

# CONFRONTATION, STRUGGLE AND TRANSFORMATION: ORGANIZED LABOUR IN THE ST. CATHARINES AREA



ABOUT THE PIONEERS OF  
*Our Retirees*

Carmela Patrias and Larry Savage



# Confrontation, Struggle and Transformation



# **Confrontation, Struggle and Transformation: Organized Labour in the St. Catharines Area**

**Carmela Patrias and Larry Savage**

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To

St. Catharines & District Labour Council on its 50th Anniversary





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On May 29, 1957, unionized workers from St. Catharines, Thorold, Merriton, Port Dalhousie, Grimsby and the surrounding areas agreed to form the St. Catharines & District Labour Council. This event, commemorated by this volume, occurred without much fanfare, probably because the workers were building on a long tradition of labour organization and community activism dating back to the mid-19th century. Rather than being inspired by some grand ideology, the Council's goals were moderate, practical and attainable, very much in keeping with the traditions of the mainstream labour movement in Canada. It sought to advance the economic and social welfare of workers; organize the unorganized and extend the benefits of mutual assistance and collective bargaining to all workers without regard to race, creed, colour or national origin; encourage the sale and use of union-made goods and union services; promote the labour press and other means of furthering worker education; give workers a voice in politics; and protect the democratic character of the labour movement.

Workers from St. Catharines and the surrounding area had attempted to improve their lot by organizing beyond the boundaries of individual crafts and communities long before 1957. But such efforts generally lasted for a few years at most. Not until Canadian workers successfully fought for legal guarantees of collective bargaining rights in the 1940s could such broad labour organizations become firmly established. The longevity and accomplishments of the Labour Council are especially impressive in light of the vagaries of the area's economy and the intense opposition to unions from local employers, frequently backed by various levels of government.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge, for the sake of both historical accuracy and planning for the future, that over its long history the local labour movement, like the national one, did not serve the interests of all working people equally well. As the following pages will show, unions did not always concern themselves with the interests of ethnic, racialized and religious minorities, and even less with those of women workers, and part-time and seasonal workers. The mention of sex as prohibited grounds for discrimination was noticeably absent from the District Council's by laws as late as the 1970s. In this respect, the attitudes of organized workers reflected the dominant views of race and gender in Canadian

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society. In the decades following the Second World War, however, the labour movement in the St. Catharines area assumed an important role in the struggle to extend equal rights to racialized and religious minorities.

### **Canallers Fight for Work and Fair Wages**

THE RIGHT TO WORK and fair wages has been workers' goal since the earliest development of commercial capitalism in Niagara. Large numbers of wage workers first came to this area during the construction of the Welland Canal starting in 1827. A few of these workers were skilled, such as the stonemasons who built dams and masonry locks, but the majority were unskilled labourers. Their work was both physically demanding and dangerous. Much of it was still done by hand with the aid of such traditional tools as picks, shovels, axes, and wheelbarrows and animals for hauling. Accidents, especially those resulting from the use of explosives, could lead to injuries and even death. Canallers worked 14 to 16 hours a day, six days a week, in extreme heat in the summer and cold in the winter. But the work was not steady. If bad weather prevented them from working, they were not paid at all. The amount of work available shrank during the winter months, and the resulting surplus of workers allowed contractors to force down wages. Some contractors paid their workers not in cash but in vouchers, redeemable only in overpriced provisions from stores run by the contractors themselves. Having underestimated the cost of building their section of the canal during the course of intense bidding with competitors, some contractors ran out of money and fled without paying the workers at all. But even those canallers who were able to work fairly regularly lived near subsistence, most often in shacks along the waterway. When this phase of building ended, many of them migrated to other public building projects in search of work.

By the time work on the second canal began in 1842, the cutting back of canal construction in the northeastern United States created a huge surplus of canallers in North America. A great many of them came to Niagara in search of work. Their numbers were increased by new immigrants, primarily from Ireland. Consequently, thousands of these workers found no work. They were so destitute that they could not leave Niagara to search for work elsewhere. Thus, in the absence of a public relief system in Upper Canada, they turned to begging and, in desperation, even stealing from more established area residents. Soon the area's permanent residents began to suffer from what we would describe today as compassion fatigue. Although locals understood that the labourers' extreme poverty motivated their begging and petty theft, they increasingly viewed them with suspicion.

Common labourers were vulnerable to such exploitation because, lacking specialized skills, they were easy to replace. Sometimes the labourers reacted to the shortage of work by fighting for scarce jobs among themselves. Sometimes, however, they united to demand work and fair wages. In the summer of 1842, for example, they withheld their labour, demanding work for all. They put up posters along

## LABORERS WANTED ON THE *Welland Canal.*



As the Company are determined to finish this Canal the present season, good encouragement will be given to all classes of Laborers: \$12 per month will be paid to common shovellers, with a privilege which will render it not difficult to obtain \$16. Good, active, smart men, as teamsters and men to hold the plough, can have from \$15 to \$16, with a chance of earning and receiving more; smart, active men, who are capable of keeping the time and overseeing 25 men, can have \$20 per month, with a chance of extending their wages to \$25. Any person that will bring on to the work two good yokes of oxen and a good stout cart, shall receive \$22 per month, and himself and team found; and can have employ until the Deep Cut is completed. Any person employing and bringing on fifteen good shovellers, shall be entitled to the wages of an overseer, and hold that station, and may draw for his men the wages above stipulated; or seven cents per yard for shovelling to carts or wagons, (after the earth is ploughed up,) and his own pay as an overseer. All those wishing employment in any of the above situations, will find it their interest to apply immediately.

All persons employed on this work may be assured, that good Rules and Regulations will be adopted: and, although the country is generally healthy, still sickness is more or less prevalent in all places: Therefore, the Subscriber will erect a suitable House for the accommodation of the sick, where all necessary Medical aid will be administered to the labourers, gratis, together with all other attention that the nature of the case may require. All classes of MECHANICS will do well to visit the WELLAND CANAL, and judge for themselves of the encouragement offered.

Application may be made to the Subscriber, who has contracted to finish the Deep Cut, and is concerned in building all the Locks, and who will generally be found at the Deep Cut.

N. B. Cash will be paid for 100 yokes of good, young, working Oxen, and for all kinds of Grain.

**OLIVER PHELPS.**

Contraville, May 28, 1827.

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P. S. It is desirable that several convenient BOARDING HOUSES should be opened in the vicinity of the cut. \$1.50 per week will be paid for good common board and lodging, during the progress of the work.

"Labourers wanted on the Welland Canal,"

*Farmers' Journal and Welland Canal Intelligencer, 1827.*

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the canal reading, "Death and vengeance to any who should dare to work until employment was given to the whole." To reinforce such threats, bands of workers patrolled the canal and drove off anyone who tried to work. Several thousand labourers took their complaints to nearby St. Catharines, parading in the streets bearing a red flag and a sign demanding "Bread or Work." In this instance, the superintendent of the Welland Canal responded by providing additional work through expanding construction. A year later, in July 1843, canal workers again went on strike demanding — and winning — higher wages. But such successes could not last given the fluctuations of canal work. By November of that year, wages were rolled back, and competition for scarce jobs led to such violent fights among canallers from different parts of Ireland that the militia was called in. The *St. Catharines Journal* described the belligerents as "strange" and "mad factions ... thirsting like savages for each other's blood." Canallers, threatening to attack passengers on boats passing through the canal, also interfered with navigation. The government of the United Province of Canada and the Board that oversaw canal construction perceived the canallers' actions as such a serious threat to the local economy that they joined forces with the contractors to suppress labour protest. They compiled blacklists to prevent the hiring of labour activists. The government passed legislation forbidding canallers to carry arms, and the Board hired mounted police to keep labourers in line. Thus, during the early stages of capitalist development, although unskilled workers occasionally joined together along class lines, their collective strength was insufficient to counter that of the employers backed by the state, and they were not able to secure significant changes in their condition.

### **The Early Labour Movement**

IN THE SECOND HALF of the nineteenth century, St. Catharines became a hub of manufacturing. Water power, increased settlement, rich agricultural surroundings, closeness to American markets, and the construction of railway lines all contributed to the area's economic development. Following Confederation, when the government of John A. Macdonald imposed tariffs on American-made goods in order to protect the development of Canadian manufacturing from competition, branches of American plants were also established in the area. Canneries, flour mills, breweries and tanneries processed the district's agricultural products. Farm implements factories, foundries, machine shops, and basket makers provided local farmers with tools and containers. Sawmills and paper mills relied on wood transported to the area by rail and water. Textile and rubber factories, carriage and bicycle makers, shipbuilders, and cigar makers constituted other early manufacturing establishments in the St. Catharines area.

In contrast to the unskilled, itinerant canal workers of earlier decades, skilled male workers such as cigar makers, coopers, machinists, iron moulders, printers and shoemakers enjoyed a fair degree of control over their working lives. By the

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Construction on Welland Canal, 1870s. Special Collections, St. Catharines Public Library.

1870s skilled workers had established branches of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, and the International Typographical Union in St. Catharines, and the town was also the Canadian headquarters of the union of shoe factory workers, the Knights of St. Crispin. Their skill and organization allowed such workers to exercise some control over their hours of work, the scale of their wages, and the number of apprentices taken on in their trades. The case of St. Catharines cigar makers illustrates the benefits of unionization. In the 1880s, when non-unionized workers toiled as long as 14 hours a day, cigar makers in St. Catharines worked an eight-hour day. While some unorganized workers were still paid irregularly and in vouchers, these cigar makers received wages in cash every week. Perhaps nothing illustrates the power of organized cigar makers better than their ability to prevent the local sale of cigars made cheaply by girls and boys in London and Montreal. Despite their cost, only union-made cigars could be had in the city. Since cigar manufacturers often started out as journeymen cigar makers, and cigar factories were still rather small, relations between employers and workers in this industry appeared to be cordial. In 1887, a St. Catharines cigar manufacturer pronounced union men more reliable, sober and industrious than their non-unionized counterparts.

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Even during the period of early industrialization, however, there were limits to the harmony between workers and employers. When St. Catharines employers, facing greater competition in an increasingly integrated market, attempted to lower the costs of production by lowering wages or breaking down the process of production, the threat of a strike was frequently enough to persuade them to change their minds. But skilled workers did not hesitate to lay down their tools in conflicts with employers who refused to budge. Some employers responded by bringing workers from Toronto's immigration sheds to replace militant workers, or by threatening to do so.

Unskilled workers in textile, garment and canning factories, and in the wood and iron industry, whose ranks included many women and children, enjoyed none of the advantages of skilled, unionized workers like the St. Catharines cigar makers. Their wages were low, their working hours long, and their working conditions at times appalling. Canneries in Grimsby employed children as young as eight years of age. Because 15 and 16-year-old boys whose income was needed by their families were forced to operate machines in the wood and iron industry with inadequate training, they suffered frequent injuries, sometimes losing fingers and even hands. To make ends meet, women and girls in the garment industry often had to take work home and sew late into the night.

Adult women's wages were so low partly because their work was seen as unskilled. Unlike tradesmen's skills, acquired through years of apprenticeship, women's work in the clothing and food processing industries, and as domestics, waitresses and chamber maids in Niagara homes and hotels, supposedly required no training. Such work was seen as a mere extension of work they performed in the home. Whatever skills such work required, such as attentiveness to detail or nimble fingers, were believed to come naturally to women. Both employers and male workers, moreover, considered women secondary wage earners. Working men aspired to earn enough so that their wives and children would not have to go out to work. They wanted to protect women and children from the harsh working conditions in factories. Indeed, the ideal of working-class masculinity rested on the notion that the male head would act as provider and protector of his family. However, male workers also wanted to ensure that employers could not use women and children as low-wage competitors for "men's jobs." Whatever the goals of male workers, their ideal of a family wage reinforced women's dependence on men financially. Employers could justify paying women low wages on the grounds that they were merely supplementing the income of their family's principal, male breadwinner. Not surprisingly, most working-class women, once they married, withdrew from paid employment. Performing unpaid work at home made more practical sense than staying in poorly paid jobs. By careful shopping, keeping a garden and sometimes domestic animals, and preserving foods, they could stretch the wages their husbands and children earned. Some of these women also sewed garments, made boxes, kept boarders or took in laundry to add to their family income.



With the arrival of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor in Niagara in the 1880s, unskilled workers, including women, could join the labour movement. Some of the Knights' assemblies (similar to union locals) were still made up of workers belonging to a single craft; some brought together skilled and unskilled workers in a given industry; and some, the so-called "mixed" assemblies, were comprised of different types of workers. In principle, the Order was open to all workers regardless of skill, gender or race. In practice its policies toward women and racialized minorities were contradictory. The Knights were genuinely committed to improving the lot of women workers, arguing that women deserved the same pay as men. The organization also supported equal political rights for women, roughly three decades before Canadian women actually obtained the vote. At the same time, however, male Knights also saw themselves as the protectors of the "weaker" female sex and continued to believe that women's proper place was in the home. As for racialized groups, although we have no evidence of African Canadians belonging to assemblies in the St. Catharines area, we know that a number of assemblies in Toronto had Black members. Yet in both Canada and the United States, the Knights were also not immune to a wider racism, calling for the exclusion of people of Asian origin from North America.

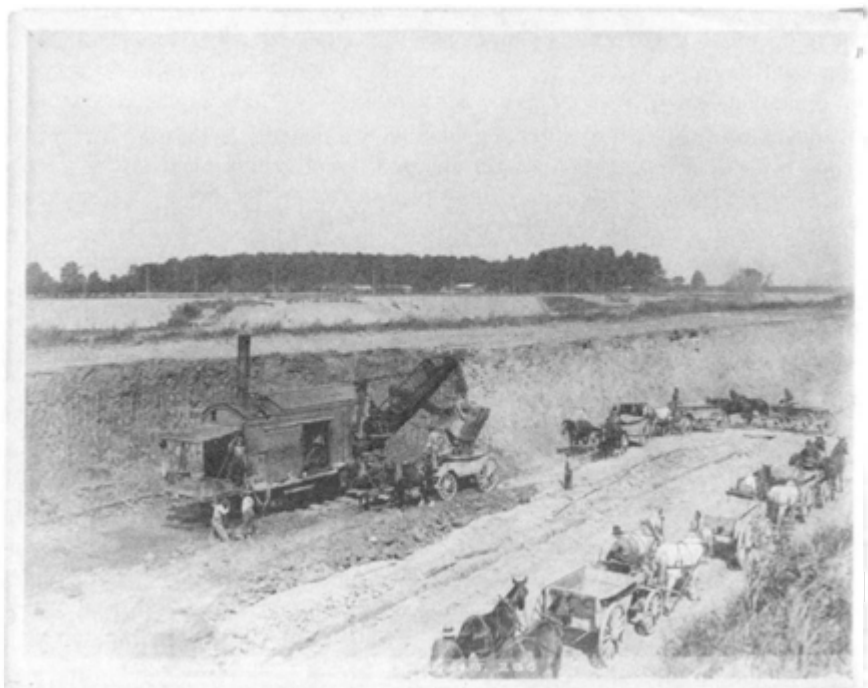
The organization's goals — to improve the condition of workers by limiting the hours of work, advocating temperance, promoting education through a labour press and other publications, replacing competitive individualism with the spirit of co-operation, and giving workers a voice in politics — clearly appealed to workers in Niagara. Roughly 2000 workers joined the Knights of Labor in the area whose workers the St. Catharines & District Labour Council represents today. St. Catharines had eight assemblies, representing coopers, tailors, sailors, clerks, axe makers, and wheel makers, as well as a mixed assembly. Thorold, which at that time had only 300 industrial workers, had three assemblies: one of stone cutters employed in the local quarry, one women's, and one mixed assembly. Merritton's Maple Leaf Assembly was the largest in the area, comprising 500 cotton workers, many of them women. Sailors from Port Dalhousie and the Welland Canal also joined the Knights of Labor.

