

Immigrants, Communists, and Solidarity Unionism in Niagara, c. 1930–1960

Carmela Patrias

Volume 82, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058026ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2018.0038>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Patrias, C. (2018). Immigrants, Communists, and Solidarity Unionism in Niagara, c. 1930–1960. *Labour / Le Travail*, 82.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2018.0038>

Article abstract

Focusing on the Niagara region, this study explains the continued adherence of thousands of Canadian workers to communist-led unions during the Cold War era. It argues that co-operation between communist-led unions and communist-led ethnic clubs and other political and social activists in the pursuit of human rights, social justice, and environmental goals explains why thousands of workers continued to adhere to such unions despite intense redbaiting in the 1940s and 1950s. Reaching out to allies beyond the workplace in solidarity unionism was especially important because of the marginalization of communist-led unions within the Canadian labour movement. The study's findings reinforce the view that local economic and political conditions played a significant role in shaping communist-led unions in Canada. The study also highlights the contribution of interethnic collaboration among immigrant workers to the development of the Canadian labour movement.

ARTICLE

Immigrants, Communists, and Solidarity Unionism in Niagara, c.1930–1960

Carmela Patrias

C. S. JACKSON, HEAD OF THE CANADIAN division of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union (UE), visited Welland, Ontario, during an organizing drive in 1942. Thirty-eight years later he recalled,

There were so many people outside the building I had to fight my way into the hall. When I got to the front of the hall I could see there was no point wasting time. I gave a five-minute speech and started handing out the membership cards. The demands for the cards were coming from outside as well as inside the hall. Cards were going across this way and coming back with two dollars attached to them. We had \$50 in the treasury of the union at the time and I took about 700 or 800 dollars out of there that night because it was \$2 initiation.¹

Welland became one of the UE's success stories. "In many ways," writes Jackson's biographer Doug Smith, "the UE became the union in that community. By 1960, the union had contracts covering 13 local industries and UE members and their families accounted for 10,000 of the 33,000 people who lived in the community."² Although Welland and its industrial suburb, Crowland, formed the UE's nucleus in Niagara, the communist-led union's influence extended to other communities on the peninsula. It represented the workers of American Cyanamid, the largest employer in Niagara Falls, as well as those of Yale and Towne in St. Catharines. These Niagara workers remained loyal to the UE at the height of the Cold War. Two other communist-led unions, the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA, later the Canadian Textile Council, or CTC) and

1. C. S. Jackson, interview by James Turk, 29 November 1980, cited in Doug Smith, *Cold Warrior: C. S. Jackson and the United Electrical Workers* (St. John's: Canadian Committee for Labour History, 1997), 118.

2. Smith, *Cold Warrior*, 119–120. See also Peter Hunter, *Which Side Are You On Boys: Canadian Life on the Left* (Toronto: Lugs, 1988).

Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill), also enjoyed worker support in Niagara through most of these years. The pro-communist sympathies within United Automobile Workers (UAW) Local 199 in St. Catharines – the largest union local in Niagara – were sufficiently strong to sustain a left-wing caucus and at times to elect its members as the local's officers.

Understandably, students of the Canadian labour movement have concentrated on the fight between communist-led and anticommunist unions within Canada's labour federations during this period and the eventual ascendancy of the anticommunist forces. We know far less about the continued adherence of thousands of Canadian workers to communist-led unions through the years of the Cold War. Studies that focus on the persistence of this form of alternative unionism generally ascribe it to the experience, ability, commitment, and militancy of communist union activists. These studies suggest that the pragmatism of communist activists, especially their willingness to focus on bread-and-butter issues, was the main cause of their success.³ Because of that pragmatism, some scholars maintain, communist-led unions came to resemble mainstream unions in many respects. The imposition of Canada's postwar industrial relations regime rendered even formerly radical unions increasingly bureaucratic, and distanced union leadership from the rank and file.⁴

The goal of this study is to offer a different view of the role of communist-led unions during the years of the postwar compromise. It argues that the strength and endurance of communist-led unions in Niagara during the 1940s and 1950s were based on their co-operation with political and social activists from outside the labour movement, especially with communist-led ethnic clubs, in community-wide – at times even regional – social justice, human rights, and environmental campaigns. Their campaigns thus came to involve not only workers belonging to the unions, but the workers' families and neighbours as well. Such unionism is what scholars describe as alternative, community-based, or solidarity unionism. Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd believe that the absence of effective national organizations led rank-and-file unionists to reach outside the workplace to establish "horizontal networks of mutual support."⁵ In the case of communist-led unions in Niagara, marginalization within the labour movement – especially their ouster from Canada's

3. I. M. Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 25, 221; Reg Whitaker & Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945–1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 360.

4. An exception to this are studies of Sudbury's Local 589 of the United Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union; however, they consider its relevance and community base without examining the question of its communist links. See Mercedes Steedman, Peter Suchnigg & Dieter K. Buse, eds., *Hard Lessons: The Mine-Mill Union in the Canadian Labour Movement* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1995).

5. Alice Lynd & Staughton Lynd, eds., *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011), xi.



May Day Parade, Welland-Crowland, 1946.

