A few weeks after arriving in Montreal, I got a job in a ladies’ hat factory. Several months earlier the United Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers’ Union (AFL-TLC) had succeeded in organizing workers in the millinery industry and establishing collective bargaining. I joined the union and soon became interested and increasingly involved in its activities; in due course becoming a union officer.

The historical background of the United Hatters is typical of unions in the needle trades. A majority of the workers were women, most of whom worked in small factories. Others performed “piece work” in their homes, which were known as “bedroom shops.” These women were completely at the mercy of their employers, who arbitrarily decided the rates for each piece of work. In some cases there were more “hands” working in bedroom shops than in the factory.

Efforts to organize unions had met with determined and often brutal resistance by the employers. There were immediate dismissals and the blacklisting of so-called troublemakers, making it impossible for them to get a job anywhere in the industry. When unions did succeed in organizing the workers, the employer most frequently refused to meet with union representatives to negotiate a collective agreement. When the workers went on strike and set up picket lines, the police protected strike-breakers and frequently dispersed the pickets, beating some and arresting others. Employers who were unable to get sufficient police protection hired their own “goon squads.” The courts showed little sympathy to strikers and frequently granted injunctions against picketing. Fines imposed on the Hatters’ Union at times threatened its very existence.

The history of the United Hatters, like that of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and other needle trades organizations, is filled with sad chapters in the development of today’s industrial relations system.

The first recorded efforts at organizing the hat and cap industry in Montreal date back to 1923. At that time the union assigned J.B. Salsberg to undertake an organizing campaign. He was a young, energetic, and competent organizer, but, for a number of reasons, his efforts were unsuccessful. Later, other attempts were made. At one point a rather militant strike took place, but again management resistance and the lack of union spirit which prevailed in the Province of Quebec at the time, prevented the union from becoming established.

In late 1933 there was another attempt, this time headed by Louis Fine of Toronto, who was later to become one of the country’s foremost mediators. Fine’s suave manner, his quiet but very logical and pragmatic approach, impressed the leading employers. They took the position, however, that they would be willing to sign a collective agreement only if certain conditions were met: first, that workers demonstrate that they really desired a union; and second, that should an agreement result in changes and improved working conditions, such improvements would
apply to the industry as a whole, thus avoiding any employer being placed at a
disadvantage.

Fine accepted the logic of this argument and with others, notably his deputy,
Maurice Silcoff, initiated an energetic campaign in which most of the factories in
Montreal were organized. When negotiations were concluded the conditions in the
agreement became applicable throughout the industry, under the terms of the
Quebec Labour Agreements Extension Act. One of the provisions in the agreement
was the establishment of a joint committee, consisting of an equal number of union
and management representatives, to assure that all factories covered by the agree­
ment lived up to the conditions specified.

After several months working as a docker, I was elected a shop steward for the
union, an honour and trust which I gladly accepted. The duties included looking
after the grievances of the workers, which were many. These were discussed with
the employer, and if I could not get a satisfactory settlement I would call on Maurice
Silcoff, who had become manager of the union. He usually lost little time in getting
to the plant, and if he was not personally available he would assign his assistant,
Paul Fournier.

I took greater and greater interest in union affairs, attending meetings and often
taking part in discussions. I had a feeling, however, that something was missing,
and that the union should undertake some cultural and educational activities. After
discussing this with some of my colleagues, and receiving assurance of their
support, I told Silcoff I would like to appear before the Executive Board of the
union to make this suggestion. I was invited to a meeting where I outlined my ideas,
and said that, while I had no blueprint, I would be glad to prepare a proposal if the
Board approved. I was asked to wait outside while the members discussed the idea.
Eventually, I was told that, while the Board appreciated my interest and initiative,
the union, being in a formative stage, was preoccupied with a variety of industrial
problems and the launching of such a programme was considered premature. I was
disappointed, but bore no malice and carried on as a shop steward.

Sometime later, as I became better known, I was asked whether I would be
interested in running for the office of recording secretary. I said I would be happy
to, but only if there were no other candidates. I did not want to become involved
in any kind of competition. When the election of officers came around mine was
the only name put forward for the position, and so I became the recording secretary.
I felt I had attained a leadership position of some importance.

The office required me to attend not only the Executive Board meetings, but
also meetings of various committees, and to prepare minutes of the discussions. I
carried my papers in a briefcase which I took to work each morning — a badge of
office. My colleagues often looked at me, no doubt wondering about the new
posture I had developed.