Knights from the Niagara Peninsula expressed their commitment to the Order's goals by electing one of their own, William Garson — a member of St. Catharines Fidelity Assembly, temperance advocate, and well-known Orangeman — as a Liberal-Labor member of the provincial legislature in 1886. Garson gave expression to the the Knights' desire to unite all workers, by urging Protestant and Catholic workers to overcome sectarian divisions. On 15 August 1887, the Knights marked a civic holiday by marching 3000 strong through the streets of St. Catharines, carrying banners that proclaimed "Rise and Defend Your Dignity," "The Land for the People," and "Long Hours Must Go." In 1888 they fought to end long hours for store clerks by pledging to patronize only stores that closed at six o'clock. In the same year, respect for the Sabbath, as well as concern for workers operating

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the Welland Canal, led them to condemn the canal's operation on Sunday. In addition to fighting together for a better world, Niagara Knights also played together. Entertainment such as balls, dances, and roller-skating parties served not only to offer alcohol-free entertainment to workers but also to raise funds to help disabled workers.

Like their attitudes to women workers and racialized minorities, the Knights' view of strikes was also contradictory. In principle, they favoured arbitration as a way of settling conflict between employers and workers. But when faced with stubborn employers, members of the Order did resort to strikes. For example, when John S. McClelland, a printer and a member of the Knights, purchased the *Evening Star*, a St. Catharines paper, in 1888 and refused to pay union wages, all but three of his printers went out on strike. Although McClelland berated the strikers in the columns of his paper, neither he nor the three strike-breaking printers were kicked out of the Knights of Labor. This led other workers to leave the Knights in disappointment. By then, however, the Order's influence was decreasing in Niagara and in many other parts of Canada and the United States.



Construction on the Fourth Welland Canal. St. Catharines Museum, N1001.

## **Class and Ethnicity in the Early Twentieth Century**

PROXIMITY TO CHEAP ELECTRICITY, generated by the large hydro stations of Niagara Falls and Decew Falls, drew industrial employers to the St. Catharines area in the last decades of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th centuries. Both the number and the size of local industries grew, as new technology allowed employers to replace skilled workers with machines tended by semi-skilled workers. Provincial Paper Mills, St. Lawrence Paper Mills, Ontario Paper Company, and Beaver Board Fibre Company were just some of the larger industrial concerns established in the St. Catharines area during this period. The building of the hydro-canals and power-generating stations, the new factories, and the fourth Welland Canal, created additional demand for labour.

Because the industrial boom coincided with the dramatic increase in immigration from southern and eastern Europe, many of the new industrial and construction jobs were filled by immigrant workers. Armenians, Hungarians, Italians, Poles, and Ukrainians were some of the largest groups to come to Niagara at this time. They took the least skilled, least secure, lowest paid and physically most demanding jobs in industry, partly because most were former agriculturalists without previous experience in factory work. Most of them were also sojourners; temporary residents who intended to work in Canada only long enough to save enough money to permit them to improve their situation when they returned to their native lands. Because they did not plan to stay at these jobs for long, they often put up with conditions that more established Canadian workers would have found intolerable. But even if they decided to settle in Canada, they had little chance of getting better jobs. Many of their employers, fellow workers and other Canadians believed that southern and eastern Europeans, and especially those of Asian and African origin, were racially inferior and equipped to perform only menial labour. McKinnon Industries, for example, recruited Armenian workers from the United States specifically to carry out hot and heavy work in its foundry, which became known as "Little Armenia." Poles, Italians, Ukrainians, Hungarians and other immigrants from southern and eastern Europe joined the Armenians in the foundry and other unskilled jobs. During the World War II, when labour shortages enabled European immigrant workers to move to better-paying and less arduous jobs, the company recruited Blacks from Nova Scotia for its foundry.

The Niagara region appealed to immigrants in the early 20th century because, in the event of a downturn in industry or the end of large construction projects, seasonal work in agriculture and canning provided additional local work opportunities. Immigrants could thus save the time and expense of migrating elsewhere in search of work. Picking fruits and vegetables and working in canning factories also provided employment for women and children who came with or joined immigrant men in Canada. Married women, especially those with young children, like their Anglo-Canadian counterparts, supplemented family income by keeping boarders and taking in sewing.

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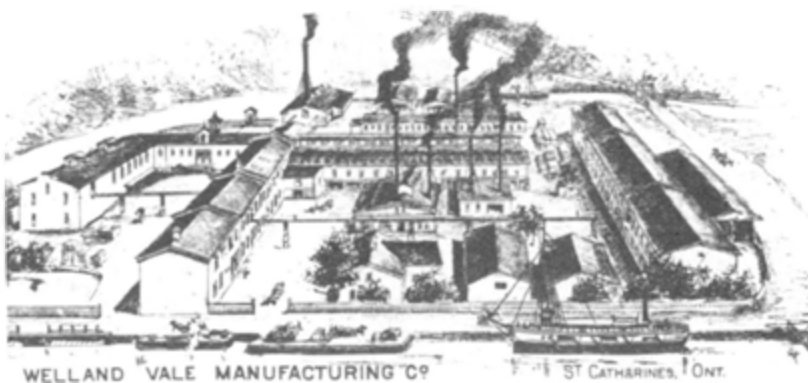
Construction Workers, early 20th century. St. Catharines Museum, N6278.

Not unlike the Irish canallers of the 19th century, many of the pre-World War I immigrants remained on the margins of Niagara society. They lived in shacks in Thorold or in crowded housing in the “foreign quarter” of St. Catharines. While their primitive living arrangements horrified many Anglo-Canadians, living as inexpensively as possible made sense to immigrant sojourners intent on saving money as quickly as possible so they could return to their homelands. Living conditions in boarding houses run by immigrant women were a step above those of all-male quarters.

Anglo-Canadian workers initially responded with hostility when large numbers of southern and eastern European immigrants arrived in Niagara. Fears that employers would use the immigrants further to deskil labor and reduce wages intensified Anglo-Canadian working-class racism. Gradually, however, many Anglo-Canadian labour activists realized that to be effective they would have to cooperate with the “foreign” workers. During World War I, increasing numbers of workers, including immigrants, joined unions. The Niagara District Trades Federation, formed in 1918, represented skilled and unskilled workers in the region, both Canadian and foreign-born.

Workers throughout Canada asserted themselves in politics as well as in the workplace at the end of World War I. In St. Catharines many of them supported the Independent Labor Party (ILP) which emerged thanks to the notion — earlier advanced by the Knights of Labor — that only men from the working class could and

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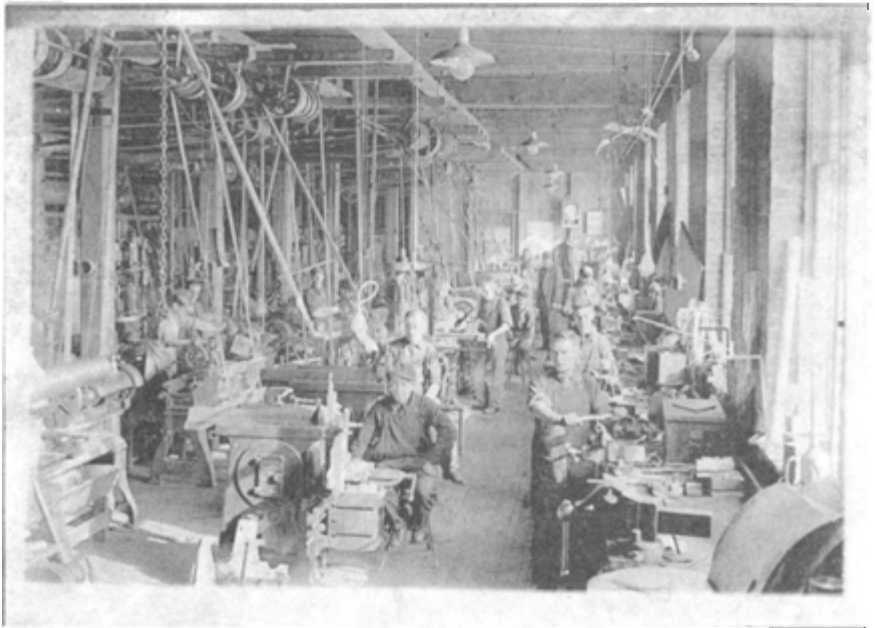


Welland Vale Manufacturing Company, makers of agricultural implements, tools and bicycles, established in 1901. Special Collections, St. Catharines Public Library.



Road Construction, 1919. St. Catharines Museum, N6574.

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McKinnon Industries, machine shop and tool room, early 1900s. St. Catharines Museum, N4381.

would truly represent workers' interests at various levels of government. In the provincial election of 1919, St. Catharines sent an ILP member to the provincial legislature, now dominated by farmers and workers. They came close to sending another worker, an unemployed machinist, to Ottawa as well.

Women exercising their newly-won right to vote played an important role in sending labour candidates to the legislature. With the aid of Rose Henderson, a Montreal socialist, working-class women in St. Catharines organized political meetings, where women without prior experience in public speaking spoke eloquently in support of political representation. Dozens of baby carriages and go-carts parked at the door on the occasion of such meetings revealed that, if they had no childcare, women simply brought their young children along. They also participated in the campaign by canvassing from door-to-door and arranging child care on election day so that women could visit the polls.

Labour's victory in the area was short-lived. Labour MPPs found themselves powerless in Ontario's farmer-labour coalition government. When farmers and workers had been able to cooperate before and during the election, the differences in their goals had been muted, but tensions became apparent when their representatives assumed power. Farmers, for example, advocated free trade, whereas organized labour sought to maintain protective tariffs. As junior partners in the

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farmer-labour coalition, workers had little say. Employers, alarmed by labour radicalism, meanwhile joined forces to defeat unionization. In Niagara, as elsewhere in industrial Ontario, they introduced schemes such as company unions and profit-sharing plans in an attempt to muffle class conflict. Yale and Towne, the manufacturer of locks, for example, introduced a profit-sharing plan open only to employees who had been with the company for ten years. The plan sought to prevent labour turnover, increasing workers' commitment to the company and its profitability. Economic recession also weakened the labour movement.

### Down Through the Years with The O.P.



Ontario Paper Workers. *Observation Post* 1944. Special Collections and Archives, Brock University.

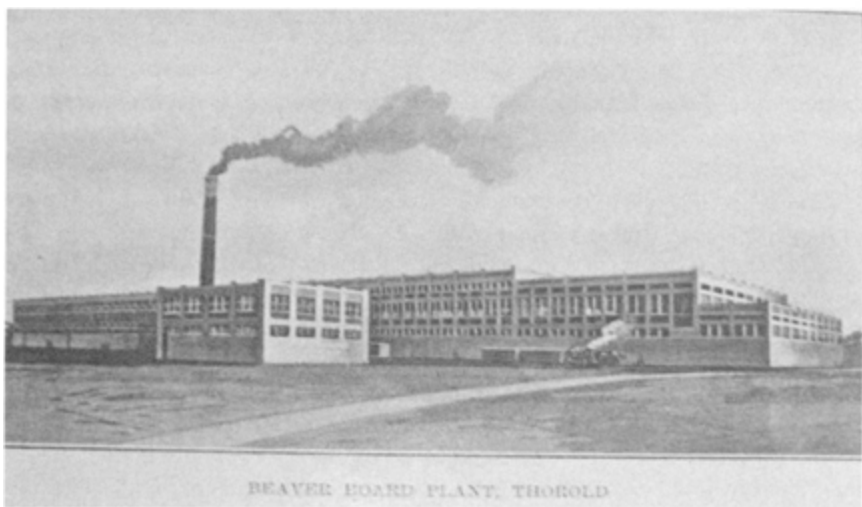
By 1920 all levels of government actively supported the efforts of employers to suppress labour protest in Niagara. A 1921 strike at Beaver Board Fibre Company in Thorold revealed, yet again, the effectiveness of the combined forces against worker protest. The strike was provoked by the company's attempt to cut wages and return to an open shop. The company hired and armed special constables from an American detective agency almost immediately, claiming they were needed to guard company property. It also sent an agent to hire strikebreakers in the United States, even though this was illegal under the federal Alien Labour Act. One of the strikebreakers testified that the company's man assured prospective recruits that "there would be no trouble getting across the International Bridge. He instructed me to say 'I am for the Beaver Board', and it would be all right. 'We give them a box of cigars every Christmas.'" The company's agent added that the Cana-

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dian government was behind the company in this strike. That is why when the company asked for six North West Mounted Police, the government sent 72 policemen.

Finally, both the employers and state authorities, who had been happy enough to recruit “foreign” immigrants to perform unskilled, ill-paid jobs in factories and large public works in the area, did not hesitate to exploit racial and ethnic tensions to create divisions among the Beaver Board strikers. Ontario Provincial Police raided “foreign” workers’ shacks and boarding houses, claiming that “nearly all the foreigners have fire-arms, and when they get drunk, they fire them off indiscriminately.” They explained that the Thorold police were so afraid of the “foreigners” that they had become a “joke.” When they went to arrest a “Russian” in his home, the occupants threw the local officers out of the window. Subsequently the local police refrained from taking any action against “foreigners.” Given these serious accusations against “dangerous” immigrant workers, it is somewhat surprising that all seven picketers brought to trial, a number of whom were of foreign descent, were charged with nothing more serious than vagrancy, for calling the strikebreakers “scabs” and “rats.”

Because of their own ambivalence towards “foreign” labourers, the strike leaders proved receptive to the anti-foreign allegations. At the beginning of the strike, the leaders attempted to unite all Beaver Board workers by recruiting interpreters to address the immigrants among them in their own languages. In response to the strong show of force by the company and the police and their anti-foreign propaganda, however, the strike leaders distanced themselves from labour radicalism and blamed “foreigners” for the “danger of Bolshevism” in Thorold.



Beaver Board Fibre Company plant, Thorold. *St. Catharines, an Industrial Survey* (1933). Special Collections and Archives, Brock University.





Empire Rug workers 1937. St. Catharines Museum, N8150.

### **The Unemployed, Textile Workers and Autoworkers in the 1930s**

PROSPERITY RETURNED in the later 1920s, and some new industries such as Hayes-Dana, Foster Wheeler, Thompson Products, Empire Rug Mills and Grout's silk mills became established in the St. Catharines area. The district labour movement, however, made no significant gains at this time. Nor were the years of the Great Depression a particularly good time for labour organizing. But while thousands of Niagara workers lost their jobs from 1929 on, not all sectors of the local economy were affected equally or at the same time. Some local industries expanded their facilities and workforce, and many employers used the depression to cut wages, speed up work and clamp down on organizational efforts.

Evidence gathered by the Royal Commission established by the federal government in 1936 to investigate conditions in the textile industry revealed, for example, that in 1932, when Grout's silk factory enjoyed higher earnings than ever before, it paid its workers lower wages than ever before. Monarch Knitting Company also cut piece rates under the guise of changing merchandise lines. As a result, the income of a growing proportion of textile workers in St. Catharines declined below the minimum required for survival. Employers claimed that market conditions forced these actions. But the Royal Commission's investigation revealed that a

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The Service Station of the Silk Industry.  
View of the plant of the Guaranty Silk Dyeing & Finishing Co., Limited, which prepares and colors threads and fabrics for further process.

Guarantee Silk Dyeing & Finishing company Ltd. Special Collections, St. Catharines Public Library.

great many textile manufacturers were making healthy profits. In fact, employers felt free to take steps to reduce labour costs because, if workers protested, they could easily be replaced from among the hundreds of job seekers who waited daily at factory gates.

