From St. Catharines, the caravan made its way to Virgil and on to Niagara-on-the-Lake, where migrant workers passed out peaches to bemused tourists in the Old Town. The workers also distributed brochures to passers-by explaining the purpose of their caravan and reminded restaurant patrons in the quaint dining establishments along Queen Street to thank a migrant worker for their meals. All along, the workers waved placards reading, “Justice, Respect, and Dignity” and “We Demand Better Medical Care.” They also encouraged the public to think about the part played by towns in the Niagara region in the Underground Railroad and to ask themselves, “Do these towns still symbolize freedom and hope or do they now evoke oppression and exploitation?” Caravan organizer Chris Ramsaroop explained to local media that workers were taking a “tremendous risk” by joining the caravan because it would make them vulnerable to possible retribution by their employers and perhaps even to deportation. Nonetheless, the migrant workers clearly saw participation in the Labour Day weekend caravan as a risk worth taking in pursuit of justice, dignity, and respect in both their workplaces and their host communities.

Organized Labour and the New Democratic Party in Niagara

On 1 June 1960, the St. Catharines and District Labour Council adopted a resolution endorsing the CLC’s drive to create a new political party in Canada that would represent working-class interests first and foremost. The Labour Council was an enthusiastic supporter of the New Party. Only one delegate to the council voted against the resolution — Gerry Haugerud, of Local 268 of the IAM, who told delegates, “My local doesn’t feel it should tell its members
how to vote."¹ Labour Council president John Ideson scoffed at this suggestion, arguing instead that “organized labor is losing more members through unemployment, automation, plant shutdowns and senseless government policies than it will ever lose through taking political action.”²

The council made a contribution to the New Party Founding Fund and worked energetically to build NDP riding associations after the party’s founding convention in 1961. Although the labour-NDP alliance did not produce immediate results for workers in Niagara, the overlap between union leadership and NDP leadership was strong.

On 18 September 1975, Mel Swart made history by becoming the first NDP candidate from Niagara to win election to the Ontario legislature. As the new MPP for the Welland riding, Swart championed the cause of organized labour at Queen’s Park. Swart inherited his democratic socialist values from his father, an organizer for the CCF during the Great Depression. Raised a Methodist, Swart believed in the social gospel and dedicated his life to ensuring that wealth was distributed more equitably.³ His first successful bid for election took place in 1948 when he won a spot on Thorold Township Council. Swart served for eighteen years on council — the last eleven of those years as reeve. He later moved into regional politics and was elected as Thorold’s representative to the Niagara Regional Council. While serving on Thorold Township Council, Swart ran for the CCF in a 1950 by-election, and then again in 1953, 1957, and 1958, finishing third in each contest. After the CCF became the NDP, Swart once again ran for the party in the 1962 federal election. He lost, at which point he switched to provincial politics. He finished second to the Conservative incumbent in both the 1967 and 1971 elections before finally winning the Welland riding in the 1975 provincial election. Swart went on to win re-election easily in 1977, 1981, 1985, and 1987. Aside from his political career, Swart was an active member of his church, served on the Brock University Founders Committee, and volunteered for countless community groups.⁴ His multiple defeats before his historic election victory have long
served as a reminder to Niagara New Democrats that election wins do not come easily but that the right combination of hard work, perseverance, and determination will eventually pay off. Higher levels of union density and a particular mix of supportive ethnic groups in the Welland riding also helped to boost NDP fortunes there relative to surrounding Niagara ridings, making it the most fertile terrain for left-wing politics in the region.

Niagara-area labour council presidents present Mel Swart with an award for his contribution to the local labour movement. Courtesy of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council.

