Conclusion

Union stories of solidarity and struggle in Niagara stand as an example for many other places in Canada. The growth and development of labour unions as a political and economic force, in Niagara and elsewhere in the country, have delivered benefits to the working class that otherwise would have been unrealizable. In the workplace, unions have managed to win wage increases, basic employment standards, occupational health and safety laws, and better working conditions.

Beyond the workplace, by actively promoting human rights, affordable housing, and universal public health care, organized labour has been at the forefront of the larger struggle for social justice and economic equality. Thanks in part to the participation of women and immigrants in unions, the labour movement in Niagara has grown more responsive to the needs and interests of a wider cross-section of working people. Since World War II, here and elsewhere, unions have played a key role in making racial discrimination unlawful. In increasing numbers, women now serve on union and labour council executives, and not merely as recording secretaries.

At the same time, new market realities in the Niagara region, as elsewhere in Canada, present serious challenges to the labour movement. As we have seen, massive plant closures, the increasing replacement of steady, well-paying, unionized blue-collar jobs with ill-paid, part-time, non-unionized casual and contractual work, primarily in the service sector, have led to a decline in the size and strength of private sector unions. In Niagara’s agricultural industry, the replacement of immigrant workers with migrant workers from the Caribbean and Latin America, under a program that prevents them from settling in Canada, presents additional challenges to the labour movement. In these circumstances, labour unions are among the few remaining defences against the pressures of neoliberal globalization, which consistently favours corporate power
and profit and environmental expediency over the health and well-being of workers and their families.

That said, there is nothing inevitable about the resurgence of working-class power. History has demonstrated that political and economic elites will never voluntarily acquiesce to union demands for dignity, respect, and fairness in the workplace. Only through confrontation and struggle have workers witnessed political, economic, and social transformations that ultimately benefitted working-class people and their communities. Niagara’s labour movement can rightly take pride in its long history of building union power, celebrate decades of united effort in the interest of working people, and draw inspiration from its past struggles and successes. But it must also prepare for the many challenges and transformations that lie ahead.