and a tremendous opportunity. We have great expectations.16

In 2009, CUPE organized English as a Second Language coordinators at Brock and went on to win substantial improvements in terms of job security for these workers. As of May 2011, the overwhelming majority of workers at Brock University — including professors, librarians, teaching assistants, cafeteria workers, administrative assistants, and maintenance, custodial, and clerical workers — 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 unionization 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:
There were 800 people standing in one of the warehouse-type things with speakers set up, and they brought in the manager and they brought in one of the big guys from the States, and they proceeded to let our manager make the announcement that we are here today to announce the closure of John Deere Welland Works, and that was how they opened and closed . . . it was short and sweet. I would have to say that’s probably one of the worst predicaments I’ve witnessed, to look across the room at people that I’ve worked with for 30 years and plus, and their chins actually hit the pavement. As a matter of fact, most people just turned and said, “What . . . what . . . what did he say? I couldn’t have heard that right.”

They were astonished because actually the mood in the plant . . . they thought that they were going to be there for an announcement to maybe add another product . . . because they had been so busy, they were just working seven days a week, they were behind schedule, everything was good.¹

Since the late 1980s, the Niagara region, following the national trend, has experienced steep declines in the rate of private sector unionization. Nowhere has that trend been more apparent than in the industrial, blue-collar city of Welland. For the past several decades, Welland has seen its base of heavily unionized industry steadily eroded through a combination of irresponsible management, unfriendly government policy, and a reckless free market. Between 1991 and 2001, the city lost roughly six thousand manufacturing jobs (both union and non-union) through plant closures and corporate downsizing.²

Despite the fact that the industrial sector in Welland had been suffering for several decades, having never really recovered from the deindustrialization precipitated by the introduction of free trade in the late 1980s, the announced closure of the John Deere plant in many ways defied logic. After all, the company was profitable, the product was in demand, and the workforce was both reliable and efficient. Over the years, when the company and the union
entered into contract talks, management would frequently raise the spectre of plant closure in an effort to gain the upper hand in collective bargaining. But the union was certainly not prepared for an actual plant closure. Indeed, the announcement caught workers completely off guard.

For its part, the company told the local media that “the decision is not a reflection of the work or productivity of our employees.” Instead, John Deere blamed the high exchange rate and soaring energy costs. The bottom line, however, was that the company was motivated by greed. It knew it could make more money by closing its profitable Welland plant and opening a new plant in Mexico operated by workers who would earn a fraction of what the company’s Canadian workers were making. The announced closure of the John Deere plant in Welland sent shock waves through the community and generated national headlines as a stark example of the crisis in deindustrialization facing Canadian workers and their communities.

Because John Deere workers earned and spent millions of dollars a year, from which local small businesses benefitted, the negative economic impact of the job loss was felt throughout the community and inevitably caused more business closures and layoffs in Welland. On top of growing unemployment, social service organizations noted increased demand at local foodbanks, while local charitable organizations struggled to reach fundraising goals owing to the shrinking amounts of disposable income available to the jobless and to workers who feared joblessness just around the corner. The wider community also suffered as a result of a severely eroded tax base. The taxes John Deere employees paid on the money they earned was used to fund community infrastructure and social programs, and both suffered as a result of the plant closure. In short, when John Deere workers lost their jobs, the entire community lost out. In 2009, the CLC published a “communities in crisis” report, which featured Welland as a case study. In it, Rosina Bisci, a local elementary school teacher interviewed as part of the study, observed that “empty plants, just like
monuments to another era, are now just sad reminders of what’s happening.”

In the wake of the company’s devastating decision to close the Welland plant, a sardonic twist on the company’s well-known slogan, “Nothing runs (away) like a Deere,” became a popular turn of phrase among locals. Tapping into the sense of anger, fear, and frustration in the community, Mark Lammert, a Niagara College student filmmaker, decided to chronicle the fallout from the plant closure in Dear John, a documentary that also served as a school project. Lammert interviewed John Deere workers about the impact of the plant closure on their lives, their families, and their sense of self. Lammert had not set out to take sides when he began production, but the company’s decision to avoid his phone calls and ignore his emails prompted him to travel to John Deere’s corporate headquarters in Moline, Illinois, in search of answers. After the company refused to meet with him in Moline, Lammert, armed with an oversized community greeting card signed by hundreds of concerned residents, held a press conference to talk about what he had learned during his trek to Illinois. Needless to say, he was unimpressed with the actions of John Deere. “I don’t think it looks good on their part. I didn’t want to look biased or slanted, but it’s kind of hard to not make them look like this big bad corporation when they won’t even sit down with me,” he told the media. Dear John was screened at the Canadian Labour International Film Festival in 2009 and won a number of prizes at film festivals across the country in 2010.