Swart’s election, combined with an economic and political shift to the right over the course of the late 1970s, marked the end of any significant communist influence on the local labour movement and its politics. This was confirmed in 1980, when a slate of social democrats led by Len Harrison of UAW Local 199 took over the St. Catharines and District Labour Council, thus solidifying the labour-NDP alliance. Throughout the early 1980s, the labour-NDP partnership was stronger than ever at both the national and local levels. CAW Local 199 president and St. Catharines and District Labour Council vice president Garry Michaud ran for the party in the 1984 federal election and placed second in the St. Catharines riding, capturing roughly 30 percent of the popular vote. The NDP also placed second in the Niagara Falls riding. The party had momentum in Niagara.
After his retirement in 1988, Swart, the lone NDP representative in Niagara, passed the torch to Peter Kormos, a criminal defence lawyer and Welland city councillor, who overcame a smear campaign to win a by-election in the riding of Welland-Thorold in 1988. Two years later, Kormos was joined by four more NDP MPPs from Niagara as part of Ontario’s first NDP government. Kormos was easily re-elected in September 1990, winning more than 60 percent of the popular vote. He served as minister of Consumer and Commercial Relations and minister of Financial Institutions, until Bob Rae removed him from cabinet for his reputation as a maverick and his refusal to compromise on the party’s campaign commitment to implement a system of public automobile insurance.

Christel Haeck, elected in the riding of St. Catharines-Brock, was a librarian, a local CUPE president, and a member of the executive of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council. She served as the parliamentary assistant to the minister of Colleges and Universities. Margaret Harrington, elected in the riding of Niagara Falls, was a member of Niagara Falls City Council, a local high school teacher, and a committed feminist. She served as parliamentary assistant to the minister of Housing and later as deputy speaker. Shirley Coppen, elected in the riding of Niagara South, was a registered nursing assistant and president of the Welland and District Labour Council. Coppen served as chief government whip, minister without portfolio, and later as minister of Labour in the provincial cabinet. Ron Hansen, elected in the riding of Lincoln, was a maintenance engineer at GM who sat on the government back benches. The fact that there were three successful female candidates from Niagara demonstrated how far women had come in the political realm since winning the franchise in 1918.

The recession of the early 1990s was, for Ontario, the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Niagara’s manufacturing base was hit particularly hard owing to high interest rates, a strong Canadian dollar, and the impact of the Canada-US free trade agreement. At the ballot box, the Ontario NDP benefitted from the economic insecurity that workers and their families
were experiencing. Voters moved to the NDP in droves, in hopes that the party would not fight the recession on the backs of the working class. However, once elected to office, Bob Rae’s NDP government found it difficult to manage its long-standing relationship with organized labour, particularly in the face of a severe economic recession.7

The Ontario NDP’s record in office has been the subject of much debate. A deep recession, hostility on the part of the media, a suspicious senior civil service, and political inexperience have all been blamed for the party’s poor performance as a government.8 One thing is clear, however: Bob Rae’s government forever changed the relationship between organized labour and the NDP.

The former Liberal government of David Peterson left the newly elected Rae government with a hefty budget deficit, and Ontario’s looming recession would only make the province’s financial situation worse.9 Fighting Ontario’s devastating recession was rapidly driving up the province’s debt. In response, the Rae government introduced an austerity program known as the Social Contract, which reopened collective agreements in the public sector and rolled back the wages of public sector union members by means of mandatory unpaid days off, known as “Rae Days.” The government argued that its plan to reduce its wage bill by $2 billion through the Social Contract would allow it to preserve jobs while also controlling the deficit. However, union leaders argued that the Social Contract was an attack on basic trade union freedoms.10

In early June 1993, roughly one hundred CUPE members picketed the office of St. Catharines-Brock NDP MPP Christel Haeck. Touting the government’s line, Haeck called the Social Contract “ground-breaking legislation in how to restructure government and the employee-employer relationship.”11 But her former union colleagues did not share her view. Brian McCormick, president of the Niagara District CUPE Council, lamented, “I worked to help elect a government that would be an ear for us. This is very disheartening.”12 Others were less reserved. “I’m ashamed of my party, the New Democratic Party,” proclaimed CUPE Ontario President Sid
Haeck shook off the criticism. “I understand the rhetoric and concern of unions,” she said. “I’d be doing the same thing. But to avoid significant job losses, they have to get a settlement.”

The Social Contract had a profoundly negative impact on the Rae government’s relationship with organized labour and precipitated an exodus of rank-and-file union members from the party. The Social Contract also pitted unions who were loyal to the NDP against unions who were directly affected by the government’s austerity program. The disunity of the labour movement during this period made it extremely difficult for unions to tackle important political issues in a concerted and effective manner.