LAC: e011196432.

main labour federations – explains the tendency of these unions to collaborate with individuals and groups outside the unions, especially communist-led ethnic clubs.⁶

As the following pages show, the central importance of ethnic clubs to Niagara's solidarity unionism rested on a combination of five characteristics of Niagara's cities, towns, and villages. First, a higher proportion of immigrants settled in Niagara in the early 20th century than in most other Ontario regions, with the notable exception of resource-rich northern Ontario. Second, new arrivals from eastern and southern Europe encountered racist discrimination in employment and housing in Niagara. Third, the particular ethnic mix meant that some of these immigrants supported left-wing ideas and had experience with labour organizations. Fourth, the relatively small size of these communities, which promoted awareness of their shared marginalization, allowed immigrant workers to transcend ethnic boundaries in the effort to counter discriminatory employment and residential practices and rally behind

6. Julie Guard offers a similar interpretation. Guard, "The 'Woman Question' in Canadian Unionism: Women in the UE, 1930s to 1960s," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1994, esp. Chap. 3.

the most experienced activists among them. Finally, the dense settlement of the region meant that workers residing in one community not infrequently worked, shopped, and spent leisure time in a neighbouring one. Hence they helped to spread solidarity unionism from Welland/Crowland – its centre – to other parts of the peninsula.

This study contributes to two areas of social history: the history of labour and the left, and ethnic and immigration history. A growing number of students of labour and the left in both Canada and the United States stress that far from comprising a monolithic movement that followed directives from Moscow “slavishly,” communist-led labour unions in North America were shaped by local economic and political conditions.⁷ The case of Niagara supports this interpretation by showing that the makeup and concerns of local workers were at least as significant in shaping the actions of communist-led union locals as directions from the Communist Party of Canada (CPC).⁸ The study’s contribution to ethnic and immigration history is its analysis of interethnic collaboration by working-class immigrants and other racialized minorities in the development of organized labour in Canada. Such an approach is unfortunately still rare.⁹ All too often the character and nature of available sources have converged with scholars’ interests to encourage a focus on single ethnic or immigrant groups. But by their very nature such studies, while highly valuable contributions to a larger mosaic, obscure the existence and impact of the type of interethnic collaboration that occurred in Niagara and more than likely in other Canadian communities. Without recognizing such collaboration, students of the left and labour will either continue to view

7. For Canada, see Jim Mochoruk, “‘Pop & Co’ versus Buck and the ‘Lenin School Boys’: Ukrainian Canadians and the Communist Party of Canada, 1921–1931,” in Rhonda Hinter & Jim Mochoruk, eds., *Re-imagining Ukrainian Canadians: History, Politics and Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 331–375; Hendrick Warnar-Brown, “‘Pressure Needed’ Politics and Work in a United Auto Workers Local, Canadian Car and Foundry Ltd., Fort William Ontario, 1952–1962,” in Michel S. Beaulieu, ed., *Essays in Northwestern Ontario Working Class History: Thunder Bay and Its Environs* (Thunder Bay: Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies, 2008), 283–297. Ian McKay notes the need to understand Canadian communists in the context of their own society. McKay, “Joe Salsberg, Depression-Era Communism, and the Limits of Moscow’s Rule,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* 21 (January 2013): 131–142. On the United States, see Judith Stepan-Norris & Maurice Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America’s Industrial Unions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

8. Wendy Cuthbertson explores employer resistance to CIO unions during World War II in *Labour Goes to War: The CIO and the Construction of a New Social Order* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012).

9. A relatively recent example that does explore interethnic relations is Royden Loewen & Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

ethnicity as divisive or underestimate the contributions of immigrant workers to the labour movement.¹⁰

Communist-led unions in Niagara lend themselves to historical analysis because the region offers rich sources for studying community unionism from the standpoint of its local leadership and on occasion even from the perspective of the rank and file and their allies. Union activists recognized that their struggles and accomplishments were innovative and historically significant. That is why they preserved the records of their campaigns and organizations. A number of them also wrote about the history of their locals and their communities and were willing to discuss their history with interested outsiders.¹¹

In the pages that follow, one voice rises above those of other participants in Niagara's solidarity unionism: the voice of the late Mike Bosnich. Bosnich's early life experiences resembled those of many other working-class immigrants who settled in the region between the two world wars. He was born Milan Bosnich, in 1919, to a Serbian family in Croatia. His father, Nicola, who had only about three years of schooling, owned insufficient land to support his family. Nicola immigrated to Canada in 1924. Mike and his mother joined him in 1929, when Nicola was working as a labourer in one of the furnace departments at the Page-Hersey plant in Welland. Six months after their arrival, Mike's mother died. With the coming of the Depression, Mike's father could get so little work that he was forced to go on relief. Mike started to contribute to the household economy while still in elementary school. His first paying job came from the Jewish storekeepers above whose store father and son lived; they hired Mike to turn the synagogue lights on and off and perform other tasks that their religion forbade them to perform on the Sabbath. As the Depression deepened, Mike was forced to leave school at fourteen, before being able to complete elementary school, having been held back when he first arrived in Welland because he did not speak English. He took seasonal jobs such as picking berries and husking corn, until he got full-time work, twelve hours a day, six days a week, at Petroff's bakery. He earned seven dollars a week and a loaf of bread a day.

10. In a recent study, Michel Beaulieu applies the term "ethnicity" to the dominant groups of British descent in Northern Ontario as well as to minority ethnic groups. While he recognizes that left-wing ethnic associations were important in radicalizing their members, he also believes that "each ethnic group, in the relative 'privacy' of its language, was likely to develop its own distinctive vocabulary of socialism." Beaulieu, *Labour at the Lakehead: Ethnicity, Socialism, and Politics, 1900–1935* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 7.