CAW chief economist Jim Stanford was featured in the documentary and explained the impact of deindustrialization as follows:

The loss of manufacturing jobs is more than just the individuals who have lost their jobs. Obviously, it’s a tragedy for them and their families to have their livelihoods disappear, but it’s also a tragedy for our communities. Manufacturing is the most important part of Ontario’s economic base. Those are the industries where we produce things that people elsewhere in the world want to buy.
And then, on top of that base, the other jobs in our community depend on the base being there. Things like dry cleaners, or restaurants, or coffee shops — private services. Even public services, like schools and hospitals, depend on us having a strong manufacturing foundation. Otherwise there is nobody there to pay the taxes that support those other jobs. So, for every job that is lost in manufacturing, there are three or four or five jobs elsewhere in the economy that also disappear. That is why our entire community is at stake here.¹⁰

The announcement of the John Deere plant closure, having gained national prominence, became a central local issue in the 2008 federal election campaign. CAW National President Buzz Hargrove blamed the plant closure on the federal government led by Conservative Stephen Harper. “This government’s utter insensitivity to the plight of working Canadians is shameful and must come to an end. . . . In my 16 years as president of the union, I have never seen such governmental indifference,” he told the media.¹¹ Industry officials like Jay Myers, president of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, also pointed the finger at Ottawa. Myers told the media that “to some extent, the government is looking at the economy through rose-coloured glasses. . . . If we don’t do more to save manufacturing, we’ll have lost a lot of high-paying jobs and value-added industrial companies.”¹²

Prime Minister Harper visited Welland during the campaign, but his decision to stay silent on the plant closure, in favour of a policy announcement concerning the regulation of flavoured cigarettes, left a bitter taste in the mouths of many city residents, especially the workers facing job loss at John Deere.¹³ The policy announcement made the prime minister appear to be out of touch with the most pressing issues facing the community and, in part, helped deliver the riding to the NDP for the first time in history.
During the campaign, NDP candidate Malcolm Allen, a CAW member and deputy mayor of Pelham, lambasted successive Liberal and Conservative governments for providing companies like John Deere with huge corporate tax cuts without any guarantees of job security for workers. Allen and NDP leader Jack Layton held a press conference outside the plant during the campaign to highlight the plight of the workers and criticize the federal government’s failure to take action to combat deindustrialization. Allen and Layton blamed the plant closure on continental free trade and the federal government’s lack of an industrial policy. Their message resonated. On election day, Allen narrowly defeated his Conservative rival by roughly three hundred votes and also bested longtime Liberal MP John Maloney, whose party had campaigned hard against free trade while in opposition but had embraced the policy once the Liberals formed the government in 1993.
“We just let industries walk in and walk out with no regard for what it means for communities, for workers and ultimately for the Canadian economy in general,” said the newly minted Welland MP after his election. “That’s a travesty and that needs to stop,” he told the local media. During his first week in Ottawa, Allen raised the issue of the plant closure in the House of Commons. He is quoted in the 24 November 2008 edition of *Hansard*:

John Deere had been in the city of Welland for close to 100 years. By its own admission it was highly profitable and highly efficient, with a great workforce. It said in a statement it issued last year that it had a commitment to Welland, yet within nine months it made another announcement to the effect that it was closing the door without any discussions with anyone. It did not even say thank you very much for the tax cuts before moving on.

I talked to a young couple. The husband worked at John Deere. They were in their late twenties or early thirties, not much older than my own children. They told me they had thought they had finally found a secure job in [the Niagara region], because John Deere was the shining star of the region. When all the other manufacturers were losing jobs, this one was actually hiring. What I saw on their faces was desperation. They were asking me, “What will we do? Where do we go next? What will become of us, our friends and our families when we have to leave?”

It is absolutely heart-wrenching to see a young family in that situation, wanting to stay in their community and to be close to their family. They want to raise their children so that the grandparents will have the opportunity to see those grandchildren. They are looking to us in this House to find ways for them to stay in their community by creating jobs for them and not letting them disappear, and not letting the John Deeres take the corporate tax cuts the Conservatives are giving them and head south to Mexico.

There is a broad consensus that the manufacturing jobs lost in Welland are unlikely to ever come back. While some of the city’s
leaders have proposed alternative plans for local economic development, the case of Welland demonstrates all too well the problem of allowing a community to become hostage to a callous and indifferent free market system that allows companies to treat workers and their communities as expendable vessels in the unapologetic pursuit of profit.

“Kicking Ass for the Working Class”: Hotel Workers in Niagara

Although Niagara Falls has always been a popular tourist destination, the city’s local economy relied primarily on manufacturing from the early 1900s well into the post-war period. While the Welland Canal facilitated industrial expansion in St. Catharines, Welland, Thorold, and Port Colborne, it was the advent of cheap hydroelectric power that spurred the development of industry in Niagara Falls, with industrial unions following shortly thereafter.

When the Niagara Falls and District Labour Council was founded in 1956, it comprised eighteen affiliated union locals representing approximately three thousand members. At its peak in the mid-1970s, the Labour Council represented roughly ten thousand members through twenty-nine affiliated unions — the largest being CUPE Local 1000, which represented five hundred workers at Ontario Hydro. The Labour Council played a key advocacy role for unemployed workers and injured workers, had representatives on a variety of city committees, and worked closely with community groups like the United Way in order to improve the lives of working people. It provided financial assistance to various charities and presented briefs to City Council on matters of both local and national importance. Its most impressive achievement was