In due course, I again raised the matter of educational and cultural programmes
at an Executive Board meeting, and this time I had no difficulty in getting
acceptance. The matter was left entirely in my hands. The programme I initiated
was a simple one. It consisted first of short seminars to be held twice a month,
between 5:30 and 7:00 o'clock in the evening. Secondly, the formation of a choral
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group. Third, the publication of a monthly mimeographed bulletin, of which I became writer, editor, and printer. The choral group was placed in the hands of one of the members with a musical background.

I assumed responsibility for organizing the seminars; but the first effort was almost disastrous. We invited Alex Edmunson, a well-known literary figure in Montreal and later a professor at Carleton University, Ottawa, to conduct a session on public speaking at the union headquarters. Notice of the seminar, with an invitation to all interested to attend, was published in our bulletin. On the appointed night Edmunson appeared. We chatted for a time and then, to my horror, I realized that not a single person had appeared. At first I thought they might come late, but they did not.

In the union hall was a room where members gathered after work to play cards, almost a ritual in any needle trades union headquarters. I went to Maurice Silcoff and told him what had happened. I asked him to go to the card room with me to urge some of the card players to come to our seminar. They thought the exercise was rather amusing, but they agreed to help out and soon the chairs were filled.

Edmunson delivered a short talk and then invited someone to come to the front to demonstrate how they spoke publicly. No one volunteered. He finally convinced one member of the audience to come forward. He seemed a bit frightened and said he had nothing to talk about. Edmunson suggested he tell a joke. Oh, he had many jokes, this chap said, but this was hardly the time or place for the kind of jokes he told. Edmunson told him to go ahead anyway, and he did. From that moment it was not difficult to get someone to come forward with jokes or stories. The atmosphere was exciting and the language so phosphorous that it would have embarrassed a group of sailors. Edmunson took it all in his stride and seemed to enjoy it. In a very serious and constructive fashion he evaluated the manner in which the stories were told.

That was our first experience in recruiting students. We changed our methods by involving shop stewards and were fairly successful in getting larger numbers of workers to attend. The programme continued for a long time.

Though I was only 20, the duties of recording secretary included representing the local on various bodies, such as the Montreal Trades and Labour Council and the Quebec Federation of Labour. I recall that late in 1940, Tom Moore, the president of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, came to Montreal to address a meeting of the Labour Council. He was known to be a fluent and eloquent speaker; but shortly after he began his address his speech became progressively slower. His words began to slur and run together. Those in the audience, wondering what was happening, began talking to each other. Moore, with one hand holding the table beside which he stood, tried to carry on; but he could not be heard above the hum of the audience. Eventually, he was gently led off the platform and then rushed to the hospital. He never recovered from the attack and died some months later.

In 1939 I was, for the first time, a delegate to the convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, which was held in London, Ontario. I was then 24 and still impressionable, idealistic, and rather naive about the stresses and strains that
 existed within the labour movement. Many of the matters that came before the
convention were strange and confusing to me, and soon forgotten.

But there was one issue which was discussed with a great deal of emotion, and
sometimes anger, which I have never forgotten, not to this day. A serious split had
occurred in the labour movement in the United States, where unions affiliated to
the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were in conflict with
the American Federation of Labour (AFL). The older AFL considered these CIO
unions, which were mainly organized on an industrial rather than a craft basis, to
be dual unions, in competition with the longer-established unions belonging to the AFL.

The president of the AFL and the presidents of a number of international unions
wanted these competing organizations expelled from the TLC. They had issued an
ultimatum that, unless the TLC took such action, the per-capita payments which
were made to the Canadian body would be cut off. The TLC was dependent on this
revenue, and the leadership capitulated, recommending to the convention that
seven industrial unions be expelled.

Carl Berg of the Hod Carriers’ International Union was the chairman of the
Resolutions Committee and it was his duty to place the recommendation before the
convention. He was a bulky man, and sitting motionless and stiffly behind the long
platform table he gave the appearance of a bust placed on the table. His deep voice,
with a slight Swedish accent, came through the loudspeakers in slowly measured
words that sounded like a sledge hammer pounding at the very heart and limbs of
the labour movement. Several times he paused as his emotions built up. He was
visibly moved by the disagreeable task, and when he finished reading the resolution
and moved concurrence, he left the platform and broke down and cried.

I was bewildered and confused. I did not really understand the meaning of dual
unions or the relevance of “in opposition to the AFL.” Expelling workers and their
unions from the national labour movement for such incomprehensible reasons was
contrary to what I so passionately believed. I have always regarded the unity and
solidarity of the labour movement with reverence, and indeed as being the corner-
stone of its strength. I could not understand or support a proposal to divide the
labour movement. I wanted to speak out and enquire why we were being asked to
expel workers from our ranks. Why were we being asked, in a few minutes, to
destroy that which labour men and women had struggled to build for more than
100 years? Such were my innermost feelings, but I sat in silence. It would be many
years before that breach was healed.