At the local level, Haeck’s unwavering support for the Social Contract drove a wedge between the NDP and the St. Catharines and District Labour Council. Haeck appeared before her former colleagues at the Labour Council to explain the government’s position, but she did not find many sympathetic delegates. After a fractious debate, the Labour Council decided not to endorse Haeck’s re-election bid. Niagara South MPP Shirley Coppen was similarly rebuffed by her former union allies at election time.

On 14 June 1993, St. Catharines native Karen Haslam, NDP MPP for the riding of Perth and minister without portfolio in the Rae government, resigned from the cabinet over her opposition to the Social Contract. She later joined Welland-Thorold NDP MPP Peter Kormos and one other NDP caucus member in voting against the legislation at Queen’s Park. Kormos explained his opposition to the Social Contract in an article for the 1993 St. Catharines and District Labour Council Labour Review, which featured a cover with the acronym “NDP” going up in flames.

In little more than 90 days after the proposition of a social contract was presented to the N.D.P. Caucus at Queen’s Landing in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Bill 48 became law. Only three members of the N.D.P. Caucus voted “no.” I was proud to be among the three.

As a longtime New Democrat, I am far from proud of this government’s record with working people. Bill 48, Bob Rae’s “Social
Contract,” is but the culmination of a series of significant reversals of longtime N.D.P. policies. I believe firmly that to call it a “betrayal” is mild. I believe strongly in the rights of workers to collectively bargain and to do so freely without fear that there will be interference with the negotiated results. Social contract legislation will directly attack free collective bargaining and turn contracts into meaningless pieces of paper. Who would have thought that it would be an N.D.P. government that would legislatively nullify collective bargaining agreements?

Some M.P.P.s voted for Bill 48 believing it was the right thing to do and an adequate response (for reasons beyond me) to the fiscal and economic crises. There were far more people in the government caucus who had great reservations about Bill 48 and noted its many flaws. Those from trade union backgrounds found it repugnant. Sadly, they voted for the Social Contract legislation. They’ll have to answer to the people of Ontario.

I believed in September 1990 that this new government would do great things in the province of Ontario. It could show Ontario and the rest of Canada that government could be different. This has not been the case. I understand the right of the Premier as leader of the party to try to take the party in new directions. At the same time, as a member of the party I have a right to resist that direction if I feel it is wrong. Too many people worked too hard to see the C.C.F. [and] then the N.D.P., as a voice for working women and men, flourish for one person to destroy it. The growing cynicism about governments has only been heightened by the passage of Bill 48. It is but the culmination of a series of betrayals of longtime N.D.P. policy. First, the abandonment of public auto insurance and the abandonment of justice for innocent accident victims, then the complete reversal on a common pause day for retail workers and for communities and now an out-and-out attack on free collective bargaining.

I encourage working people to fight back, to let this government know that an economic war measures act is not the answer to our province’s economic difficulties. Let the government know that all of us expect far more from our politicians and our political
leaders. Years of Tory ideology, cutbacks and slashes in Ottawa was bad enough. We don’t need it coming from Queen’s Park.17

The 1993 federal election, which took place a few months after passage of the Social Contract Act, saw the defeat of every single federal NDP MP in Ontario. In Niagara, NDP candidates won, on average, an embarrassing 5 percent of the popular vote. On 22 November 1993, the OFL passed a resolution condemning those NDP MPPs who had voted for the Social Contract Act.18 Among the delegates supporting the resolution was Ontario NDP president Julie Davis. “It’s sad we’ve come to this,” she lamented.19 Without the support of the labour movement, the NDP’s future seemed uncertain at best. In June 1995, most NDP candidates across Ontario suffered devastating defeats in the provincial election. In Niagara, Peter Kormos managed to hold on to his Welland-Thorold seat, largely because of his personal popularity and principled opposition to some of his own government’s policies. In St. Catharines, St. Catharines-Brock, Niagara Falls, Lincoln, and Niagara South, NDP candidates suffered from a lack of volunteers and union resources, and all finished a distant third. The Mike Harris Conservatives swept into power with an explicitly pro-corporate and anti-union agenda, leaving many union activists wondering whether abandoning the NDP had only made a bad situation worse.