11. Mike Bosnich, "How the UE Transformed a Whole Community," C. S. Jackson fonds, vol. 6, file 8, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC); Mike Bosnich, *One Man's War: Reflections of a Rough Diamond* (Toronto: Lugs, 1989); George Ploss (past president of UE Local 523), "1942: Welland Becomes Unionized," unpublished essay, 1969, C. S. Jackson fonds, vol. 6, file 8, LAC; Nelson Lamontagne, *Four Decades of Struggle* (Welland: United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union [UE], 1982); Fern Sayles, *Welland Workers Make History* (Welland: Winnifred Sayles, 1963); Peter Hunter, *Which Side*. I conducted the interviews cited in this study in the mid-1980s.

In 1936 he moved to Toronto and found work as a printer's apprentice at *Borba* (The struggle), the Serbo-Croatian newspaper of the CPC.¹² Bosnich became politicized during his apprenticeship, eventually joining the CPC. In 1939, when Welland plants started hiring again, Bosnich returned and got a job at Page-Hersey. During World War II, Bosnich served overseas in the Canadian Armed Forces. He returned to Page-Hersey after the war and was elected shop steward in 1947. Before long he became the business agent of Local 523 of the UE. Bosnich also served on Crowland Municipal Council for many years. In 1956 he left the CPC over the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary, but he continued to act as the UE's Welland business agent until 1978. As I hope to show in this study, Bosnich's experiences as an immigrant worker – above all, in Niagara – combined with his commitment to social and economic justice, his intelligence, and his keen sense of observation make him not only an effective leader in Niagara's labour movement, but also an exceptionally insightful commentator on working-class immigrants in 20th-century Canada and specifically in Niagara. In the decades since our conversations in the 1980s, Bosnich's observations have frequently served to guide me in my work on immigration and labour history. I hope that the readers of this piece will find them similarly helpful.

I

LARGE INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS such as the construction of the fourth Welland canal and power-generating stations drew thousands of immigrants to the region, as did the promise of steadier employment in manufacturing. Cheap electricity, excellent transportation, and proximity to the American border had brought textile, electrical, metal fabricating and smelting, and chemical and allied plants, automobile parts manufacturing, paper mills, and flour milling to Niagara. As the region's cities, towns, villages, and townships grew, they also became among the most ethnically diverse communities in Ontario. By 1931, when roughly 18 per cent of Toronto's residents were of non-Anglo-Celtic origin, the ratio in Niagara communities was much higher (see table 1). The census of that year listed fifteen "European Races," including French Canadians. "Asian Races," "Indian and Eskimo Races," and "Negroes" – people of colour – were classified as "other."

Although employment opportunities brought European immigrants and French Canadians to Niagara in the early 20th century, racism against "foreigners" led to their exclusion from supervisory positions and clean, well-paid production jobs in manufacturing, as well as from most white collar jobs, until the middle of the century. Even to obtain less desirable, semiskilled,

12. Mike Bosnich, interview by author, Welland, 11 October 1985. Anthony Rasporich, *For a Better Life: A History of the Croatians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart in association with the Multiculturalism Directorate, Secretary of State, 1982), 141.

Table 1. Principal Origins of Niagara's Population, 1931

Communities	Total population	"British Races"	% of total	European	% of total	Other	% of total
St. Catharines	24,753	19,913	80	4,477	18	363	1
Niagara Falls	19,046	14,166	74	4,611	24	249	1
Welland	10,709	6,326	59	4,290	40	93	0.8
Port Colborne	6,503	2,885	44	3,536	54	82	1
Thorold	5,092	3,201	63	1,871	37	20	0.3
Crowland	4,999	1,425	29	3,535	71	39	0.7
Humberstone	2,490	1,202	48	1,252	50	16	0.6

Source: Data from Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, vol. 2, table 33, "Population Classified according to Principal Origins for Municipalities etc., 1931."

and unskilled jobs, such immigrant workers and their children frequently paid bribes – in cash, liquor, labour, or other gifts or services – to foremen or their representatives. Immigrant workers from eastern and southern Europe were also excluded from many neighbourhoods, even some working-class ones, either informally or through restrictive covenants. The small number of non-white workers in the region (as in much of central Canada) meant that the groups aptly named "inbetween peoples" by American labour historians Barrett and Roediger became the chief targets of racial discrimination in the region.¹³ French Canadians in Niagara, overwhelmingly working class, were almost as marginalized as immigrant workers during the first half of the 20th century. Indeed, in the labour movement they collaborated with their immigrant counterparts, with whom they worked in local plants.

Left-wing immigrants from different ethnic groups provided the leadership in antidiscrimination campaigns. There were socialists, anarchists, and communists among the Croatians, Hungarians, Jews, Serbs, and Ukrainians who came to Niagara. Some had adopted left-wing ideas in their homelands, while others, who had earlier worked and lived in the United States, were introduced to left-wing politics and labour unions there. They established left-wing associations in Niagara and they contributed to and disseminated leftist publications that helped to politicize others in their ethnic groups. Among Niagara's Ukrainians, for example, socialism was influential from the early 20th century. The 1911 declaration by a household of Ukrainian workers in Crowland to a Canadian census taker that their religion was "socialist" speaks

13. See James S. Barrett & David R. Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 (Spring 1997): 3–44. For a discussion of the differences between racial designations in Canada and the United States, see Carmela Patrias, *Jobs and Justice: Fighting Discrimination in Canada, 1939–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 3–15.