The same year the world became engulfed in a unprecedented war. Adolf Hitler
and his Nazis, in the leprosy of their minds, unleashed violence and horror that
knew no bounds. This brought a quick recovery from the Great Depression of the
earlier 1930s. New industries mushroomed and old industries expanded, all geared
to the war effort that taxed them to their very limits. With thousands of young men
in the armed forces there was a serious shortage of labour. More and more women
entered the work force in roles previously regarded as men’s work, thus “Rosie the
Riveter” was born.

When the war ended, the spectacular advances in technology and science,
developed during the conflict, were applied to peacetime production, transforming
the very nature of industrial life. There were new concepts and methods of production, and new words, "cybernetics" and "automation," creating fear and anxiety for working people. Others argued that the scientific and technological developments represented "progress," and that in the long run all would benefit.

Trade-union development was equally dramatic. Labour laws were liberalized and the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively received legal recognition. These rights became more secure and legislation was influenced when the International Labour Organization adopted its Convention 87 on "Freedom of Association and the Right to Organize," and then, in 1949, Convention 98 on "Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining."

Improved labour legislation, coupled with a buoyant economy and the emergence of the CIO organizing mass production industries, made it possible for the labour movement in Canada to increase its membership from about 250,000 in 1939 to over 1,000,000 in 1955.

The Province of Quebec had changed from an agricultural to an industrial society. The influx of people from rural areas to Montreal and other industrial centres, and the employment of thousands of workers in new war industries, had brought about greater interest and often militant demands by workers for union representation. In part to meet this demand, the Montreal Trades and Labour Council, in 1942, established a Metal Trades Council as an umbrella organization made up of representatives of various metal trades unions. The purpose was to organize workers in war production plants and channel them into the various unions that had jurisdiction in such industries. Robert Haddow, an international representative of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), was chairman of the Council and the driving force in the organizing campaign.

Soon after its establishment the Council sent an appeal to all unions in the province for financial or other assistance. The Hatters' Union offered my services for one month, with payment of my salary, which was about $120. Haddow provided me with a list of Defence Industries Limited (DIL) munitions plants in the province and told me to begin organizing them. It was a new experience, but one I approached with confidence. The DIL plant at Verdun was producing a variety of cartridges and had more than 3,000 employees. Because of the many skilled and semi-skilled machinists and trained inspectors employed there, it was generally accepted in the labour movement that Verdun was clearly in the jurisdiction of the Machinists. Haddow asked me to start there.

It was in May 1942 that I prepared a leaflet and handed it out at the plant gate. Announcing the start of the campaign, it listed the benefits of union organization and outlined the union's objectives once it became the bargaining agent. Finally, it invited the Verdun workers to join the union by signing an application card and paying an initiation fee of one dollar.

While I was handing out the leaflets, I managed to speak to some of the workers. Any who showed a particular interest were invited to meet me at the lunch break or after working hours. I realized that alone it would be very difficult for me to get a majority to join what we named the Provisional Union Organizing Committee. They were given application cards and receipt books and asked to sign up as many
members as they could in their respective departments. In the first week, 16 of these
volunteers signed up over 400; it was a good beginning.

Going to the plant every day I soon found that the best time to talk with the
people was during the lunch break. In the morning they were rushing into the plant,
and in the evening they were anxious to get home. From discussions with members
of the committee I learned quite a lot about working conditions in the plant. I asked
what specific conditions needed improvement and what the union should try to
obtain once we started bargaining. Their recommendations varied widely from
higher wages to sanitary conditions.

The second circular was more specific about the union’s programme, and it also
announced that I would be seeking an appointment with the plant manager to
introduce him to our union and its activities. This announcement was well received:
it sort of legitimized our union.

In mid-June I arranged to meet the plant manager, H.B. Hanna. When I arrived
at the plant I was admitted by a security guard, then escorted by another guard to
the manager’s office. As we walked through the plant I waved to some of the
workers I knew and spoke briefly to others. Later, I learned the visit had reverberated
through the plant.

At the time of our meeting, federal legislation making collective bargaining
mandatory under certain conditions had just been enacted. Nevertheless, I was
curious about the company’s reaction to our campaign. I told Hanna of the union’s
efforts to organize employees in war production factories and expressed the hope
that the DIL management would not discourage workers from joining the union. I
explained that the IAM had already granted a charter to the Verdun DIL local.