Surprisingly, given the vulnerability of workers, there was an increase in labour militancy and organizing throughout Niagara in 1937. Most likely, Canadian workers were inspired by the example of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a group of industrial unions expelled from the craft dominated American Federation of Labor. By 1937, the CIO was making great headway in organizing workers in mass production industries in the United States. The presence of experienced communist organizers in Niagara also contributed to the revival of labour activism. For example, among political and labour groups, only the communists actively sought to organize the most vulnerable members of the working class: the unemployed. To receive aid for their families, these workers had to crush stones along an abandoned canal. Not surprisingly, they were less than enthusiastic about the work. One of them compared it to convict labour. But they did not give collective expression to their discontent until 1937, when some of the relief workers refused to work due to poor weather. The St. Catharines Welfare Committee responded by withholding their relief payments. Bitterly aware that they were unemployed through no fault of their own, Niagara's unemployed laid down their tools and demanded to be treated with more respect. Their action bore fruit. The chair of the Welfare Committee blamed the denial of relief on a misunderstanding and promised that, as long as relief recipients reported to work, they would be paid, even if the foreman decided that work could not proceed because of bad weather.

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Despite vulnerability to dismissal, some workers fortunate enough to hold jobs also resorted to strikes against growing exploitation. Monarch Knitting Company workers responded to wage cuts and speed-ups by organizing Local 5 of the Canadian Full-Fashioned Hosiery Workers' Association. The intense anti-unionism of Niagara employers found expression in the testimony of J. A. Burns, president and general manager of the Monarch Knitting Company, before the Royal Commission on Textile Industries. He claimed that "agitators" sent over from the United States, whose main goal was to take workers' money in the form of union dues, were responsible for union organizing at Monarch, and warned that if such agitators did not succeed in fomenting strikes, they would not hesitate to leave town with the workers' funds. "They have not the employees at heart, they are thinking about their own welfare," Burns explained. He fired members of the shop committee, two of whom were women, and threatened to close the St. Catharines plant if labour unrest continued.

One of the great ironies of Burns's claims was that the Canadian Full-Fashioned Hosiery Workers' Association was almost as critical of the CIO as Burns himself. The union belonged to the All-Canadian Congress of Labour — a small, nationalist labour federation which refused affiliation with American-led in-

lays claim to being the Birmingham of

strategic position.

James Chittick, in his book "Silk Manufacturing and its Problems," New York, 1913, says: "In damp situations the working of textile fibres is facilitated, owing to the moisture in the air," which



St. Catharines Plant of the Monarch Knitting Co., Limited.

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ternational unions — and its members rejected what they saw as the overly radical tactics of the CIO, stressing instead their desire to cooperate with employers. But the firing of their shop committee made such cooperation impossible. Monarch workers walked out and stayed on strike for 11 weeks, demanding that the fired shop committee be reinstated. Hosiery workers from Hamilton, London and Toronto supported the strikers, threatening a general strike by workers in their trade. After both sides agreed to conciliation, the Industry and Labour Board instructed the company to rehire the two female shop committee members and to help its male head to find another job.

Another irony of this strike was that, despite women's leading role in the organizing campaigns, male organizers complained about the difficulty of convincing female employees of Monarch Knitting to join their union, and their complaints were probably not without foundation. While some women supported unions, many more did not. Monarch's male employees were quite wrong, however, in ascribing the "girls'" reluctance to timidity. Many of the women, who generally stayed in paid employment only until they married, were less committed to their jobs and hence to organizing than their male counterparts. Their low wages, even for performing the same jobs as men, contributed to their reluctance to stay in factories. Around the time of the strike at Monarch, where both men and women were employed as knitters, adult female knitters earned only 62% of the wages of adult males. That their union took such unequal wages for granted probably did not help matters. Working women's household responsibilities also meant that they had less time and energy to devote to union activities than did male workers.

Workers at McKinnon Industries — a General Motors (GM) subsidiary since 1929, manufacturing automotive products — did turn to the CIO in 1936. The company had established a workers' council, but workers who attempted to use it not simply as a forum for venting frustrations but as a means to bring about meaningful change, were disappointed. The company took no actions in response to worker complaints. When the workers decided to join the United Automobile Workers (UAW) they received assistance from experienced organizers, some of whom were also members of the Communist Party. But while the founding of Local 199 of the UAW, which would become the largest and most powerful union in St. Catharines, was clearly inspired by developments in the United States, the organizational initiative appears to have been wholly local.

The provincial government, under the leadership of Premier Mitchell Hepburn, whose opposition to the CIO in Oshawa and northern Ontario was well known, was also eager to oust the UAW from McKinnon. Hepburn sent the OPP to see if the organizing drive could be defeated by charging union activists with inciting unlawful behaviour. In an attempt to break worker solidarity, the police interviewed workers in their homes, but were unable to obtain information that would have allowed them to charge anyone.

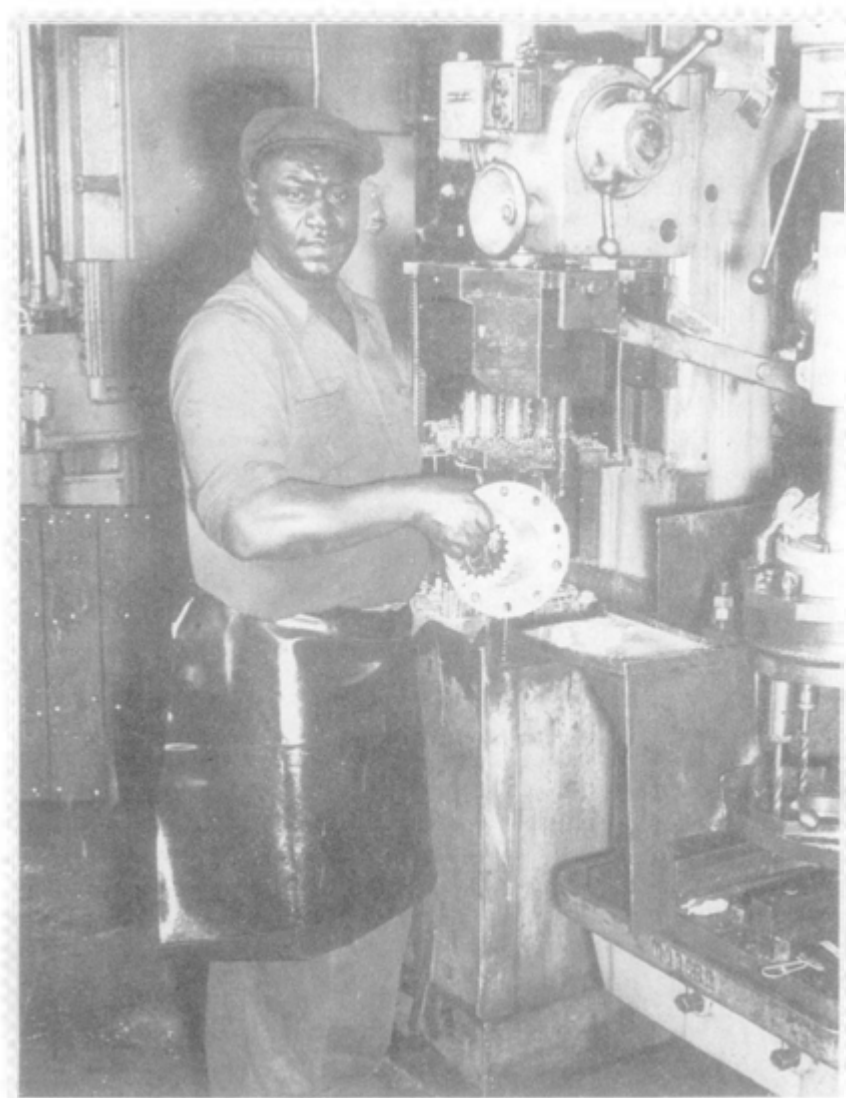
The *St. Catharines Standard* sided with Hepburn and McKinnon Industries. The paper described union organizers as “foreign agitators” whose ambition for power brought only “distress and misery” to workers “whom they are able to exploit.” The newspaper also condemned the “economic tragedy” resulting from the “war between capital and labor” instigated by sit-down strikes in the United States, and added that similar developments in St. Catharines would scare away prospective new industries. The paper did not hesitate to use both racism and sexism to discredit the UAW. When the business agent of the CIO-affiliated International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), Sam Kraisman, came to speak to St. Catharines workers, the *Standard* asked rhetorically “what have Toronto Jewish woman’s delegates with strike experience in the clothing trade to offer St. Catharines motor workers”?

Most McKinnon workers belonging to ethnic minorities responded with enthusiasm to the industrial unionism of the CIO. A disproportionate number of them were among those who signed the UAW’s first charter at the factory. As unskilled workers they had not been eligible for membership in craft unions. As unskilled workers particularly vulnerable to dismissal, they generally feared to express grievances without an organization to defend their rights. Yet, all of them knew someone who had been injured on the job, and since they had the dirtiest jobs at the plant, many of them suffered from diseases like silicosis. They resented the power and arbitrariness of foremen who expected personal favours from immigrant workers who wanted to get a job for a relative or friend, or a better job for themselves, or simply to hang on to their jobs during the depression. Some supervisors pushed immigrant workers to clear their driveways in winter, mow their lawns in summer, invite them home for dinner, bring them bottles of scotch or treat them to drinks after work. The immigrants were also angered by the company’s discriminatory employment policies, which kept non-Anglo-Celtic workers out of skilled and white-collar jobs. Most older immigrant workers, with little education and limited knowledge of English, were not in a position to aim for such jobs. But they held such hopes for their Canadian-educated children. As the daughter of Armenian immigrants recalled:

*No Armenian women were hired as clerical help.... It was hard for foreign women to get in the office at McKinnon’s. A man by the name of McCarthy ran the office and he didn’t like foreigners.... I also applied for a job in Fleming’s [law firm] office but I knew they wouldn’t hire us because we were Armenian. So I worked in the factory and then got married. I’m sure my qualifications were fine.*

By contrast, the UAW went out of its way to appeal to minority workers. To convey its message, it arranged for interpreters for those workers who had a limited grasp of English. In contrast to the company’s policy of excluding “foreigners” from white-collar jobs, the union provided opportunities for advancement to tal-

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St. Catharines-born Ron Nicholson working at McKinnon Industries, 1951. St. Catharines Museum.

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ented members of minority groups. Armenian Canadian Hygus Torosian, a founding member of Local 199 of the UAW and one of the most active members of the local's educational committee, was awarded a scholarship to study at the Workers' Educational Association Training School in England, so that he could equip himself "for even more effective work in his organization and community."

In May 1937 McKinnon workers gave their overwhelming support to the UAW: 1190 workers voted to join the union while only 12 workers opposed the move.



Worker at McKinnon gun shop, 1942. *St. Catharines Standard*.

### **Fighting for Democracy on the Home Front, 1939-1945**

DURING THE WAR, when labour shortages developed, workers were again in a strong position. Men and increasingly women as well joined unions and demanded higher wages, the right to organize and worker representation on government boards. McKinnon workers were no exception. In 1941, when they struck for higher wages and the right to organize, they justified their demands not simply in terms of need but also as equity issues. They maintained that, while workers were being pressured to work harder and faster for patriotic reasons, employers were profiting from war.

McKinnon Industries responded by intensifying its anti-union campaign. Management fomented suspicion of "foreign" workers, both because employers often saw immigrant workers as radicals and because management believed that pointing to immigrants' role in the UAW would create divisions among workers. The company's hiring policies indicated its distrust of non-Anglo-Saxon workers. When it requested machinists trained by the Dominion Provincial Wartime Emergency Training Programme, it specified that such men should be between the ages of 26 and 40, should weigh 150 pounds or over, and should be "of Anglo Saxon origin if possible."

But the company also promoted suspicions toward non-Anglo-Celtic workers more actively. Donald Schoures, a McKinnon worker, described the activities of Major Carmichael, also known as "Digger," another of the company's employees, in a signed affidavit:

*I, Donald Schoures, hereby testify to efforts by one known to me as Digger in attempting to form a secret organization of employees of the McKinnon Industries Limited, St. Catharines. Early in Sept, 1941, I was approached by a group leader in the plant, Arthur Othen, and requested if I wished to attend a meeting on government business. I was taken to a meeting of other McKinnon Group leaders and employees of the Co, employees who had attended upon the invitation of various group leaders. The person known as Digger but has been identified as one Colonel Carmichael was the leader and principle [sic] speaker. The people present at the meeting were informed by Digger that they were there to combat any forms of sabotage. In his speech the speaker advised all present to watch the McKinnon employees of foreign extraction while in the plant for possible sabotage by them. The Digger stated he was in favour of unions but that Local 199 UAW-CIO was dominated by foreign born people and the leaders of the union would be guilty of sabotage if strike action took place at the McKinnon plant. He requested all members of his organization the Inner Circle Counter-Sabotage Committee to keep the wheels of industry turning whatever the cost. Included in the membership of the Inner Circle Counter Sabotage Committee were members of Local 199 UAW-CIO. Statements made by Digger at this meeting proved he was in receipt of decisions made at union meetings. He condemned the union in the taking of the strike ballot declaring it was not properly conducted, members being forced to vote in favour of strike action which was untrue. He further declared any*



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*strike action would be illegal which was untrue. Throughout the meeting he dwelt on the functions of the union which he criticized, rather than forms of sabotage the organization he had set up was supposed to discuss. In my opinion the Inner Circle Counter Sabotage Committee was set up as an anti-union organization rather than an anti-sabotage group.*

In the name of patriotism, the federal and provincial governments and the mainstream local press sided with management against the union. In a radio address, C. D. Howe, Canada's powerful federal minister of Munitions and Supply, urged St. Catharines workers to keep working. He sent 200 RCMP officers to St. Catharines, claiming that they were needed to ensure that those who wanted to keep working would not be harassed by picketers, despite the fact that local police reported that picketing was peaceful. Premier Hepburn described the strikers as "just as big an enemy as the Germans." The *St. Catharines Standard* backed the government. "Every hour of the strike here," one of its editorials stated, "helps the dastardly beast, Hitler." The editorial worried that striking workers would tar the image of all St. Catharines workers by showing that they were more concerned with "a few cents more an hour" than "to do their bit to help humanity." The *Standard* did not mention that McKinnon workers were earning less than autoworkers in Oshawa and Windsor. Instead, it denounced them for being unpatriotic, and selfish, and for leading to layoffs in other plants.

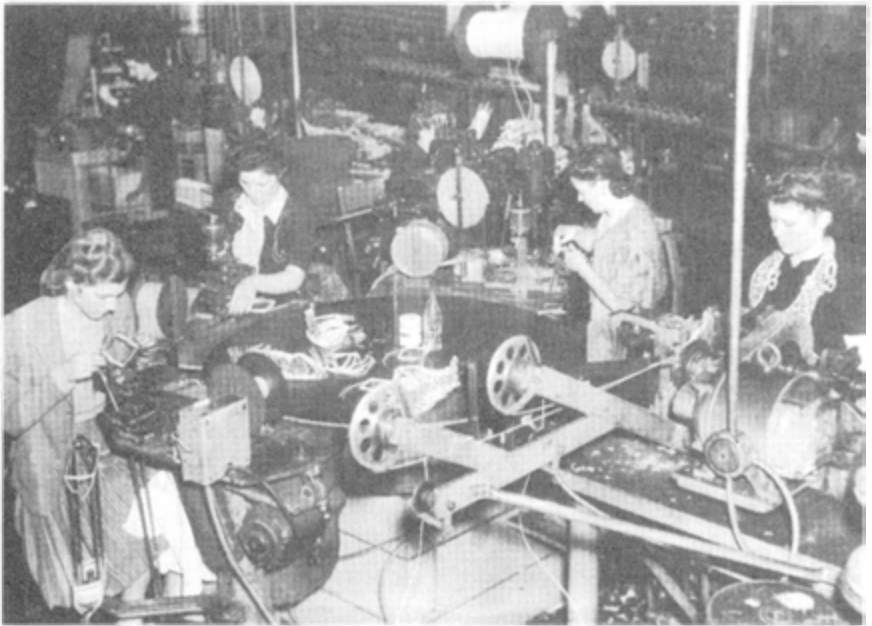
Most striking workers did not lose their determination in the face of such opposition. They had no doubts about the importance of their contribution to the war effort. As "Just another worker" wrote to the *Standard*, when government declared its plans to cap profits, manufacturers "went on strike," claiming that they would not make enough profits. The government altered its plans in response. The absence of labour representation on any war boards no doubt helped. "Why can't we have decent men in Ottawa," he asked, "instead of having a group of Canadian Manufacturer's Association puppets who are always thinking in terms of profits rather than sacrificing."