of their deep commitment to the political left.¹⁴ Indeed, in 1916 the first branch of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Federation in Canada was organized in Crowland.¹⁵ By 1920 the RCMP's Security Bulletins were reporting with alarm about the activities of Ukrainian social democrats, Russian anarchists, and Polish and Russian Bolsheviks in Niagara.¹⁶ The ranks of Ukrainian and Russian leftists were augmented by Hungarians who had been forced to leave their homeland following the defeat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 and others who had become radicalized in the United States prior to coming to Niagara, as well as by Croatian and Serbian communists, who formed the first Yugoslav club of the Workers' Party of Canada in 1923.¹⁷ The CPC established a branch in Welland in 1924. In St. Catharines, by the 1930s some Armenians were apparently receiving instruction in communism in the basement of the local Armenian Church.¹⁸ Left-wing members of the small groups of Jews in Niagara communities – most of them small business people – also contributed to the establishment of communist-led unions in the area. It was to one of them, Harry Katzman, that workers from Welland's Electrometallurgical plant turned when they decided to organize a union.¹⁹ Proximity to the US border allowed American radicals from different ethnic groups to visit their counterparts in Niagara and to promote left-wing politics among them.²⁰

During the Great Depression, most left-wing immigrant workers in Niagara rallied behind the CPC – the only political party active in organizing employed and unemployed immigrant workers in Niagara. Probably because the marginalized immigrants and minority workers among whom party organizers became active were unorganized, the region was spared the bitter conflicts fomented by the dual unionism that the Comintern and hence the CPC advocated between 1928 and 1935.²¹ Instead, communist-led protests and strikes

14. Canada [Manuscript] Census, 1911, Ontario, District 132, Sub-district 4, Enumeration district 2, 16.

15. Sayles, *Welland Workers*, 108.

16. "The Thorold Riot and the Foreign Born Population," in Gregory S. Kealey & Reg Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins*, vol. 1 (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1989), 91–94; "Notes of the work of the C.I.B. Division for the week ending 17 Sept., week ending 4 Nov.," MG 27 II D19, vol. 9, Arthur Lewis Sifton Papers, LAC.

17. Sayles, *Welland Workers*, 108.

18. Gregory S. Kealey & Reg Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins*, vol. 2 (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1989), part 1, 427, December 1934.

19. Sayles, *Welland Workers*, 146. In 1954 the company was renamed Electro Metallurgical Company.

20. Kealey & Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins*, vol. 1, 271, 4 November 1920.

21. On the impact of Workers Unity League organizing among Jewish garment workers, see Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), Chap. 8. On Northern Ontario, see Beaulieu, *Labour at the Lakehead*, 129–178.

laid the foundation for solidarity unionism in the area. In 1932, when the CPC established unemployed workers' associations as part of its campaign to reach unorganized workers in Canada, for example, it sent John Strush of the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association (ULFTA) to Welland. Officially, he was to direct the Labour Temple's cultural and educational programs. Unofficially, however, he was also in charge of organizing the unemployed.²² In 1934, English-born Frank Haslam, from neighbouring Port Colborne, took charge of unemployed organizing in an attempt to recruit more Anglo-Celtic support. Like Strush, however, Haslam relied on the help of the Hungarian and Ukrainian communist-led organizations to reach local residents. While the leadership of the campaign was thus communist, it enjoyed community-wide support, especially in Crowland's "foreign quarter." During the 1935 strike, unemployed and employed male and female workers and their children, from a variety of ethnic and religious groups, participated in demonstrations at township council meetings to demand meaningful work and adequate cash payment for relief work to sustain unemployed workers and their families. Many local merchants also identified with the goals of the relief strikers.²³ Political support from urban Crowland's Ratepayers' and Tenants' Association, along with donations of food from local merchants and other sympathizers, allowed the strikers to hold out for weeks, despite the municipal council's decision to withhold relief allotments from them. Even the arrival of Ontario Provincial Police reinforcements to the township, and Premier Hepburn's declaration that unless the strikers returned to work "it was battle to the bitter end," failed to persuade the strikers to abandon their demands.²⁴ United Church minister Fern Sayles, a supporter of the relief recipients, captured the significance of their protest: "The issue really is – shall life or property come first? Since all that the poor have left is life the radical is their champion, while the economically secure, 'with a stake in the community,' and likewise from self-interest are loyal defenders of property, at whatever cost to life."²⁵ The strikers succeeded in gaining moderate improvements in the local treatment of the unemployed. The strike also reinforced radical immigrant workers' resolve to place representatives from their ranks in local government. The Ratepayers' and Tenants' Association offers a clear example of community-wide protest: it included not only communists, but anarchists, supporters of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), and unaffiliated workers.

A strike at Page-Hersey Tubes in Crowland during the same year emphasizes that fighting racist discrimination was an important aim of worker

22. Carmela Patrias, *Relief Strike: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario, 1930–1935* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1990), 26–27.

23. John Kozlowski, interview by author, Welland, 8 December 1986; Mrs. Gibbon (née Lusina), interview by author, Welland, 7 March 1986.

24. "No Dictation by Strikers Says Premier," *Globe*, 30 April 1935.