However, the silver lining for activists in the labour movement was that the weakening of the labour-NDP partnership led to unprecedented grassroots coalition building and a rejuvenation of extra-parliamentary politics. After its election, the Harris government wasted no time pursuing an aggressive anti-union agenda, as evidenced by the repeal of the NDP government’s anti-scab law and reforms to the province’s Labour Relations Act that made it more difficult to certify unions.20 In response, organized labour and its community allies, temporarily disillusioned with party politics, sought to build union power by taking to the streets and exercising their democratic right to protest. The city-by-city demonstrations during the Harris government’s first term were known as the “Days
of Action,” and the tagline for the St. Catharines event in May 1998 read, “Niagara Fights Back.” In a flyer advertising the demonstration, event organizers wrote, “Our Premier has said ‘he doesn’t do protests.’ He implies that there is another way to talk to this government. Those of us who have tried know better. Consultations held after announcements, ‘town hall’ meetings by invitation only, refusal after refusal of government members to meet with citizen groups — these actions are not democracy as we know it. When democracy is threatened, responsible citizens must protest.”

St. Catharines and District Labour Council president Ed Gould and Linda Rogers, a leader of the Niagara-based Golden Horseshoe Social Action Committee (GHsAC), acted as co-chairs for the event. After the defeat of the NDP government, many disillusioned left-wing activists in Niagara channelled their energy into groups like GHsAC, which formed a bridge between organized labour and social activists working in the peace movement, the environmental movement, and anti-poverty coalitions. In the days leading up to the St. Catharines march, the organizers commemorated workers who had died on the job as part of the annual Day of Mourning on 28 April. Community Awareness forums were held to discuss the impact of government cuts to social services, the arts, health care, and education, and a “tent city” and “jobs cemetery” were erected to shed light on the growing plight of the homeless and unemployed.

On 1 May 1998, thousands of demonstrators from across Ontario gathered in the large parking lot below St. Paul Street in downtown St. Catharines and then marched throughout downtown streets, chanting, waving flags, and carrying placards denouncing the Harris government. The demonstrators eventually made their way to Montebello Park, in the heart of the city’s downtown core, for a boisterous rally. The Days of Action protests were significant in that they represented a shift in the way labour engaged in politics. Since the 1960s, the labour movement’s political focus had been very much influenced by the political priorities of the NDP. However, the breakdown in party-union relations in the 1990s opened up a new world of possibilities for organized labour.
Courtesy of the St. Catharines Museum (St. Catharines Standard Collection).
Despite the promise of independent political action in partnership with groups like GHSAC, most unions simply did not have the capacity to develop a culture of political action outside the scope of electoral politics. By the time the 1999 Ontario election rolled around, most union leaders were solidly behind the NDP once again and encouraged their members to forgive and forget. Some unions, however, opted not to return to the NDP fold.24

In August 2006, CAW convention delegates voted to sever all ties to the NDP after their president, Buzz Hargrove, was kicked out of the party for promoting a strategic voting scheme in the 2006 federal election that called on voters in some ridings to cast ballots for Liberal candidates in an effort to prevent a Conservative victory.25 Adopting strategic voting was not new: several unions (including teachers, nurses, and building and construction trades) had adopted the same tactic in the 1999 Ontario election, in what proved to be an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the Mike Harris Conservatives from winning re-election. Hargrove’s very public show of support for Prime Minister Paul Martin in 2006 was, however, the last straw for many New Democrats.

Hargrove’s support for Martin did not sit well with local autoworkers in St. Catharines either. In fact, CAW Local 199 was one of the few autoworker locals that remained affiliated to the NDP despite the decision of the CAW convention. Local 199’s loyalty to the NDP was, in part, explained by the personal political allegiances of the local union leadership, most of whom were committed NDP supporters.26 Indeed, the local’s president, Wayne Gates, had run as an NDP candidate in the Niagara Falls riding in the 2004 and 2006 federal elections, and the local’s secretary-treasurer, Malcolm Allen, won a seat for the NDP in the Welland riding in the 2008 federal election. Allen was re-elected in 2011 as part of the NDP’s electoral breakthrough, which saw the party form the official opposition in Ottawa for the first time in history.

Despite recent electoral successes, the politics of organized labour is certainly at a crossroads. While the labour-NDP relationship has yielded both benefits and occasional frustrations for
workers in Niagara, history has demonstrated that, in the long run, unions need to take responsibility for their own futures by building the capacity of union members to defend their interests and promote their particular vision for society, independent of employers or politicians.