Women, who entered factories such as McKinnon in growing numbers, were among the most outspoken defenders of the strike. A "girl employee" wrote to the *St. Catharines Standard*:

*I am not so good at composing a letter of this kind, but I believe I can convey my meaning. I am one of the girl employees on strike at McKinnons'. I have worked there a good number of years and every time I have ever asked for a raise, have been told the company could not afford it.... As for being patriotic, I have a kid brother overseas and I certainly would like to see a decent set wage for him to come back to. He quit McKinnons on account of receiving 25c per hour.... If the so-called big names feel they would like to sacrifice and be patriotic, they can take their own sons and daughters out of college and let them do their share of slaving. McKinnons and the government have their representatives and we picked Bob Stacey as ours. As far as I know I*

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*certainly was not forced or coerced into joining the union. I joined because it stands for democracy, which is what we are trying to fight for. There are plenty of millionaires being made out of this war and they sure do not care who gives their lives as long as they rake in the money. We don't want Hitler here, but we are being run by a few 'would-be' Hitlers. The working man of McKinnons should be able to live not merely exist and have the right to save a dollar and send their children to college the same as G.M.'s executives do. The workers are the ones that count and should not be treated as ignorant dogs. If I did not have my parents to live with I would have gone short many a day on McKinnons' pay.... Here's hoping the government realizes we have to live too!*



Women war workers making munitions at McKinnon Industries, *St. Catharines Standard*.

That this young woman understood her low wages and general inequality solely in terms of class, and not gender, tells us a great deal about widespread acceptance of gender inequality even among workers, including militant female workers.

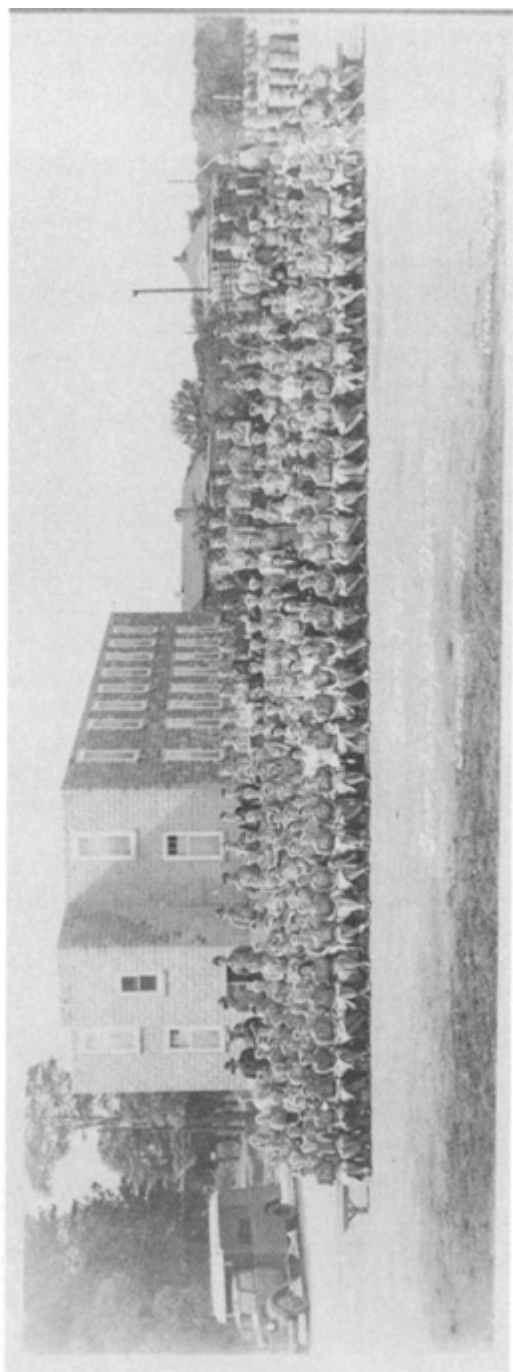
The strike was well organized and peaceful. A female picketer brought a “camera-type” radio to the picket line. Girls and youths distributed song sheets and harmonized strike songs and “current tunes” as they walked the line, at times accompanied by a mouth-organ playing picketer. The workers’ relaxed approach reflected not only their position of relative strength in the context of serious labour shortages, but also their refusal to see a contradiction between their rights to orga-

nize and receive fair wages and their loyalty to Canada and the war effort. The “democratic Canada” they hoped to establish as workers on the home front would clearly offer equal opportunities for the members of all classes.

The strikers’ views were shared by workers throughout Canada and by a large segment of the local community. The St. Catharines Trades and Labour Council, the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL – founded in 1940 as a merger of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour and the Canadian branch of the CIO), the Toronto Trades and Labour Council (AFL), the Toronto Labour Council (CCL), the Montreal Labour Council, and workers from Halifax, Sydney, Winnipeg, and Port Arthur sent messages of support. About 60 workers belonging to unions ranging from Cape Breton miners to British Columbia International Woodworkers of America (IWA) members came down from nearby Hamilton, where the CCL was holding its annual convention, to join the picket lines. To feed the strikers, local farmers donated fruits and vegetables, merchants gave other food items, and restaurants sent food to the kitchen run by Local 199’s women’s auxiliary. The strike ended with the company accepting a closed shop and agreeing to negotiate over wages.

Despite these anti-union efforts, Niagara workers in other sectors also joined unions in greater numbers and fought for higher wages and better conditions. Their ranks included seasonal agricultural labourers, workers in canneries and workers in the service industries, all of whom had historically found it difficult to organize. In 1941, striking McKinnon workers helped increase the wages of agricultural workers. Excused from strike duty, automotive workers from low-wage groups picked peaches for local farmers desperately short of workers. They used their experience in the labour movement to win an extra five cents per hour of picking. Women employed by Canadian Canners struck for and won higher wages and better working conditions at the Niagara-on-the-Lake plant. Waiters and waitresses at the General Brock Hotel, walking out when two of their ranks were fired, demanded that management recognize their union.

Evidence of the strength of the labour movement in the St. Catharines area was its ability to overcome organizational differences that divided workers elsewhere in Canada. A unity council brought together AFL and CIO unions in this area more than a decade before these unions merged to form the Canadian Labour Congress in 1956. But there were still limits to labour’s inclusiveness in the St. Catharines area. McKinnon workers, for example, protested un-apologetically against the hiring of Japanese Canadians. As a result, the Japanese Canadians who were relocated by the government to this area, were largely confined to low-paying, labour-intensive jobs in agriculture, canneries, and basket factories. Discrimination against them continued after the war as well. Harry Kurahara recalls attempting to move from a basket-making factory in Grimsby to McKinnon in 1948:



Boese Foods, Staff, Employees and Dormitory, September 1947. Mennonite Central Committee Collection, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana.

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*I went to McKinnon in 1948 to put my name in, and the guy said they were not hiring, just like that. But you know, the same afternoon two young fellows I knew went and got jobs with McKinnon. From that day on I thought that guy was a redneck, he doesn't like Japanese otherwise why would he say they weren't hiring and turn around and hire two guys? So from that day on, me and General Motors, we don't agree, from that day on I wouldn't buy a GM product. It hurt, but you convince yourself you're as good as that guy.*

Union organizers showed more awareness that their own failure to defend women's interests may have contributed to the union's weakness among female workers at McKinnon Industries. During a discussion of problems facing Local 199 of the UAW at a meeting of the District Council of the UAW in June 1942, they explained: "We will remain weak with [females] unless we can lead the way on equal pay for equal work." But despite the presence of such militant and clear-sighted female workers at the plant as the "girl striker" who wrote to the *St. Catharines Standard*, Local 199 representatives still maintained that it was "hard to find people with leadership potential among the girls themselves."

Meanwhile, the strength of working-class discontent, expressed by a large number of strikes, as well as Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF — the forerunner of the NDP) electoral gains, convinced the provincial government that it might have to recognize workers' right to collective bargaining. In 1943, the provincially appointed Select Committee to Inquire into Collective Bargaining between Employers and Employees invited testimony from Ontario workers and employers on the subject. The large delegations from Niagara, and especially from the St. Catharines area, reflected how polarized the area was along class lines. The largest local employers (McKinnon Industries, Lightning Fastener, English Electric, Hayes Steel, Imperial Iron, McKinnon Columbus Chain, Packard Electric, St. Catharines Steel Products, Thompson Products, Welland Vale, Engineering Tool & Forgings, Foster-Wheeler, Ontario Paper Company Thorold, and Alliance Paper Co. Merritton) were represented. They had organized as a non-profit corporation named the Niagara Industrial Relations Institute in 1942, proclaiming their desire "to improve industrial relations between employers and employees in the Niagara Peninsula and to formulate policies for proper collective bargaining relations between employers and employees in that district." In fact, the brief presented by their lawyer, J. L. Gabriel Keogh, to the Committee made clear that they wanted to protect company unions and to limit the power of the industrial unions that had succeeded in gaining a foothold in the area.

In this confrontation, the well-represented workers and other supporters of collective bargaining, were still unable to carry the day. The Ontario government listened to their accounts of employers throughout the peninsula forcing (and sometimes bribing) workers to support employee associations that pretended to be independent but were, in fact, not much different from company unions. The government seemingly accepted labour's claim that the overwhelming majority of

workers in the area supported labour unions and wanted state recognition of their right to collective bargaining. Despite outlawing employer interference with unions, however, the 1943 Ontario Collective Bargaining Act allowed for the formation of "independent" company unions.

### **Women and Workers of Colour in the 1950s and 1960s**

THE IMMEDIATE POSTWAR PERIOD was one of prosperity and growth in the St. Catharines area, as local industries switched back to manufacturing consumer goods, labour needs of construction and industry were filled in part by new waves of immigrants from Britain and continental Europe. In these years, when so many workers enjoyed secure jobs and decent wages, the labour movement throughout Canada directed considerable energy to fighting racism through anti-discrimination legislation. Thanks in no small part to labour's efforts, starting in 1944 the Ontario government passed laws forbidding discrimination based on race, religion, colour or nationality, in public signs, employment, the provision of services and the sale of property. However, no law addressed discrimination in apartment rentals in the province.

A case of housing discrimination in St. Catharines in 1959 pushed the St. Catharines & District Labour Council to the centre of labour's fight against such discrimination. The case, covered by newspapers across the nation, involved a family of four by the name of Summers. Charles Summers, a truck driver, his pregnant wife Ada, and their two young children, were told to leave their apartment on Ontario Street because, as the *St. Catharines Standard* put it, "they were Negroes." They had been living in the apartment for a mere two months in September 1959, when their landlady asked them to leave. She had received a number of anonymous letters from Ontario Street residents complaining that they did not want "colored people" living there. A group signing itself his "McKinnon customers" sent a similar letter to Jack Woods, owner of the Coffizon, a restaurant located on Ontario Street, near the McKinnon plant. Woods rented his premises from the owner of the building in which the Summers lived. His racist customers threatened to stop spending money in his restaurant unless he put pressure on his landlady to evict the Summers family.

Charles Summers, a native of St. Catharines, refused to leave. When his landlady first approached him, he asked her for a written notice. Having obtained the documentation, he contacted the *St. Catharines Standard* to publicize this racist incident. "I felt that if I didn't take a stand now," he told the paper, "my children and in turn their children would have to face the same discrimination during their lives. I want this kind of thing to stop now." Summers's stand encouraged African Canadians and other local residents to speak out against discrimination. Russell Thompson, a member of the Meliorist Club, an African Canadian service club, told reporters that up to 80% of young Blacks in the area were unable to find work, that

few barber shops in St. Catharines would serve African Canadians, and that there had been earlier attempts to prevent them from settling in certain parts of the city.

Irving Freeman, a St. Catharines Jew, wrote to the *Standard* about a practice suggesting the persistence of anti-Semitism in the city. Jews were still barred from membership in the St. Catharines Golf Club. Freeman noted that this instance of discrimination was particularly reprehensible because it was practiced by the leaders of public life in the city, who dominated the club's board of directors.

The labour movement rallied behind Summers. Having received a number of complaints about similar discrimination in Toronto, the Toronto and District Labour Committee for Human Rights was just then trying to convince the Ontario government to pass legislation that would outlaw discrimination based on nationality, race, or religion in rental housing. However, they found it difficult to document these cases of discrimination. Understandably, very few members of minority groups had the courage to publicize the humiliation that they suffered in their daily lives. Some were even afraid that publicity would expose them to greater hostility.

Consequently, when Charles Summers brought his experiences to the public's attention, the executive secretary of the Toronto and District Labour Committee for Human Rights, lawyer A. Alan Borovoy, took note of his courageous stand. Borovoy believed that if the St. Catharines City Council could be persuaded to pass a by law against such discrimination, the provincial government would be more willing to do so as well. He contacted John Ideson, president of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council and a strong supporter of anti-discrimination legislation, and they worked together to prevent the eviction of the Summers family and to establish a deputation to the city council.

Responses to this campaign suggest that by the late 1950s many residents of Niagara were upset by the open racism in the area. When Borovoy circulated a petition opposing the eviction of the Summers family, most of their neighbours on Ontario Street signed it. One of them, Mrs Kalagian, an Armenian Canadian, called on the Summers and said, "I want to tell you, you're the best people we have seen in ten years.... We want no part of this letter business." Jack Wood of the Coffizon Restaurant angrily responded to racist customers who pressured him to urge the Summers's eviction: "I would rather go out of business than have a part in persecuting innocent people." Letters of protest appeared in the *St. Catharines Standard*. Others expressed their support for the Summers family by telephone and some even offered them alternative housing. A doctor from Niagara Falls sent money to help with a down payment for a house. Newspaper coverage of the Summers case from places as distant as Sydney, Nova Scotia, suggest that many Canadians outside Niagara also opposed racist discrimination.

In response to these protests, the Summers's landlady decided against eviction. She was a member of the St. Catharines Armenian community. She and her family acknowledged that she had acted hastily. The anonymous racist letters frightened her precisely because her own community had suffered from discrimination.



John Ideson, first president of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council (on right), shaking hands with Len Harrison, 1981 president. St. Catharines & District Labour Council Collection.



The deputation that John Ideson led to City Hall on 26 October 1959, enjoyed the support of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council, the local Ministerial Association, the United Nations Association of St. Catharines, the Unitarian Fellowship of St. Catharines, the St. Catharines Council of Women, the Niagara District Council of Human Rights, B'nai B'rith of St. Catharines (a Jewish organization) and the local Bahais. The deputation called for a by law that would make it illegal to select or eject tenants from apartment buildings and multiple dwelling units because of their race, colour, religion or national origin. The suggested by law specified that municipal officials would investigate reported cases of discrimination and fine landlords who violated the law. The proposal received strong endorsement from Alderman Joe Reid, who claimed that St. Catharines was not "very far away from Little Rock [Arkansas, where jeering whites, supported by the state governor, attempted to bar nine African American students from entering the local high school under federal court order]."

But the Summers case also revealed that many Canadians still refused to acknowledge that racism was a problem in Canada. Such St. Catharines notables as the mayor and several aldermen condemned racist discrimination but suggested that the anonymous letters were the work of marginal individuals. The mayor added that the attempt to evict the Summers family was a "misunderstanding," since there was no serious discrimination in St. Catharines. Some aldermen voiced strong opposition to the by law proposed by Ideson's delegation. According to one of them, while such a law would give "a colored man the right he should have," it would take away property rights from another person. "It is unfortunate," he added, "but the minute a colored person moves into a neighbourhood the fellow next door couldn't sell his home for half what it's worth. Why should the law make me do something that would depress the value of my neighbour's property." Voicing the views of many Canadian critics of anti-discrimination laws, another alderman protested that one cannot legislate against prejudice. As human rights activists and the victims of discrimination pointed out, legislation was designed to wipe-out discrimination not prejudice. While such legislation also had an educational function — to publicize the state's condemnation of discrimination — the victims of racism could not afford to await the slow change of attitudes as a result of education.