25. "The Crowland Situation," letter from Rev. Sayles, *Welland Tribune*, 5 January 1935.

protest in Niagara. A large number of the workers at this plant were of eastern and southern European and French Canadian descent. These workers were restricted by prejudice and discrimination to the most menial work in the factory. In 1935, Page-Hersey workers struck for higher wages and for recognition of an independent union. To end the strike the company signed a six-month contract with the unaffiliated union that the strikers established. The union's constitution specified not only that all wage earners in the plant – irrespective of their trade, nationality, “race,” creed, or political opinions – were eligible for membership, but also that they would have the right to express their views in their native languages. The intent of these clauses was to enable members of minority groups (including French Canadians) who lacked familiarity with the English language to participate in decisions concerning their workplace and, at times, concerning the wider community as well. Management's unwillingness to honour the contract was, however, quickly revealed. It singled out the strike's “foreign” leaders – who were also members of the CPC – by failing to rehire them despite promises to the contrary. Further, it blacklisted them so that they were turned away by all other large employers in the area. Management also replaced the union with a joint committee consisting of representatives of both employees and management. According to Mike Bosnich, after the company bought off the union's treasurer, a man of British descent, the ethnic workers decided that “you can't trust those *keksari* (cake-eaters).”²⁶ In contrast to the union's inclusivity, the new joint committee excluded most immigrant workers by allowing only employees who were “able to read and write the English language” – and who were British subjects – to run for office.²⁷

Immigrant communist influence was significant a year later when workers of the Empire Cotton Mill of Welland walked out on strike. The firm, which employed a large number of immigrants and French Canadians, many of them women, was notorious for expecting its workers to work longer hours, for lower wages, than any other employer in Welland. Communist activists in the UTWA launched an organizing drive at the plant in 1934, as part of the CPC's efforts to establish the Workers' Unity League. The cotton mill workers, who had been subjected to a series of wage cuts since the onset of the Depression, were responsive. The strike began spontaneously, however, on 22 December 1936, when the night-shift workers walked off the job. The rest of the workers followed the next day. Among rank-and-file strikers were French Canadians, Italians, Hungarians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Yugoslavs. The strike's leadership reflected their diversity: Camille Berger, Emil Berger, F. Montpettit, and A. Peppin (all French Canadian); Joe Bratkovich (Yugoslav); Mary Jary (Hungarian); and Velma Sambol, W. Chickory, A. Overton, and F. Overton

26. Mike Bosnich, interview by author, Welland, 5 December 1985.

27. Sayles, *Welland Workers*, 136; Bosnich, *One Man's War*.

(Anglo-Celtic).²⁸ Their demands included a return to pre-Depression wage levels, shorter hours, union recognition, and proper ventilation in the mill. But speeches during the strike also pointed to the discriminatory practices these workers hoped to end by becoming unionized, including being subjected to sexual harassment, having to pay for jobs, and being treated disrespectfully. As Jary, whom the communist press had dubbed the “Pasionaria of Welland” (after Dolores Ibarruri, the fiery communist leader of the Spanish Civil War), explained: “With the union when we return to work there will be no need to bring kegs of wine, cakes and chicken for the bosses. You won’t have to be good looking to get a break. You won’t have to listen to that awful language we hear in the mill. The union would give everyone a chance and they would receive treatment like humans, not cattle.”²⁹ As in the case of the relief strike, once they struck, the textile workers were supported by many people who were not communist or even communist sympathizers. Father László Forgách, Welland’s Hungarian priest, for example, believed that “the workers had every reason in the world to go on strike,” explaining that their wages were “outrageous.” He expressed his support for the strike by allowing the textile workers to meet in the church hall and by refusing the employer’s entreaty that he encourage the workers to return to work.³⁰ Such support was essential to help 865 workers to stay on strike for over seven weeks in winter during the Great Depression.³¹ On 8 February 1937, the employer agreed to increase the wages of the lowest-paid employees, to establish shop committees to raise grievances with the management, to recognize the right of employees to belong to any organization of their choosing, and to allow all former employees to return to work without discrimination. The workers accepted the offer. The very next day, however, the employer reneged on its promise to reinstate all striking workers. Many of the strike’s leaders were blacklisted and consequently could not find work in any plant in Welland.

Communist workers and their supporters did not limit their activism to protest and resistance at the workplace. Starting in the 1930s they ran in local elections, and in some communities they elected representatives who spoke up on behalf of workers. John Petrochenko, a Ukrainian immigrant, ULFTA member, and Page-Hersey worker, for example, was elected to the Crowland School Board. He introduced free books, notebooks, and pencils for the children attending schools in Crowland Township.³² The significance of this

28. Louis Fine, Industrial Standards Officer, to Hon. D. A. Croll, Minister of Welfare and Labour, 12 February 1937, Department of Labour, RG 7-1-0-143, Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO).

29. “Cotton Mill Employees to Hold Secret Vote on Proposal Tomorrow,” *Welland Tribune*, 19 January 1937.

30. Father László Forgách, interview by author, Toronto, August 1978.

31. Fine to Croll, 12 February 1937, RG 7-1-0-143, 5, AO.

32. Bosnich interview, 11 October 1985.

measure was great for impoverished immigrant families, whose wage earners were frequently unemployed during the Depression.

Co-operation with the pro-labour United Church ministers Harvey Forster, superintendent of the All People's Mission in Niagara, and Fern Sayles, minister of the Maple Leaf mission, was another important legacy of the 1930s in Niagara. The men were active in Welland's CCF club: Forster as president and Sayles as treasurer. Unlike some social democrats, however, they supported communist-led organizations as well. As Forster explained in his 1943 annual report: "Our staff have identified themselves with the needs of the working-man, have espoused the TU [trade union] movement and have co-operated freely with left wing groups."³³ The clerics believed that unionization was the only way to fight employment discrimination against minority workers.³⁴ Church support for labour militants lent legitimacy to solidarity unionism at a time when the clergy within individual ethnic groups were generally opposed to communists and other left-wing groups.