Hanna said it was company policy neither to discourage nor to encourage their
employees to join or not to join a union. The company would respect the wishes of
the majority of its employees. He added as a personal note that if there was to be
a union in the plant, he hoped a substantial majority would become members so
there would be no friction. I told him his hopes were more than likely to be realized.
Finally, he drew my attention to the difficulties in getting substantial wage increases
because of the provisions of the wartime wage and price control legislation. In a
friendly, and somewhat fatherly, fashion he tried to caution me against making too
many promises and commitments to workers. Our discussion ended on a surpris­ingly friendly note.

In the fourth week of the campaign I issued another circular with a brief account
of the meeting with Hanna, and announcing that we would shortly apply to the
Department of Labour for certification as bargaining agent. The circular was
effective in encouraging others to sign up.

As my one-month assignment with the Metals Trades Council was about to end
I was, with sadness, getting ready to return to my job in the hat factory. Then
Haddow told me my assignment could be extended for another month, or even two,
if I was interested.

In addition to trying to develop the union at Verdun, we planned to begin
organizing the DIL plant at Valleyfield, about 40 miles south of Montreal, where
there were some 3,000 employees. I went to Valleyfield several times and spoke to
workers at the plant gate, managing to interest a few of them. However, we decided that, until our union was certified at Verdun, and a collective agreement negotiated, our organizing efforts at Valleyfield would be low-keyed.

On 11 August 1942, the certification vote was held at Verdun with the balloting under the supervision of the federal Department of Labour. The question on the ballot was: "Are you in favour of the company negotiating an agreement with the Metal Trades Council as the sole bargaining agent for DIL Verdun employees?" There were 3,230 workers who voted "Yes" and 320 who voted "No." Naturally, we were delighted and thrilled by the result of this historic vote and the overwhelming majority who had supported us.

Because the Verdun local was chartered by the International Association of Machinists, and more particularly because I had no previous collective bargaining experience, and certainly not on such a scale, Haddow and another IAM organizer, Adrien Villeneuve, joined the negotiating committee and myself and were the principal spokesmen for the union.

In the course of the negotiations, I was often lost in the maze of unfamiliar craft and contract terminology. Most of the time I just listened and I was very impressed with the give-and-take, the proposals and counter-proposals, and the compromises that were made. While it was confusing, I realized how little I knew and how much I had to learn about this strange and complicated business called collective bargaining.

The negotiations were unusually brief, and after only three formal sessions, the agreement in principle was initiated. On Sunday, 23 August, a mass meeting was held in the plant canteen to ratify the draft agreement. A number of recommendations were made and several subsequent sessions with the company were necessary before the contract was worked out in a manner satisfactory to both parties. Finally, on 3 September, the contract was formally signed. It was a great day for me, and I felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment. It was with a new feeling of purpose and confidence that I set out on my new assignment, the organization of the DIL workers at Valleyfield.

There, I rented a room in a store across the street from the plant to use as the union office. As before, I set up a Provisional Campaign Committee, composed of some of the workers I had got to know. They were equipped with application cards and receipt books and asked to recruit members. We distributed a circular announcing the successful completion of negotiations at Verdun and listing gains the union had made. The Valleyfield workers were urged to follow that example by signing up with the union.

The circular created a good deal of excitement and the response to our appeal was far beyond our expectations. The day after the circular appeared we received about 200 signed application cards. As the momentum of the campaign increased, the membership grew rapidly. Some days workers stood in long lines outside the union office, waiting their turn to sign up and pay the one-dollar initiation fee. I had not seen such enthusiastic support for a union before, nor have I since.

It seemed as if the whole town knew about the union. Initially, I was a stranger in Valleyfield, but, as in all small communities, strangers quickly become known
and identified. Wherever I went there was support and encouragement from the people. When the time came to pay the rent for our union office the elderly store owner, speaking somewhat awkwardly, but with sincere humility, said there was no charge for the first month, that was his contribution to the union. Such was the spirit of the people of Valleyfield in fall 1942.

About a month after our campaign began, a majority of the workers had joined our union and we were in a position to apply for certification. We established a formal structure by electing officers and committees. However, on the matter of obtaining a union charter we ran into difficulties.

I had assumed that the IAM would charter the local, as it had at Verdun, but this was not the case. I was told that, because of the nature of the production at Valleyfield, it was not within the Machinists' jurisdiction.

I was advised to apply to the Trades and Labour Congress at Ottawa for what was known as a “federal charter.” The situation was that when a group of workers wanted to join a union, but none of the unions affiliated to the TLC claimed jurisdiction of such an operation, then the TLC could issue its own charter and the local would be identified as a “federal union” of the TLC.

Needless to say, all this was very confusing to me. I had never heard of federal unions, none existed in Quebec. Nevertheless, I arranged an appointment with then acting president of the Congress, Percy Bengough, to make application for such a charter. I little knew what that meeting would lead to.