In the end the by law proposal was defeated by one vote, apparently because the majority of council members believed that such a law would be beyond the jurisdiction of municipal government. However, they agreed to support a petition to extend the provincial Fair Accommodation Practices Act, which outlawed the refusal of services in public places on the basis of race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry or place of origin, to apartment rental. Later that year, when the petition was submitted to Ontario premier Leslie Frost, St. Catharines organizations, the District Labour Council foremost among them, were disproportionately represented among those who supported it. The proposed change was enacted provincially in 1961.

The Labour Council was much slower to take action against gender discrimination in the workplace. Contrary to the common view of the 1950s as the era of domesticity, in blue-collar communities such as St. Catharines, the number of women in paid employment, including married women, grew. Employers needed their work, and many supervisors came to believe that married women were more reliable workers than single ones. Yet as in earlier decades, the need for their labour did not lead to improved conditions. Assumptions about women's nature and abilities were too deeply rooted among employers and workers.

A statement by Martin Cahill, public relations director of McKinnon Industries, illustrates such assumptions. "Most of the jobs that require nimbleness and fine attention to small detail," he told a *Standard* reporter, "are done by girls." "Girls don't do laborious or heavy work," he added, explaining that they had only done such work during World War II "because of the man shortage." This departure from the norm, apparently, did not convince him that women were capable of performing supposedly "male jobs." Such assumptions help to explain why the sex-typing of jobs continued at McKinnon until the 1970s, and why women were limited to a small number of jobs in just a few departments.

In October 1967, a group of female workers who lost their jobs at McKinnon Industries used the hearings of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada to publicize discrimination against women on production lines in the automotive industry. They received assistance in drafting their brief from feminist Laura Sabia, a former St. Catharines municipal councillor.

*In May 1966, with no advance notice whatever, we were suddenly laid off. We were not even given the courtesy of 24 hours' notice. Some of us with seniority of 5 to 10 years were also laid off without any explanation save that there was no longer any work for us. We were told to apply as new employees in other cities, but because of family ties, this was impossible for us. We appealed to Local 199 of the United Automobile Workers Union for some explanation and redress. We were told of our eligibility for Unemployment Insurance Benefits and Transitional Assistance Benefits. We were made aware of the government's retraining program in various commercial and stenography courses. The U.A.W. was aware of the impending Auto Pact and its ramifications for women workers, but they did little to solve these problems with industry.*

*We are cognizant of the government's clerical courses for women, but girls coming out of school with a four-year commercial diploma find employment at \$40.00 to \$50.00 per week, which, we submit, is not adequate for us to maintain a home and support a family. We do not want to be a drain on welfare agencies. We want only to support our families in dignity and we assure you that we are most willing to do the hard work that industry entails....*

*We submit to you that women in industry are subject to discrimination as far as lay-offs are concerned. The first to go are women, and rarely are they called back. Unions care little of forcing an issue where women are concerned.*

*We ask that a thorough study be made of women workers on production lines in industry. Industry cares little of making available jobs for women when certain lines are closed off. Women seem expendable in both industry and unions.*

The twelve women who signed the brief were all self-supporting, some of them with dependent families. As their representative, Ann Fast, explained during the Commission's hearings in Toronto, women were at such a serious disadvantage following the signing of the Auto Pact, when the automotive industry was being restructured, because the sex-typing of jobs at McKinnon Industries meant that there were two seniority lists. Since so few job classifications were open to women, they were much more likely to lose their jobs than men with equal seniority. But while the women demanded an end to such "discrimination between the sexes," they also endorsed the ideal of the family wage by demanding that "married women, supported by a husband, should step aside to allow room for the woman who must support herself and her family." The self-supporting women apparently believed that married women made poor workers because, working for "luxuries," they were not committed to their jobs. The Royal Commission was unwilling to support the rights of self-supporting women over those of married women. It suggested that the elimination of gender-based job description and seniority lists would improve the situation at McKinnon Industries.

Ann Fast also told the Commission that the UAW showed little interest in women's problems. Such complaints received little sympathy from D. F. Hamilton, secretary-treasurer of the Ontario Federation of Labour, who was presenting the next brief to the Royal Commission. Showing little understanding of the double day of female family heads, and confirming Fast's allegations, Hamilton suggested that unions would be more responsive to women's needs if women were "willing to spend their off-hours, as men do, working for the union."

The entry of a growing numbers of married women into paid employment in the years that followed finally led to greater recognition of the right of all women, single or married, to equal opportunities in the work force. More women occupied executive positions in unions, and unions pushed for equal pay for work of equal value, maternity leave, and access to childcare.

### **Autoworkers Take on General Motors: 1970 Strike**

ALTHOUGH THE UAW's 1984 strike against GM, which paved the way for a Canadian breakaway from the international, is usually considered the most important strike in the history of Canadian autoworkers, the UAW strike in 1970 actually had more of an impact on local autoworkers in St. Catharines. In 1970, long before Canadian autoworkers dreamed of breaking away from their American counterpart, internal ideological divisions in Local 199 were more stark than ever before. Activists in Local 199 were divided into two competing factions: the Unity caucus and

the Walter Reuther Administration caucus. The Unity caucus was made up of communists, socialists, and an assortment of militant ideologues, some of whom took jobs at GM in order to engage in class struggle at the level of the shop floor. Before the 1970 strike, the Unity caucus was a powerful political force in the plant and regularly bested the Walter Reuther Administration caucus in in-plant elections. The Walter Reuther Administration caucus, named after fiercely anti-communist UAW President Walter Reuther, was made up of union activists, mostly social democrats, who rejected the radical anti-capitalist approach to labour relations promoted by the Unity caucus.

After the sudden death of Walter Reuther in May 1970, his successor, Leonard Woodcock, led UAW members in a historic strike against GM. The autoworkers had not struck GM for over 20 years, but resentment between the workers and the company had been simmering beneath the surface for years. Production at GM was stopped on 15 September when 6,600 UAW Local 199 members in St. Catharines, and 350,000 of their counterparts throughout North America, walked off the job in a legal strike.

The ten-week strike led to an improved contract in the United States that included cost of living allowances and a pension plan that gave workers the option of retiring after thirty years of service, regardless of their age. While the UAW strike against GM ended on 20 November 1970 in the United States, the Canadian section of the UAW refused to settle and continued their strike. Gord Lambert, a fiery communist, leader of the local 199 Unity caucus, and chair of the UAW's master bargaining committee in Canada, was the driving force behind the decision to prolong the strike in Canada. Canadian autoworkers were seeking, among other things, wage parity with their American counterparts.

To qualify for strike pay, autoworkers were required to picket two hours per week and attend union education courses, where, according to the *St. Catharines Standard*, courses ranged from "trade union history to an explanation of the Canada Pension Plan and highway safety." Single men received \$30 per week strike pay; married men received \$35; and married men with children received \$40 per week. (It is noteworthy that local media omitted information about strike pay for women.) The extended strike in Canada came to an end on 16 December 1970. Although local autoworkers endorsed the contract by a vote of 5101 to 377 a few days later as part of a ratification meeting, the settlement failed to win immediate wage parity with American autoworkers and included a cost of living concession.

The prolonged strike in Canada had a profound impact on internal union politics at Local 199. Most local autoworkers viewed it as a failure. Gord Lambert began to lose support in the plant for the way in which bargaining had been handled at the national level. Lambert was a strong rank and file leader who served as plant chairman for 18 years, vice president of Local 199 for 18 years, head of the UAW's master level bargaining committee for GM in Canada for 18 years and later as President of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council for five years. Immediately

after the 1970 strike, Lambert's opponents in the plant convinced the rank-and-file that his brand of militancy was outdated and ineffective. Rumours even circulated suggesting that his drive to prolong the strike in Canada had been influenced by the Communist Party. Lambert was defeated in his bid to be re-elected to the plant chairman position by John Washuta, who later became president of Local 199 and a St. Catharines city councillor. Washuta was a member of the Walter Reuther Administration caucus, renamed the Blue Slate caucus after the 1970 strike. The Blue Slate caucus gained control of the bargaining committee in the 1971 elections and the local's executive in 1972; both had previously been dominated by the more radical Unity slate. The events of the early 1970s had a paralyzing effect on the Unity caucus. Internal dissent and growing ideological schisms marginalized the left and led to its eventual demise over the course of the next two decades. Local 199 had been the last bastion of left politics within the autoworkers union. It never managed to recover from the fallout over the 1970 strike. Most Unity caucus activists eventually drifted away from plant-based politics to the St. Catharines & District Labour Council, where they proved to be a far more formidable force throughout the 1970s, organizing a local boycott of California grapes to help raise the wages of farm workers, building international solidarity with anti-colonial struggles around the world, aggressively pursuing an anti-racism agenda, and forming a union of the unemployed.

### **Strike Wave: 1972-1976**

BETWEEN 1972 AND 1976, 4751 strikes and lockouts, each involving, on average, 800 workers, were launched in Canada. In Niagara, workers at Court Industries Ltd., members of Local 268 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), walked picket lines in 1972 along with Local 582 of the International Chemical Workers, who were engaged in a dispute with their employer, Exolon. Labour disputes also took place at the Seaway News, Red-D-Mix Concrete and Kimberly-Clark of Canada over the course of the year. In 1973, UAW Local 199 struck Aimco Industries and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) struck Foster Wheeler. In the same year, moving picture operators, members of International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), walked picket lines to settle a contract dispute with local theatres, and a Canada-wide railroad strike had a profound impact on St. Catharines. In 1974, workers at GM, Columbus McKinnon Ltd., Hayes Dana, Aimco Industries, Kelsey-Hayes, Eaton Yale, W. S. Tyler Company, Foster Wheeler, and several credit unions walked picket lines. The next year, painters and allied workers, postal workers, sheet metal workers, paperworkers, autoworkers, and plumbers were all engaged in labour disputes with a variety of employers across the Niagara Region. Strikes continued in the paper industry in 1976 at Abitibi Paper, Domtar Pulp and Paper, Beaver Wood, and the Ontario Paper Company. Steelworkers at Ferranti Packard walked picket lines along with mem-



St. Catharines workers protesting against Trudeau's economic policies. *St. Catharines Standard*, 17 June 1982.

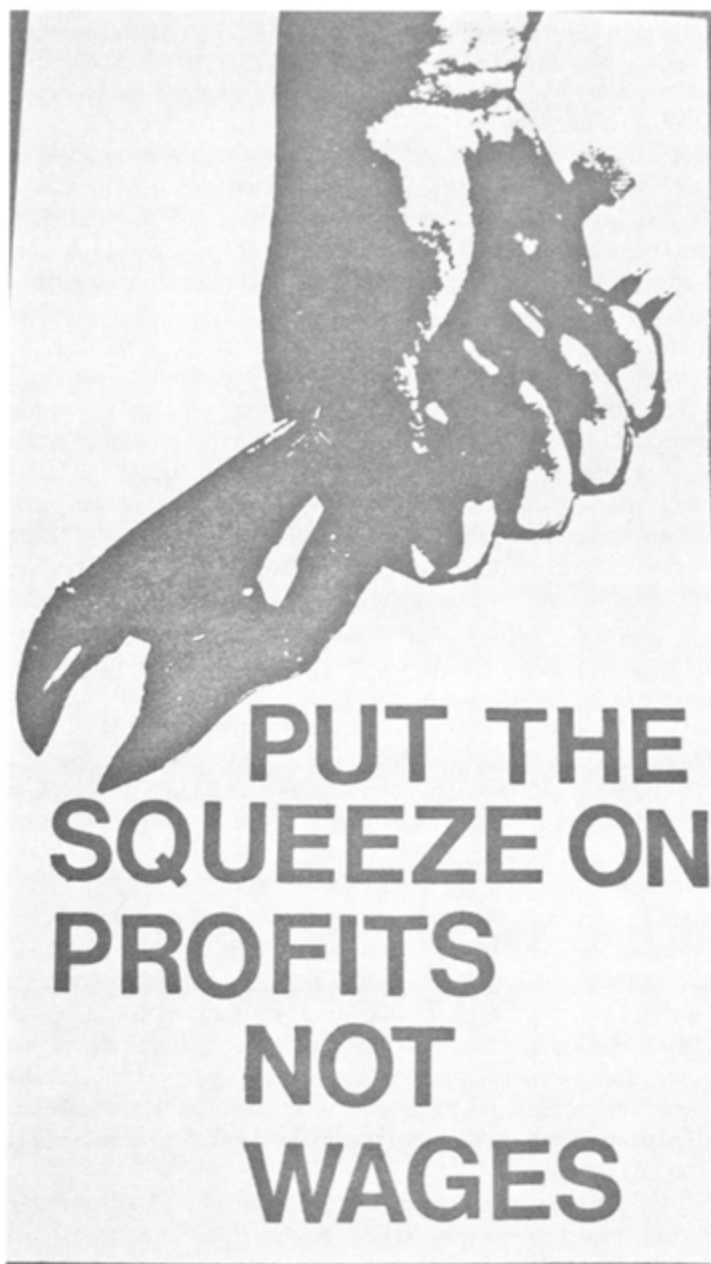
bers of Local 1263 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), working for the Regional Municipality of Niagara. In short, between 1972 and 1976, thousands of workers across Niagara were involved in prolonged and bitter labour disputes with their employers.

This strike wave in Niagara, and indeed across Canada, had immediately preceded a recession in the early 1970s which saw unemployment increase substantially along with inflation. Workers looked to the collective bargaining process to ensure that they could maintain a decent standard of living amid economic crisis, but their employers were equally determined to make certain their profit margins remained high.

The strike wave coincided with a shift in the way the state handled labour relations. A key aspect of repressive government policy was back-to-work legislation, which was used much more frequently by federal and provincial governments during this period. In fact, throughout the 1970s, federal and provincial governments ended a large number of labour disputes by handing down no less than 41 back-to-work measures. This compared to 13 back-to-work measures passed in the 1960s and just three in the 1950s. This new reliance on back-to-work legislation marked a shift in the government's attitude towards the collective bargaining process. On 14 October 1975, much to the delight of Canada's business elite, Pierre Trudeau's Liberal government announced that it would introduce a program of wage and price controls in an effort to curb inflation. Prime Minister Trudeau's Anti-Inflation Program, which suspended free collective bargaining for workers, coincided with the introduction of neoliberalism, a new economic ideology for the 1980s based on a belief in small, inactive government. Trudeau embraced this new ideology through his anti-labour policies such as the "6 and 5" program, which included limited wage increases, the temporary removal of the right to strike for Canadian public sector workers, and numerous other pieces of legislation which restricted trade union rights.

Canada's provinces took their cue from the Federal government and quickly implemented their own coercive policies aimed at organized labour. These actions included the virtual removal of the right to strike in some sectors, and continued wage restraint. Governments of all political stripes used words like "voluntarism" to hide their real agenda of coercion. This shift in policy from consent to coercion also resulted in a fundamental reversal of roles. In the postwar era, the demands of trade unions were appeased in order to maintain capitalism as a viable economic system. The new ideology shifted the focus by forcing unions to take responsibility for maintaining capitalism.

Many workers resisted this economic and political shift by engaging in mass mobilizations against government. The 14 October 1976 day of protest, held on the anniversary of the Trudeau government's announcement that it would implement a program of wage and price controls, drew tens of thousands of workers off the job across the country. The Canadian Labour Congress claimed that more than one mil-



[Put a Squeeze on Profits not Wages], *199 News*, October 1980. Special Collections and Archives, Brock University.



lion workers took part in industrial actions, including an estimated 400,000 workers in Ontario. Some Niagara workers traveled to Ottawa to join thousands of other workers demonstrating on Parliament Hill. Others engaged in a series of workplace actions in Niagara.