II

BECAUSE COMMUNIST-LED INDUSTRIAL unions were not established in Niagara until 1942, most leftist workers who joined them were again spared having to make sense of the CPC's rapid policy reversals between 1939 and 1941. Members of the CPC in Niagara – always a small minority – may have debated its shift from opposition to Canadian participation in an "imperialist" war during the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 to all out support for the war after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, but such discussions did not engage most other workers. Rather, their local experience of Depression-era protests and strikes prepared marginalized women and men with left-wing sympathies to assume leadership positions in Niagara's labour movement during and after World War II. Ukrainian Canadian Annie Hunka, for example, whose husband, William, one of the leaders of the Page-Hersey strike, was not rehired by the firm and was also blacklisted, became a member of the negotiating committee that brought the UE to the Electrometallurgical plant in Welland. Mary Jary, who had lost her job following the cotton mill strike, became a founding member of Local 529 of the UE at Yale and Towne in St. Catharines. She also served on the central committee of the Hungarian Canadian Workers' Clubs and as a manager of the Hungarian-language CPC newspaper.³⁵ Bruno Rocco, an Italian Canadian worker who participated in

33. Annual Report of the All People's Missions, Niagara Presbytery, United Church of Canada, 1943, Harvey Forster Papers, United Church Archives, Toronto.

34. H. C. Forster to Local 523, UE, Foster Wheeler Corporation, St. Catharines, Ont., Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1947–48, vol. 28, file 1, UE fonds, LAC.

35. Constitution and By-Laws, Local 529, UE, St. Catharines, 11, District 5, Companies, UE fonds, University of Pittsburgh; "Weekly Summary no. 904, November 1938," in Kealey &

both the Crowland relief strike and the Empire Cotton Mill strike, became the treasurer of Local 523 in Welland. The recollections of Peter Hunter, area representative of the UE in Niagara in the late 1940s, underscore the importance of “ethnic” workers in the union’s local leadership: “Unity of the work place [*sic*] was reflected in the names of UEW executives over many years: Mike Bosnich, Yugoslav; John Trufal, Ukrainian; Bruno Rocco, Italian; Nelson Lamontagne, French Canadian; Joe Kovaks, Hungarian; and Anglos such as Tom Curran, Earl Harris, and John McIntyre.”³⁶

The neglect of Niagara by such industrial unions as the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) also contributed to the success of communist-led unions in the area. C. S. Jackson’s comments with which this article opens and historian Wendy Cuthbertson’s *Labour Goes to War* indicate how poor these unions were during World War II.³⁷ Communist labour leaders such as Jackson, however, were attracted to Niagara because of the active communist-led ethnic groups in the area. UE organizers there during the early 1940s relied heavily on these clubs, as Bosnich explained: “The main organizing, signing cards, bringing union fees was done by the [ethnic] clubs. The Hungarians contacted the Hungarians, the Italians contacted the Italians, the Ukrainians contacted the Ukrainians, and the Yugoslavs contacted the Yugoslavs.”³⁸ These efforts were frequently led by local workers who had been active in the region’s Depression-era strikes and protests, or by their children. They made up a significant portion of the Niagara labour movement’s militant activists.³⁹ The impact of these local ethnic militants far outweighed their numbers. In their Niagara stronghold of Welland, Bosnich, who belonged to this category himself, estimated that ethnic militants made up no more than 2 or 3 per cent of the workforce. At Page-Hersey, for example, out of about 1,200 workers in 1946, between 20 and 40 belonged to the CCF and about 30 to the CPC.⁴⁰ But they not only spoke the languages of the non-Anglo-Celtic workers; they also knew their grievances and aspirations first-hand. Showing their commitment to communist-led unions by taking the training courses the union offered and assuming the demanding role of shop steward, which the majority of workers were reluctant to undertake, and joining political action committees in their

Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins*, vol. 2, part 5, 326.

36. Hunter, *Which Side*, 162. Curran was, in fact, Scottish.

37. Cuthbertson, *Labour Goes to War*, 30–34.

38. Mike Bosnich, interview by author, Welland, 11 November 1985.

39. Benjamin Isitt describes such groups as the “militant minority,” a term used in the past by radicals themselves and later adapted by labour historians such as David Montgomery. See Isitt, *British Columbia Workers and the Rise of a New Left, 1948-1972* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 3–4.

40. Bosnich interview, 11 November 1985.

locals, these militants were effective in mobilizing less engaged workers inside and outside the workplace.

To understand the influence of communist-led unions in Niagara, we must consider the concerted opposition they faced both during and after World War II. Contrary to the long-held view that the postwar period was one of acceptance by employers and the state of the right of workers to be represented by unions of their choice, in Niagara, employers mounted extensive and sophisticated anti-union campaigns that continued into the 1950s. These campaigns consisted of provoking hostility between English Canadian and “foreign” workers, establishing company and company-dominated unions (CDUs) without charters from Canada’s central labour bodies, and launching or invigorating public relations and company welfare programs. The threat of CDUs, as well as postwar raids by anticommunist unions, meant that communist-led unions could not relax into passivity and conformity. In fact, the determined opposition of communist-led unions to such anti-union programs goes a long way toward explaining their success during the Cold War.

Niagara employers responded to organization drives in local plants by attempting to establish CDUs instead. At the Electrometallurgical plant in Welland, for example, the manager called together representatives from each department in 1942 and showed them a wide range of possible contracts their employer was willing to sign. Despite the offer of funds to be used as the “independent” union’s executive saw fit, workers rejected the proposal. Instead, as we saw, they became the first group in Welland to join the UE.⁴¹ In some factories, such as Gelling Engineering in Welland, management tried to undermine the UE by extending the mandate of the Labour Management Production Committee (established as a government initiative during World War II to foster harmonious relations between management and workers) to matters that should have been covered by union contracts.⁴² In this case UE supporters ran for positions on the committee and then convinced its members to vote for joining the UE.