Autoworkers led the way by shutting down production at GM, Hayes Dana, and a number of other manufacturing plants in the Niagara region. The *St. Catharines Standard* reported that only 190 of 3500 day-shift workers at GM bothered to show up for work. Steelworkers managed to disrupt production at Niagara Structural Steel, Lord and Burnham and Seneca Steel in Beamsville. Bus drivers, caretakers, and maintenance workers who failed to report to work created disruptions for the four local school boards. The strike wave across Niagara and the rest of Canada was complemented by organizing initiatives and direct actions against rogue employers.

In 1972, in an apparent effort to avoid unionization of its part-time secretarial staff, the Welland County Roman Catholic Separate School Board fired its 43 part-time secretaries only to rehire them all from a temporary agency. In protest, the St. Catharines & District Labour Council, acting in concert with other Niagara area labour councils, presented the Board with a brief threatening a tax transfer drive. In short, area unions would encourage their members to switch their taxes from the Separate School Board to the Public Board. Although the Separate School Board went ahead with its plan to fire its secretaries, CUPE, the union seeking to represent the workers, brought the case to the Ontario Labour Relations Board. The OLRB ruled, despite the peculiar outsourcing ploy used by the School Board, that the workers were indeed employees of the Board. Part-time secretarial staff became the newest members of CUPE shortly thereafter.

In November 1972, the manager of the Skyway Lumber Company became a target of the Labour Council when he refused to allow 15 workers time off to vote in the 30 October federal election. One of the workers complained to the area Returning Officer that he was forced to quit his job in order to exercise his democratic right to vote. Labour Council President Kenneth Brisbois wrote to the manager of the company on 2 November 1972, stating that the Council "has a policy of protecting not only the organized but also the unorganized against arrogant and unscrupulous employers." He added that "this Council will not tolerate any employer violating [the Elections] Act, or any legislation that is enacted for the benefit of all the people in this country." Brisbois called on the manager to write a letter of apology and pay each worker for two extra hours or risk legal action. The manager, who had initially complained to the *St. Catharines Standard* that he could not afford to close his business to comply with the law, responded to the Labour Council's request almost immediately. On 6 November 1972, the manager wrote to the Labour Council and enclosed fifteen letters of apology with a promise to pay each worker for an additional two hours on their next paycheque.

During this period, the Labour Council also made a habit of helping out non-union hospitality workers involved in individual disputes with their employers. The Labour Council routinely wrote letters of warning to employers who engaged in unfair labour practices and helped workers file Employment Standards appeals. This type of activity cultivated a "fightback" culture within the local labour movement and solidified organized labour's place as a political force within the community.

### **From Abitibi to Gallaher — Canadian Pulp and Paper Workers Fight Back**

BY THE MID-1970s, inflation had been eating away at wage increases in the pulp and paper industry, so much so that workers had lost roughly \$1.75 per hour since 1973. When the workers asked their employers to address the decline in real wages, the giant paper companies refused to budge and in some instances hid behind the federal government's Anti-Inflation Board, arguing that they were prohibited from meeting workers' demands. On 13 May 1974, workers at Abitibi Provincial Paper in Thorold engaged in a controversial wildcat strike which shut down the plant for four days. Six hundred workers walked off the job after four of their co-workers were suspended for refusing to carry out additional duties assigned by management. The incident involving the workers, who defied back-to-work orders issued by their local executive and their national representative, foreshadowed a year of labour unrest in Ontario's pulp and paper industry. A month earlier, in April 1974, Canadian pulp and paper workers, with the help of a Thorold-based union representative named Don Holder, broke away from their international union to form the Canadian Paperworkers Union (CPU). The fractious birth of the CPU, which came about through a desire for more autonomy, was an exciting development for union activists, but the new union would not have the luxury of celebrating its rebirth for very long. With virtually no strike funds to help support its members, due to an asset dispute with the international, the CPU would take on the pulp and paper industry in an unprecedented labour struggle which would drag on for nearly eight months.

In Thorold, 700 members of CPU Local 290 at Abitibi Provincial Paper legally struck their employer on 17 July 1975. In late August, Abitibi suspended premium payments for striking employees' life insurance. During a campaign stop, Ontario NDP leader Stephen Lewis, flanked by local candidate Mel Swart, addressed the striking workers and accused Abitibi of bargaining in bad faith. Lewis declared that Abitibi "is deliberately and methodically attempting to destroy a new Canadian union and no government worth its salt should permit it."

Workers went for six weeks without any strike pay. To make up for the shortage of strike funds, the 55,000 members of the newly-minted union voluntarily donated a minimum of one hour's pay each week to the striking workers in Thorold. The St. Catharines & District Labour Council pledged both moral and financial support.

Gord Lambert, the Labour Council's president, told the media, "If Abitibi thinks they can starve the strikers into submission then they ... are only indulging in wishful thinking."

By mid-September 1975, 5000 CPU members in Ontario were on strike. The dispute which started in Thorold had spread industry-wide. CPU members at Kimberly-Clark of Canada, Domtar Fine Papers, and Beaver Wood Fibre, all located in Thorold, were walking picket lines along with workers in several northern Ontario communities. Pulp and Paperworkers in Quebec also hit the picket lines. In all, the labour dispute directly affected 2000 paperworkers in Niagara and indirectly crippled Thorold's economy, where small business was largely dependent on the wages of CPU members.

The Holy Rosary Credit Union extended \$500 a month loan credit to striking CPU members, and residents delivered food to the picket line on a daily basis. The community's support for the workers in the labour dispute between the paper mills and CPU helped deliver a decisive victory to NDP candidate Mel Swart in the 18 September 1975 provincial election. Swart, a vocal supporter of the CPU and a fixture in local politics in Thorold, had run under the CCF-NDP banner in federal and provincial elections on eight separate occasions before finally topping the polls in 1975. His breakthrough represented the NDP's first electoral victory in Niagara.

At the 1 October 1975 meeting of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council, a representative from CPU Local 290 updated delegates on the labour dispute and thanked UAW Local 199 "for its excellent financial and moral support at the plant gate collections." More than \$5000 was raised for the Paperworkers. As the strike grew longer, Local 199 offered to advertise odd jobs for CPU members in the union newsletter. In December 1975, the Labour Council made a \$1000 contribution to the strikers and one of its affiliates announced that it would be donating one hundred Christmas turkeys. A second round of plant gate collections followed.

In February 1976, the industry-wide pulp and paper strike finally came to an end when 3800 members of 13 CPU locals in Ontario and Quebec cast their ballots 83% in favour of ending the labour dispute. In the end, the workers won a modest wage increase and an indexing formula in order to prevent skyrocketing inflation from reducing wages.

Twenty-three years later, the Abitibi Provincial paper mill was the site of another important strike, but restructuring in the pulp and paper industry had created a situation wherein both the employer and the union had changed. Gallaher Thorold Paper Company was now operating the mill, and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) was representing the workers. The CEP was not entirely new, having been created in 1992 through the merger of the Canadian Paperworkers Union, the Communication and Electrical Workers of Canada and the Energy and Chemical Workers Union. However, the number of workers at the mill, still members of Local 290, had been cut in half over the years.

On 25 May 1999, Gallaher Paper declared bankruptcy and shut down operations. Three hundred members of CEP Local 290 were left jobless, but the workers were not prepared to go down without a fight.

Bankruptcy trustee Ernst and Young and creditor Toronto Dominion Bank became targets of the workers' anger. Niagara Centre NDP MPP Peter Kormos suggested that the creditor was favouring bids by companies wanting to liquidate the plant rather than run it.

In the early morning on Monday, 18 October 1999, a group of union members occupied the plant. The workers moved quickly to secure the plant by locking all gates and doors with chains. Heavy machinery was strategically placed in front of bay doors, but not before a large supply of coffee, clothing, and communications equipment made its way into the mill. CEP representative Mike Lambert told the media that the workers would stay until "smoke is once again coming from the stacks." The workers used masking tape to spell the words "SAVE JOBS" in an office window and hung a large banner from the mill which read, "Toronto Dominion Bank \$1.48 billion profit, What About Us?"

The plant occupation became an overnight media sensation, with the workers being featured on the front cover of the *Globe & Mail*. By shedding light on the impact of the manufacturing crisis on workers' lives, CEP members inspired labour activists across the country to hold companies accountable to the communities in which they operate. Members of Local 290 addressed town hall meetings and picketed TD Bank locations to gain support and educate the public. They even kept the machinery working, conscious of the fact that if it were left dormant, the new owner would be required to spend millions of dollars to get it working again. Meanwhile, the community of Thorold rallied to support their neighbours, locked inside the mill, by delivering cooked meals and other essential supplies. In response to the overwhelming support showed by the community, the workers unfurled yet another banner which read, "Your total support has been a hit. CEP Local 290 will never forget."

Twenty-six days after the occupation began, the workers emerged from the plant after a purchase agreement was finalized. On 11 November 1999, a letter of intent to buy Gallaher was signed by The Butler Group, which signaled its intention to restart the mill. By the following spring, the deal had fallen through.

Cec Makowski, an Ontario Vice-President of the CEP, looked back at the occupation and considered its importance for the labour movement. "When all other avenues have been closed there are still opportunities to achieve a successful outcome by taking a different approach, even if it's illegal. People often say, 'Hey, that's illegal.' I often say, 'Yeah, it's illegal. But your forefathers did a lot of illegal things for the labour movement. In fact, unions themselves were illegal at one time.'"

## **The Eaton's Strike: Women Workers Walk the Line**

IN 1984, the Retail Wholesale & Department Store Union (RWDSU) actively began organizing retail service workers at Eaton's locations across Ontario. The growing service sector, dominated by women and part-time workers, was seen as the labour movement's greatest organizing challenge in the postwar period, largely because of the high level of turnover and relatively small number of employees working at individual locations. Despite these obstacles, the RWDSU helped workers at six Eaton's locations, including one store in St. Catharines, to win union certification in the spring of 1984. Workers were generally upset at the working conditions in Eaton's stores, but were particularly motivated by their employers' unwillingness to provide job security or pensions.

Eaton's refused to negotiate a master agreement with the union, preferring instead to negotiate separate contracts at each and every unionized Eaton's store. This decentralized approach favoured the employer because it divided workers by location. However, the union was able to unite the predominantly female workforce around common issues, and union members agreed to a coordinated bargaining strategy that would force Eaton's to bargain with them as a group. Unionized Eaton's workers at six locations in Brampton, Toronto, London, and St. Catharines walked off the job on 30 November 1984. The plan was to disrupt normal business operations at the struck stores and picket unorganized stores.

At a 4 January 1985, rally outside the Eaton's store at the Pen Centre in St. Catharines, CLC official Shirley Carr declared "I hope Fred Eaton choked on his Christmas or New Year's turkey." The demonstrators then moved from the picket lines into the mall to take their message directly to shoppers.

Labour activists and community groups returned in February 1985 to bolster picket lines and once again bring their case to consumers. This time, however, Eaton's was ready with beefed up security and police. Chanting, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Eaton's scabs have got to go", demonstrators made their way past security and through the halls of the Pen Centre. The Niagara Regional Police waited until after the demonstration to charge Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), Local 199 President Gerry Michaud and an RWDSU organizer with trespassing. Despite the militant actions of the labour movement, Eaton's workers continued to enjoy strong support from the community. Welland-Thorold NDP MPP Mel Swart endorsed the strike and likened the labour dispute to a battle between David and Goliath.

On 12 March 1985, a group of women workers from the St. Catharines Eaton's store began a protest walk to Toronto, dubbed a "trek for fairness." Draped in several layers of clothing and running shoes, Shelley Adams, one of the striking workers, told the *St. Catharines Standard*, "We've been out now for four months. We want a pension and some job security. It's been a tight battle." The half dozen women participating in the trek for fairness arrived in Toronto three days later, where they joined a rally at Queen's Park calling for the government to pass first contract legislation. Under such law, a neutral third party would be granted the right



Pickers from St. Catharines-area unions demonstrate their displeasure with Eaton's at Pen Centre. St. Catharines & District Labour Council Collection.

to impose a first contract when a union and an employer could not reach an agreement. This type of legislation is intended to guard newly unionized workers against union-busting. However, the union recognized that it could not rely exclusively on the law to win its struggle against Eaton's.

On 13 April 1985, Niagara's four labour councils organized yet another rally in support of striking Eaton's workers in St. Catharines. The rally, which drew more than 300 people boosted morale on the picket line, where workers had been faithfully holding the fort for 20 weeks.

The "Eaton's Fairness Campaign" became an issue during the 1985 provincial election, and union activists took the opportunity to raise awareness about the strike and its impact on the company's primarily female, part-time workers. Strikers also took the opportunity to press politicians on their support for first contract legislation. The RWDSU distributed hundreds of "Boycott Eaton's" lawn signs and ran radio advertisements encouraging shoppers in Niagara to steer clear of Eaton's. The Eaton's strike was about lifting women workers out of the low-wage, casual service and retail sector. Unionization was seen as a way of achieving decent pensions and job security for workers in a traditionally unorganized industry. Although the union succeeded in winning support from the community, Eaton's relentless and hard-nosed approach to bargaining with its newly unionized employees convinced the union's leadership to give up the fight.

In May 1985, the labour dispute came to an end suddenly when the international president of the RWDSU signed a contract which was basically the same as the one Eaton's had offered the union in November 1984. Rather than ask union members to ratify the agreement, the union instead asked its members to vote on whether or not they wished to return to work. Under Ontario labour law, Eaton's could decide not to rehire striking workers if their labour dispute exceeded six months. With that deadline fast approaching, workers opted overwhelmingly to return to work in order to save their jobs.

The first contract legislation that the workers had been lobbying for finally became law in 1993 under the NDP government, but was quickly rescinded once the Mike Harris Conservatives swept to power in 1995.

## **Don't Lower the Standard**

WHEN MEDIA TYCOON Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. bought a majority stake in the Southam newspaper chain in November 1996, journalists took notice. By the end of 1996, Black owned 650 dailies and weeklies around the world. He controlled almost half of Canada's daily circulation and 70% of Ontario's newspapers, including the *St. Catharines Standard*.

Black had a reputation as a ruthless employer who routinely intervened in editorial policy decisions and engaged in severe cost-cutting at the expense of journalists, for whom he had little regard. More and more, journalists saw unionization as a

## 46 *Patrias and Savage*

way of protecting their trade and their jobs in an increasingly hostile work environment.

In 1997, the CEP, under the guise of the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild, organized workers in the *St. Catharines Standard* newsroom. "It was a bitter fight," recalled Andrew Lundy, an employee of the *Standard* and union supporter. "The publisher, Dan Gaynor, took the successful drive personally. I'm sure that paved the way for the strike and subsequent exodus of most senior reporters in 1998." When the *Standard* insisted on wage rate rollbacks, the union had no choice but to strike. The newsroom staff began walking picket lines in May 1998, and stickers which read "Don't Lower the *Standard*" started to appear all over the city. The striking workers picketed a Southam newspaper shareholders' meeting in Toronto where record profits were reported and the *Standard* imported scab labour to produce its paper. In an effort to raise awareness of the dispute and put pressure on The *Standard* to settle the contract, the striking workers launched a newspaper of their own, the *Independent*.

*"Overall, it was a fun, exhausting, and most would say worthwhile experience."*

*By Andrew Lundy*

*In May, 1998, the 30-odd newsroom staff at The Standard in St. Catharines went on strike — the first time in the paper's 100-plus year history — after talks to come up with a first contract broke down.*

*The reporters, editors and photographers decided that, in addition to picketing, we'd also start our own strike paper, The Independent. There were two main reasons: one, to show the quality of work we were capable of, and two, to drain advertising dollars away from the parent company, hurting them enough to get them bargaining from a more acceptable position.*

*Working on the paper was one of the hardest things I ever did. While also a member of the bargaining committee, I routinely pulled 18-hour days (as did many of my colleagues) reporting, editing and laying out the paper. Most of the striking reporters wrote good stories, the copy desk edited and laid out a quality publication, and the photos produced some great pics. We even had an advertising guy who recently retired from The Standard helping sell our ad space.*

*We published three weekly issues, each of which broke news that The Standard (then staffed by replacement workers and managers) did not, and featured several local advertisers who diverted their money away from The Standard.*

*The paper was distributed free, so we couldn't rightly claim to be cutting into the main newspaper, but the ads did help pay for our costs, along with the generous help of CEP, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers our union. Once the strike was settled, the paper disappeared.*

*Andrew Lundy is a former St. Catharines Standard striker*



The *Independent* was launched on 30 May 1998. Paul O'Brien, Unit Chair of CEP Local 87-M, explained in the first edition of the newspaper that the idea for producing the *Independent* came from striking newsroom workers in Welland who had created the *Guardian Express* years earlier in order to exert pressure on their employer to settle a contract. The now-defunct *Guardian Express* was so well received by the community that it continued to operate for nearly a decade after the strike. In the case of the *Independent*, the union published roughly 45,000 copies of the 20 page tabloid-style newspaper, which were distributed weekly free of charge. The newspaper talked about the labour dispute, but also tackled community-wide issues such as restructuring in the automotive sector, cruelty to animals, and mould in portable classrooms. According to an article in the first edition of the *Independent*, "the main issues of the labour dispute include wage rollbacks of up to 12 per cent for new employees, threats to the photography department, and a gag order that journalists fear attacks the very basis of their craft — free speech." Unions, community groups and small businesses kept the weekly newspaper afloat through advertising. In one advertisement, the Niagara New Democratic Youth injected some humour into the politically-charged strike by asking: "Q: What's the difference between Conrad Black and a trampoline? A: You should always take your shoes off before jumping on a trampoline." After a three week strike, the *Standard* reached a deal with its newsroom staff and the union ceased publication of the *Independent* shortly after its 13 June 1998 edition was distributed to the community. Although most of the workers were proud of their first contract, which included improvements to benefits and language in the collective agreement, roughly one third of them took buyouts or simply left shortly after the strike. Although the union was forced to accept a two-tiered wage system in order to settle the contract, the disparity between the tiers management was proposing was narrowed significantly as a result of the strike. More importantly, the union remained intact. A strike involving the same publisher, which took place at the *Calgary Herald* shortly after the *Standard* strike, ended with the newspaper breaking the back of the union. The newsroom workers at the *Standard* not only avoided decertification but actually improved their union contract in several key areas.

On the surface, most of the key labour struggles discussed in this book could be characterized as defeats for the unions and the workers involved. Autoworkers held out several extra weeks in 1970 and gained very little in return; the occupation of the Gallaher paper mill, ultimately, did not result in a new buyer; workers at Eaton's walked picket lines for over five months without winning any substantial contract gains; and a handful of striking journalists opted to leave their jobs rather than live under a new contract. These examples may even provide fodder for those who contend that unions have outlived the usefulness. However, to treat these labour disputes as labour defeats would be to ignore the deep impact these struggles had both inside and outside of the workplace. Fighting back does make a difference. If unions consistently succumbed to the inevitability of the corporate agenda, workers

would eventually give in to the lie that nothing could be done to reverse the neo-liberal tide. The reality is that workers who stand strong and take part in pivotal labour disputes almost always help prevent further attacks on unions in other workplaces. Labour struggles can also have a profound impact on public opinion and, as the Eaton's strike showed, result in public policy changes.

### **Labour Builds the Community: Brock University**

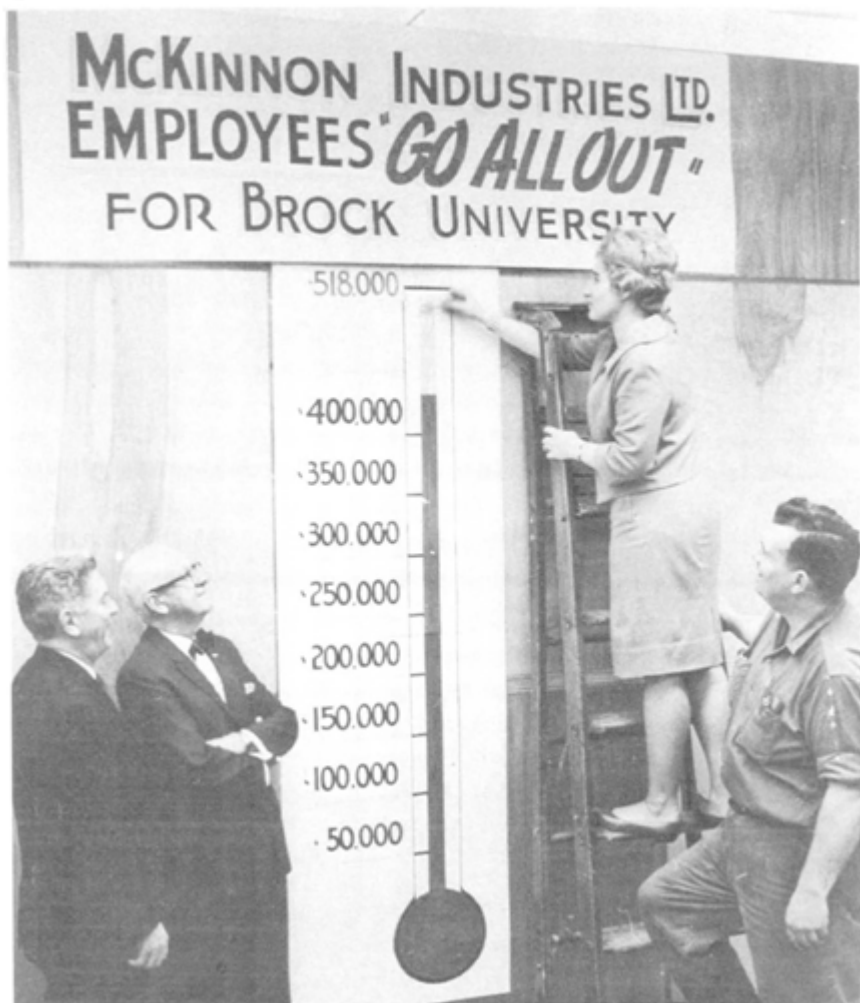
IN THE EARLY 1960s, community leaders in Niagara floated the idea of building a university that would serve the Peninsula. Early on, the committee responsible for raising funds for the university identified organized labour as an important source of support for the project. At the time, there were roughly 40,000 unionized workers in Niagara, making an average weekly wage of \$95. These workers, who belonged to 175 locals of 52 national and international unions, were considered essential to a successful fund-raising campaign.

Workers were interested in the prospect of job creation that would come with a university, but were more intrigued by the fact that a local university would be more affordable and keep families closer together. A fund-raising analysis developed by Brakeley G.A. and Company argued that "many girls whose families might otherwise be able to educate only their sons, will have the opportunity to attend Brock." This type of argument was particularly appealing to trade unionists with a 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 deduction and in-plant solicitation was the best approach to fund-raising among union members. It was estimated that unionized workers, based on a participation rate of 30%, 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 for the next five years. Organized labour had set a goal of \$1,000,000 for itself, far exceeding earlier estimates.

*"Labour and Brock Work Together"*

*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.*



McKinnon Workers' Contributions to Brock University Building Fund. Special Collection and Archives. Brock University.

*When the Founders Committee of Brock University was constituted, Lynn Williams of the United Steelworkers of America became Labour's representative on the Committee. With the founding of Brock, The Founders Committee became the first Board of Governors and Lynn Williams represented Labour on that body.*

*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.*

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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.

From the 1968 Edition of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council *Annual Review*

By 1970, organized labour had surpassed its target, raising \$1,410,500 for the University's Founding Fund. This amount represented 21.7% of the total amount raised by the University's Founding 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 was run with 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 benefited from 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. While servicing USWA locals in Niagara in the 1960s, Williams became organized labour's representative on the Founders Committee of Brock University. During his time on the Founders Committee, Williams was instrumental in successfully encouraging workers in the Niagara region to contribute, through payroll deduction, to Brock University's Founding Fund. As a member of Brock's first Board of Governors, Williams initiated the Brock Invitational Lectures. Well-known labour academics and high-ranking union officials came to the university to deliver lectures on issues facing workers and their workplaces. In 1973, Williams left Niagara after being elected district director of the USWA. In 1977 he was elected international secretary, and in 1984, he was elected president of the international union. In 1985, Williams, the first Canadian to be elected to the USWA's top spot, was awarded an honorary degree from Brock. He was re-elected twice before retiring in 1994.

For Williams, convincing workers to contribute to the establishment of Brock University was easy. "Why wouldn't we do it?" asked Williams. "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." Williams was key to organizing voluntary dues check off in unionized shops throughout the Niagara Region.

"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. In the same vein, Williams believed that labour's participation in the building of Brock University was key to ensuring that la-

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bour would continue to play an important role in its development. For Williams, education was essential to building a strong labour movement. He envisioned that the University could help the labour movement by orienting research in a way that could help the local economy prosper. He also believed that the existence of Brock University would help to diversify Niagara's economy.

### *"Final Report"*

#### *Brock University Founding Fund*

*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.*

In 1989, partly in recognition of organized labour's role in building the University, Brock launched the Centre for Labour Studies. Ester Reiter, a professor of sociology at Brock, gave an intellectual justification for union education at the university level in the St. Catharines & District Labour Council's *Annual Review*.

### *"Labour Studies at Brock"*

*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*

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*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 daycare 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, unionization of the University's own workforce came slowly. Maintenance and janitorial staff worked under union contracts early on, but it would take decades before a majority of the university's workforce was unionized.

In 1996, Brock University faculty voted 64% in favour of union certification, and the University's professional librarians voted 75% in favour of unionization. Brock's faculty and professional librarians chose to unionize for a handful of reasons. The election of the Mike Harris Conservatives in June 1995 gave university workers 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's administration had made a series of arbitrary policy decisions in the areas of workload and discipline. 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.

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.

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*"Here We Grow Again. OSSTF organizes first university group."*

*By Heidi Klose*

*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*

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*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.*

Heidi Klose is an administrative assistant in the History Department at Brock University.

In 2007, the overwhelming majority of workers at Brock University belong to labour unions. Indeed, there are five separate union locals on campus, representing roughly 2000 workers.

### **The Politics of Labour: Unions and the NDP**

ON 1 JUNE 1960, the St. Catharines & District Labour Council adopted a resolution endorsing the CLC's drive to create a new political party in Canada. 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, told delegates "My local doesn't feel it should tell its members how to vote." Labour Council President John Ideson scoffed at that 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."

The Council made a contribution to the New Party Founding Fund and enthusiastically worked 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 cross-over from the union leadership and the NDP leadership in Niagara was evident. However, when a group of leftists breathed new life into a moribund labour council in the mid-1970s, the labour-NDP alliance was temporarily threatened.

At the September 1975 meeting of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council, NDP and Communist Party candidates running in the provincial election came to address delegates. After brief speeches, a USWA delegate moved that the Council officially support the NDP. But the communist candidate in attendance also won an endorsement through the backdoor when a successful amendment to support "any candidate who declares himself as a supporter of labour" was carried with the support of devout leftists like John Clout and Gord Lambert. Although both Communist and NDP candidates went down to defeat in the 18 September 1975 election, New Democrat Mel Swart was victorious in the neighbouring riding of Welland, which included Thorold.





Niagara area labour council presidents present Mel Swart MPP with an award for his contribution to the local labour movement. St. Catharines & District Labour Council Collection.

Mel Swart was unquestionably the most successful left-wing politician in the history of Niagara. He inherited his democratic socialist values from his father, who was 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. His first successful election was in 1948, when he won a spot on Thorold Township Council. Swart served for 18 years on Council – the last eleven of those years as Reeve. Swart later jumped to regional politics and was elected as Thorold's representative to Regional Council. While serving on Thorold Township Council, Swart ran for the CCF in a 1950 by-election, then again in 1953, 1957 and 1958, finishing third in each contest. When the CCF morphed into the NDP, Swart once again ran for the party in the 1962 federal election. After his election loss in 1962, Swart 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 before retiring in 1988. 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.

Swart's election, combined with an economic and political shift to the right over the course of the late 1970s, wiped out 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 CAW Local 199 took over the St. Catharines & District Labour Council, thus solidifying the labour-NDP alliance. Throughout the early 1980s, the labour-NDP alliance was stronger than ever on both the national and local levels. CAW Local 199 President and St. Catharines & 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% of the popular vote.

After his retirement in 1988, Swart 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 would be joined by four more NDPMPs from Niagara as part of Ontario's first NDP government.

Kormos was easily re-elected in September 1990, taking more than 60% of the popular vote. He was appointed Minister of Consumer and Commercial Relations and Minister of Financial Institutions, until Bob Rae removed him from cabinet for his maverick reputation and 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 & 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 particularly hard hit due 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 benefited from much of the economic insecurity experienced by workers and their families. Voters moved to the NDP in droves, in the hopes that the party would not fight the recession on the backs of the working class.

The Ontario NDP's record in office has been the subject of much debate. A deep recession, a hostile media, a suspicious senior civil service, and political inexperience have all been blamed for the party's poor performance as a government.

However, one thing is clear: 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 debt, and Ontario's looming recession would only make the province's financial standing worse. Fighting Ontario's devastating recession was driving up the province's debt rapidly. 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 through unpaid days off, known as "Rae Days". The government argued that its plan to reduce its wage bill by \$2 billion through a Social Contract would allow it to preserve jobs while controlling the deficit. However, union leaders argued that the Social Contract was an attack on basic trade union freedoms.

In early June 1993, roughly 100 CUPE members picketed the office of St. Catharines-Brock NDP MPP Christel Haeck. Haeck called the Social Contract "ground-breaking legislation in how to restructure government and the employee-employer relationship." 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." Others were less reserved. "I'm ashamed of my party, the New Democratic Party," proclaimed CUPE Ontario President Sid Ryan. 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 & District Labour Council. Haeck appeared before her former colleagues on the Labour Council to explain the government's position, but she didn't find many sympathetic delegates. After a fractious debate, the Labour Council decided not to endorse Haeck's re-election bid.

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 cabinet over her opposition to the Social Contract. She later joined Welland-Thorold NDP MPP Peter Kormos and one other NDP caucus member to vote against the legislation at Queen's Park. Kormos explained his opposition to the Social Contract in an article for the 1993 St. Catharines & District Labour Council *Annual Review* which featured a cover in which the acronym "NDP" is going up in flames.

*"Betrayed: Social Contract Bill a Problem for All Working People"*

By Peter Kormos

*In little more than 90 days after the proposition of a social contract was presented to the NDP Caucus at Queen's Landing in Niagara-On-The-Lake, Bill 48 became law. Only three members of the NDP Caucus voted 'no'. I was proud to be among the three.*

*As a long time 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 long time NDP 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 NDP government that would legislatively nullify collective bargaining agreements?*

*Some MPPs 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 CCF then the NDP, 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 long time NDP 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.*

Peter Kormos is MPP for Welland-Thorold. This article appeared in the 1993 *Annual Labour Review*

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% of the popular vote. On 22 November 1993, the Ontario Federation of Labour passed a resolution condemning those NDP MPPs who voted for the Social Contract Act. Among the delegates supporting the resolution was Ontario NDP President Julie Davis. "It's sad we've come to this," she lamented. 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 Niagara, Peter Kormos managed to hold on to his Welland-Thorold seat, largely based on a local campaign against the government. 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 silver lining for activists in the labour movement was that the weakening of the labour-NDP partnership led to unprecedented grassroots coalition building and direct actions.