When the Ontario government established the Select Committee to Inquire into Collective Bargaining between Employers and Employees in 1943, about 30 Niagara employers – including some of the largest ones, such as Atlas Steels, McKinnon Industries, North American Cyanamid, and the Ontario Paper Company – joined forces to defend company unions against the advance of CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) unions in the region. Under the leadership of Senator J. J. Bench, a lawyer from St. Catharines who represented

41. George Ploss, “History of UE Local 523,” unpublished essay, C. S. Jackson fonds, vol. 6, file 8, LAC.

42. Minutes of Labour Management Production Committee, 12 March 1951, Gelling Engineering, vol. 29, file 2, UE fonds, LAC. For an analysis of labour management production committees, see Peter McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

many of these companies, they formed the Niagara Industrial Relations Institute (Niagara Institute). Even as the Niagara Institute publicly professed to support workers' right to collective bargaining, it unleashed a campaign to discredit them, opposed the closed shop and automatic check-off, and vilified union organizers as "foreigners."⁴³

To undermine the influence of the Niagara Institute, the area's organized workers and their supporters sent delegations bearing pro-union petitions signed by thousands to the Select Committee's hearings in Toronto. The largest among these delegations, made up of about 100 activists from Welland, included not only labour activists – communist ones among them – but also such influential community leaders as United Church ministers Forster and Sayles. Smaller delegations represented workers from Niagara Falls, Merriton, and St. Catharines.⁴⁴

The testimony of Rev. Sayles to the committee reveals the significance of ethnic diversity in Niagara in the formation of solidarity unionism. He described and criticized attempts by Atlas Steel Company in Welland to establish a company union by citing several affidavits from Atlas workers. One of the workers was Tom Curran, who had become the president of Local 523 of the UE in Welland after he lost his job at Atlas Steels for attempting to organize for the CIO. Another, Margaret Gulas, described the firing of ten "girls" by Atlas because they had taken part in the UE organizing campaign. Sayles then explained that he had tried to stop cases of discrimination against the "non-Anglo-Saxon" people by local firms on an individual basis only to conclude "that it is impossible to deal with these problems in that way, and that only as labour is organized, and has the right to organize and speak for itself and as it is possible to get management to recognize that labour has that right and deal with them can the problems we have had all through these years be solved."⁴⁵

Testimonies by other witnesses underscored what a serious threat CDUs represented to the labour movement in Niagara. Workers from plants in Welland, Niagara Falls, and St. Catharines described employers' refusals to bargain with bona fide unions and attempts to oust such unions from their plants. Ontario's minister of labour, Peter Heenan, admitted that the investigation of company unions was one of the committee's main goals, because the government feared disruptions to war production. In cases of unrest it was difficult to determine who represented the workers.⁴⁶ The committee established the right of workers

43. Carmela Patrias, "Employers' Anti-Unionism in Niagara, 1942–1965: Questioning the Postwar Compromise," *Labour/Le Travail* 76 (Fall 2015): 46–48.

44. Select Committee to Inquire into Collective Bargaining between Employers and Employees (hereafter Select Committee), vol. 9, 11 March 1943, RG 49, AO.

45. Testimony of Reverend Fern Sayles, Select Committee, 11 March 1943, vol. 9, 779–781, 791, AO.

46. Testimony of Labour Minister Peter Heenan, Select Committee, 2 March 1943, vol. 2, 10, AO.

to bargain collectively with their employers through a union of their choice. But it also ruled that independent unions were not dominated by employers and that workers could therefore choose to be represented by them. Through this ruling – which extended to the postwar period – the state handed employers the means to prevent the establishment of bona fide trade unions. Thus, instead of facilitating harmonious relations among them, Ontario's new industrial relations regime reinvigorated the rivalry between employers and employees to gain or retain the loyalties of workers and communities.

Niagara employers relied on public relations firms – above all, the Ontario Editorial Bureau – to construct anti-union campaigns through plant newsletters, radio broadcasts, “personal” letters to employees, press releases, advertisements, and articles in what a local labour publication called “millionaire magazines”⁴⁷ such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. Disingenuous public relations campaigns could even place editorials in the *St. Catharines Standard*. But the most important agencies for transmitting employer messages to workers were publications ostensibly published by “independent” unions. The plant paper of Foster Wheeler (published by the Ontario Editorial Bureau) warned that international unions – “the subversive element” – were “flooding the air waves and factories with obnoxious and antagonistic propaganda.”⁴⁸ Destroying confidence in management and befuddling the minds of workers were the weapons that international unions used to create mass hatred, justify their refusal to compromise, and encourage strikes. Not only the communists, but the CCF socialists aimed to use organized labour to destroy free enterprise, said the Foster Wheeler paper. The publication of the CDU at Joseph Stokes Rubber in Welland claimed that communism caused discord within unions and dissension between employer and employee, while destroying the profit motive and individual initiative.⁴⁹

Such red-baiting by employers paralleled warnings against communist subversion in the wider community. The Progressive Conservative candidate in Welland County, Lt.-Col. Sam Hughes, a Welland lawyer and grandson of Canada's minister of defence in World War I, for instance, told the Rotary Club of St. Catharines that communists in the Niagara district were “closely tied up with Russian intelligence,” and that if Canada was ever attacked by “Soviet Russia the latter would concentrate on the destruction of the international bridges here, the Welland ship canal, and vital industries in the area.”⁵⁰

47. Leaflet issued by UE Organizing Committee, Niagara Falls, 31 December 1952, General Local Files, Local 536, 1952, reel M-2356, UE fonds, LAC.