### **St. Catharines Day of Action 1 May 1998**

ON 1 MAY 1998, thousands of union members, community activists and concerned citizens converged in Montebello Park in downtown St. Catharines as part of a series of demonstrations against the right-wing provincial government of Mike Harris which had replaced the NDP in 1995. The city-by-city demonstrations were known as the "Days of Action," and the tagline for the St. Catharines event read "Niagara Fights Back." In a flyer advertising the 1 May 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 & District Labour Council President Ed Gould acted as co-chair of the event which attracted major media attention. In the days leading up to the 1 May 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, healthcare and education, and a "tent city" and "jobs cemetery" were erected to shed light on the growing plight of the homeless and unemployed. 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 was 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 orga-



St. Catharines Day of Action 1 May 1998. *St. Catharines Standard*.

nized labour. Despite the promise of independent political action, most unions simply did not have the capacity to develop an independent culture of direct 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.

In August 2006, CAW convention delegates voted to sever all ties to the New Democratic Party 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 some voters to cast ballots for Liberal candidates. Adopting strategic voting was not new — several unions had adopted the same course of action in the 1999 Ontario election, in an attempt to prevent the Mike Harris Conservatives from winning re-election, but Hargrove's very public show of support for Prime Minister Paul Martin in 2006 was the last straw for many New Democrats.

Hargrove's decision did not sit well with local autoworkers in St. Catharines either. In fact, CAW Local 199 is one of the few autoworkers locals that remain affiliated with the NDP despite the decision of the CAW convention.

## **Labour and Local Politics**

ALTHOUGH MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT is the level of government closest to the people, it is often overlooked. However, unions have increasingly focused on municipal government due to downloading and privatization of municipal services. Many union activists in Niagara have run for elected office at the local level. However, very few have had successful careers in municipal government, largely due to the heavy influence that developers tend to exert on city councils. That said, several trade union activists in Niagara have provided a strong voice for organized labour as elected representatives.

In a 1968 article in the *St. Catharines Labour Review*, Mel Swart issued a call to arms for unions to get more deeply involved in municipal government.

### *"Labour's Role in Municipal Politics"*

*By Mel Swart*

*There can be little doubt that Labour has a very real stake in the operation of local government. This is true in two respects. Municipalities are substantial employers of labour and, obviously, the attitude and practices of councils toward their employees affect the standard of living and well being of these workers and their families. Of equal importance; taxation and general policy decisions of local councils are of real concern to labour people generally because they constitute the largest group — often a majority of the ratepayers in many municipalities.*

*It has been often said that municipal government is the grass roots level of democracy because it is closest to the people. If this is the case (and there is some truth in it)*

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*it is to our shame that municipalities have often been the leaders in denying democratic rights to their employees. Until recently, the Ontario Government had permitted municipalities to opt out of the provisions of the Labour Relations Act. Many municipalities took advantage of this medieval legislation and thus prevented their employees from having any real bargaining power. This failure of democratic government to give full democratic rights to its employees is still true at the provincial and national level. It's one of the major responsibilities of labour to remove such iniquitous legislation at every level of government and replace it with labour laws that will give fair treatment to public employees and serve as a model for private employers.*

*Municipal taxation is basically an unfair form of taxation because it is not based on wealth, income or any yardstick of "ability to pay." It is predicated rather on the out-dated concept of a hundred years ago that real property ownership is the major criterion of wealth. Of course, stocks, bonds, and other financial holdings as well as income from wages, salaries and investments is now a much better indication of a person's ability to pay.*

*Proof of the unfairness of present municipal taxation is supplied by a recent study of municipal tax in relation to income. It shows that an average home owner making \$5,000.00 annually pays eight percent of his income in municipal taxes; one making \$10,000.00 pays six percent; and those making \$50,000.00 pay only three percent. The lower and middle income groups are thus paying a far higher share than they should be of education and many other municipal costs. In fact, it's a graduated tax in reverse! The lower your income, the higher percentage of it you pay in taxation. Taxation reform is obviously long overdue and you're not going to get it from those who benefit from the status quo. So labour has a job to do here.*

*There are other policies related to municipal taxation that should concern labour too. Just recently the City of Laval imposed a three percent tax on apartment rentals. This is paid by the tenants, not the apartment owners. It constitutes double taxation because, of course, the normal taxes are included in the rental charge. The newspaper account said that other cities are considering adopting the same plan.*

*The Ontario Government, last year, passed an Act permitting municipalities to postpone tax payments by the elderly. It is poor legislation because the taxes become a debt against the property and ultimately have to be paid. However, many municipalities have declined to use even this limited help to the hard pressed.*

*All of these things add up to the need for action by labour at the municipal level. It can't afford not to concern itself with community affairs.*

*Labour action should take several forms. Major unions and every Labour Council requires a civic government committee. It should not hesitate to make its views known to Council, not only on labour matters, but on all other major items that affect the welfare of the average citizen.*

*As necessary as it sometimes is to lobby councils into action, it is, at best, only a second rate method of achieving desirable goals. The best method is for labour people to become involved at the decision making levels of our democracy. Because they make up such a large proportion of the citizenry, they have the right to expect appointment of competent members of their group to local planning boards, park commis-*



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*sions, transportation, authorities, hospital boards and so forth. Labour should not hesitate to go after these positions.*

*Appointments, however, are not the final goal. That goal is to elect labour people, or persons sympathetic to labour to our councils. I am a firm believer that councils should represent a broad cross section of the community. If this belief is valid then those associated with, and sympathetic to the working people should be the largest group on council. It is labour's duty to see that this goal is reached.*

*Ultimately, there will be in this province political parties at the local government level. All progressive forces can then direct their combined efforts toward electing the party that will truly represent the common people. In the meantime however, we must elect progressive councillors on an individual basis.*

*I must express the opinion that in our present stage of political development it is unwise to run a labour slate for council in most municipalities. It may well doom them to defeat. Instead, organized labour should encourage its able members to run as individuals with all assistance possible being given by the labour movement. After all, you don't see the business community officially putting up a slate of officers, but they don't do badly in getting their people on council, do they?*

*One final comment must be made. Don't ever believe that "working people" make poor representatives on council. On the contrary, they often make the best. Because they are able to view issues from the standpoint of the ordinary ratepayers, their decisions are usually practical ones.*

*Harry Emerson Fosdick once said: "Democracy is the conviction that there are extra ordinary possibilities in ordinary people." Election of labour people to our local councils is therefore really an extension of democracy which will not only benefit labour but be good for society as a whole.*

Long-time municipal politician Bill Marshall was one of Niagara's most prominent trade union activists. Marshall was elected shop steward at Hayes Steel in Merritton in 1949 and helped lead his co-workers, member of UAW Local 676, on strike shortly thereafter. In 1952, he was elected business agent for the local and also won election as an alderman for the town of Merritton. After a failed bid to win the mayor's chair in 1957, Marshall returned to municipal politics as a ward councillor for Merritton when the town was amalgamated with St. Catharines in 1960. During his time on St. Catharines City Council, the UAW appointed Marshall to an international representative position in Niagara, where along with the Labour Council he continued to do outstanding work for community agencies like the United Way. Marshall successfully switched to regional government when it was established in 1970 and worked as both a municipal politician and a union representative for over a decade. Marshall retired from the UAW in 1982, but continued to serve as a Regional Councillor for St. Catharines until 1988.

Former UAW 199 President John Washuta served for decades as a ward councillor in St. Catharines before retiring from local politics in 1997. Washuta's son, Greg, followed in his father's political footsteps by winning a seat on St. Catharines

City council for the St. George's ward in the November 1997 municipal election. That same year, CUPE activist Janice Wing was elected to Niagara Falls City Council. Malcolm Allen, who serves as secretary-treasurer of CAW Local 199, was elected as a ward councillor in Pelham in the 2000 municipal election, and Shawn Wilson, a Regional Niagara employee and CUPE Local 1287 member, won a seat on Thorold City Council in 2006. Jeff Burch, a staff representative for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), also won a seat in the 2006 municipal election as a ward councillor for Merriton ward in St. Catharines.

### **From Unemployment to Organizing**

FIGHTING UNEMPLOYMENT has always been a priority for the labour movement in Niagara. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, organized labour held community forums and sent deputations to St. Catharines City Hall on the issue of unemployment and homelessness. However, the greatest test of organized labour's influence came during deep recessionary periods in the early 1980s and early 1990s.

In 1980, GM initiated a major layoff which had a significant impact on the community. With unemployment hovering just under 20% in the St. Catharines-Niagara area in 1981, the St. Catharines & District Labour Council asked government to fund work projects in order to assist laid-off workers in obtaining the required number of weeks needed to requalify for unemployment insurance benefits, which were set to expire at the end of January 1982. Around the same time, several autoworkers from St. Catharines joined a "marathon of despair" to protest high interest rates, which were crippling homeowners and precipitating plant closures and layoffs. St. Catharines & District Labour Council President Len Harrison, who helped organize the marathon of runners who took turns jogging from St. Catharines to the Scarborough home of Housing Minister Paul Cosgrove, dropped off a telegram to the minister demanding his resignation.

Six months later, local autoworkers took another hit with GM's announcement that it was planning to close its Welland Avenue plant in St. Catharines. In June 1982, an estimated 1200 UAW members and supporters participated in a march from the UAW hall on Bunting Road to the Welland Avenue Plant. Protesting autoworkers continued to blame the Trudeau government's failure to address high interest rates for the plant closing. Many union members waved placards which read, "Export Trudeau, not our jobs!"

By December 1982, the unemployment rate in St. Catharines-Niagara rose to just over 20%. According to Statistics Canada, the Niagara Region ranked second of 32 areas across Canada in unemployment. The consistently high levels of unemployment prompted the St. Catharines & District Labour Council to organize a union of the unemployed, in order to pressure government to initiate a number of anti-poverty measures which included extending unemployment insurance benefits, eliminating regressive sales taxes on Canadian-made products, and lowering

interest rates. Nearly 100 unemployed workers packed the UAW hall for the inaugural meeting of the new group. Within the next few months, the Labour Council managed to launch the Unemployed Help Centre with the assistance of progressive church organizations and government. The drop-in centre for unemployed workers provided job listings, counseling, and a soup kitchen.

Although the economic recession was over by the mid-1980s, the election of Brian Mulroney's Conservatives in 1984 signaled that the war against working families was not about to let up. The Mulroney government led an unprecedented attack on Canada's social safety net and embarked on the most ambitious privatization spree in Canadian history. In 1987, the Mulroney government negotiated a free trade agreement with the United States. Acting for the benefit of corporate interests in both Canada and the United States, the negotiation of a free trade deal guaranteed corporate Canada unrestricted access to the American economy while providing corporate interests in the United States greater access to Canada's vast resources. The Canadian labour movement joined progressive community groups and political organizations to fight the trade deal, proposing instead that Canada achieve a "fair trade" deal which would protect Canadian sovereignty and Canadian workers. The labour movement in Niagara organized vigorously against the free trade agreement, holding a number of town hall meetings to raise awareness about the impact of a free trade deal on the local economy. NDP candidates won a record high share of the popular vote in the 1988 federal election, which was considered a referendum on free trade. However, the anti-free trade forces split between the NDP and the Liberals, thus allowing the Conservatives to win a second majority government despite winning only 43% of the popular vote. The labour movement's all-out war against the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement in the late 1980s, although ultimately unsuccessful, demonstrated the labour movement's strength as an independent, progressive coalition builder. As for the trade deal, it precipitated massive layoffs in Ontario's manufacturing sector while failing to liberalize trade in key areas, like softwood lumber. Union membership in Niagara dropped dramatically as a result of the trade deal, as the manufacturing sector began to shrink at an alarming rate. Some unions remained complacent, oblivious to the fact that increased levels of unionization in the Region's public sector have masked the significant decline in private-sector union density in Niagara. Some private-sector unions have turned to organizing in order to reverse the negative trend in union membership by reaching out to workers in the expanding service sector. The USWA successfully organized telemarketers at Telespectrum in St. Catharines, while the CAW has been less successful in its several attempts to unionize casino workers in Niagara Falls.

## Conclusion

THE CONFRONTATION, struggle and transformation implicit in the experience of labour convinced workers of the need for collective advocacy and action in defense of their common interests. The growth and development of labour unions as a political and economic force, in the form of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council and similar organizations elsewhere in Canada, has delivered benefits to the working class that would have been otherwise unrealizable. In the workplace, unions 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 healthcare, organized labour has been at the forefront of the wider struggle for social justice and economic equality. Thanks in part to the participation of women and immigrants in unions, the labour movement in St. Catharines 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. More women now serve on union and district council executives and not merely as recording secretaries. At the same time, however, new market realities in the St. Catharines area, 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, unorganized, part-time, 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 sector, the replacement of immigrant workers with migrant workers from the Caribbean and Latin America, under a programme that prevents them from settling in Canada, presents additional challenges to the labour movement. In these circumstances, labour unions are among the few remaining defenses against the pressures of globalization, which consistently threaten to prioritize corporate power and profits and environmental expediency above the health and well-being of workers and their families.

In 2007 the labour movement can note the long history of work and workers in St. Catharines and environs, celebrate fifty years of united effort in the form of the St. Catharines and District Labour Council, draw inspiration from its struggles and successes, and prepare for the many challenges and transformations that lie ahead.

**Presidents of the St. Catharines & District Labour Council**

1957-1965	John Ideson (UAW 199)
1965-1966	Walter Scott (USWA 6399)
1966-1967	Ronald Deane (CUPE 157)
1967-1970	Dizz Dean (LCUC 17)
1970-1975	Kenneth Brisbois (UAW 199)
1975-1979	Gordon Lambert (UAW 199)
1979-1980	Joe Bouchard (CUPE 1045)
1980-1985	Len Harrison (UAW-CAW 199)
1985-1988	Al Godin (LCUC 17)
1988-1991	Rob West (CPU 1521)
1991-1992	Gabe MacNally (CAW 199)
1992-1993	Patti Poirier (USWA 6595)
1993-1997	Gabe MacNally (CAW 199)
1997-2000	Ed Gould (CAW 199)
2000-2007	Sue Hotte (OSSTF District 22)

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## **Images**

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Special Collections, James Gibson Library, Brock University

## **Interviews**

Lynn Williams  
John Boyd  
Paul Siren



Québec, Canada

2007





## CONFRONTATION, STRUGGLE AND TRANSFORMATION

is the story of working women  
and men in the St. Catharines  
area from the mid-1800s to  
the present.

The study explores the labour  
movement's fight to survive and  
thrive in the Niagara region.  
Thanks to extensive quotations  
from interviews, archival sources  
and local newspapers, the story  
unfolds, in part, through the voices  
of the people themselves:

workers who fought  
for unions, community  
members who supported  
them and employers who  
opposed them.

Carmela Patrias teaches  
history at Brock University.

Larry Savage teaches labour  
studies and political science  
at Brock University.

"I certainly was not forced or coerced into joining the union. I joined because it stands for democracy, which is what we are trying to fight for. There are plenty of millionaires being made out of this war and they sure do not care who gives their lives as long as they rake in the money. We don't want Hitler here, but we are being run by a few "would-be" Hitlers. The working man of McKinnons should be able to live not merely exist and have the right to save a dollar and send their children to college the same as G.M.'s executives do. The workers are the ones that count and should not be treated as ignorant dogs."

**Girl Striker, McKinnon strike 1941.**



"The second inherent fault in the secret ballot formula is that it gives an opportunity for union organizers, by means of intensive propaganda campaigns and the making of specious but unfulfillable promises, to whip up a sentiment for the union of a most transitory kind, by inculcating a belief that only by casting a vote for the union can the worker secure any benefit whatever."

**J. L. Gabriel Keogh, speaking to the Ontario government's 1943 Select Committee to Inquire into Collective Bargaining between Employers and Workers, on behalf of a Niagara Peninsula employers' association.**

"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."

**Ester Reiter, Department of Sociology, Brock University, 1989.**

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