48. “Free Unions Needed for Peace and Prosperity,” Foster Wheeler, Canadian Steelworker Foster Wheeler Division, Ontario Editorial Bureau fonds (hereafter OEB), Brock University Library Special Collections and Archives (hereafter BULSCA).

49. *The Tumbling Barrel* 5, 6 (July–August 1948): 2, BULSCA.

50. “Sam Hughes: Welland County Strong Fight against Reds,” *Globe & Mail*, 20 June 1949; “Red Nest Charged on Welland Canal,” *Globe & Mail*, 12 August 1949.



The Link (newsletter of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, Local 637), 27 November 1946.

Vol. 31, file 31-8, Canadian Labour Congress fonds, LAC.

Niagara's communist-led unions – constrained by far more limited resources than local employers – used their own plant newsletters and union newspapers and leaflets to respond to such attacks and in other ways publicized labour's perspective. To reach the wider community, activists published columns in local newspapers, such as "Telling the Town" in the Welland–Port Colborne *Evening Tribune*. They also broadcast labour programs directed at the entire Niagara Peninsula on the radio station CKTB in St. Catharines. Because its American counterpart also continued to operate in the United States despite its ouster from the CIO, the UE could depend on experienced and talented American union publicists. Many of the cartoons in UE publications in Niagara, for example, were the work of Fred Wright, the UE's staff cartoonist. In 1944, convinced that comics influenced youth, the UE purchased and distributed thousands of copies of "Johnny Everyman" comics. These were published by the East West Association in the United States, under the sponsorship of novelist and human rights advocate Pearl Buck. They differed from the commercially successful "Superman" comics, which extolled the virtues of an individual endowed with extraordinary powers, by focusing on the "virtues of the common people."⁵¹ The foreign-language publications of

51. John Wigdor to Ralph Sullivan, 4 December 1944, Welland Office, General 1944, reel M-2338, UE fonds, LAC.

the CPC continued as the communist-led unions' most important means for reaching workers who did not have a good command of English.

A 1951 pamphlet – falsely attributed to Bosnich, then business agent of Local 523 of the UE in Welland, and Douglas Campbell, president of the Welland branch of the Labour Progressive Party (LPP, as the CPC was then called) – makes clear that the anticommunist campaign in the region created tensions among rank-and-file members of communist-led unions. A front-page editorial of the Welland *Evening Tribune* drew the region's attention to this publication throughout Niagara. "Will the large section of U.E. membership in Welland that deplores the communist tendencies of the union leadership be content to sit idly by and do nothing about a new and bold admission by the union leadership that they are out to promote the Communist Party?" asked the editorial. "That's the question that is being asked by loyal citizens of the community who have been shocked by the distribution of a pamphlet in which all pretence is cast off and the U.E. is slavishly tied to the Stalin banner?"⁵² Two days later the paper carried a retraction and a statement from Bosnich, who pointed out that the pamphlet was a forgery and chastised the *Tribune* for failing to contact the union before publishing its editorial. Although Bosnich acknowledged that communists were involved in the anti-nuclear campaign to which the pamphlet referred, he said nothing about links between the UE and the CPC. This lack of transparency was characteristic of communist-led unions in the region. Despite revelations that the pamphlet was a forgery, however, some UE members remained anxious about their union's reputation. At a meeting of the Niagara Falls local that represented workers at McGlashan Clark and International Silver, several members called on the union to disassociate itself in public from the communists. Only one member pointed out that attacks on communists often served to discredit all labour unions. He argued that fifteen years earlier "there were no communists [active in Niagara] but the people who fought for improvements were nevertheless branded."⁵³ This last argument must have resonated with many members of Local 505, however, because it remained within the UE.

In St. Catharines, political tensions between supporters of the CCF and those of the CPC brought about a split within Local 529 of the UE in 1948. The CCF faction condemned both international communists, for the manner in which they had acquired power in Czechoslovakia, and the communists in the local, for wanting to secede. They suggested that to "rid the union of communists," the local should support the CCF.⁵⁴ In an editorial entitled "Labor Fights Reds," the *St. Catharines Standard* came out unequivocally on the side of the CCF faction. The communist-led faction, including Jary, condemned the CCF for failing to endorse LPP-Liberal collaboration – the communist strategy

52. Editorial, *Welland Evening Tribune*, 17 March 1951.

53. Re: Local 505 meeting, 21 March 1951, reel M-2342, UE fonds, LAC.

54. "Yale-Towne Local to Secede," *St. Catharines Standard*, 11 June 1948.

in the 1948 provincial elections. Disingenuously, they then rebuked the social democrats for disrupting the local's unity by introducing partisan politics within it.⁵⁵ In a vote to decide the fate of the union, the workers of English Electric voted to join the USWA, while Yale and Towne workers decided to remain in the UE.

The support of Niagara workers for the UE despite the local Red Scare was perhaps clearest in 1952 and 1953, when the UE was fighting the company union that had been in place at North American Cyanamid in Niagara Falls since World War II. The company union attempted to discredit the UE by circulating copies of a leaflet by the anticommunist rival of the UE, the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), about the donations made by the UE to such American communist "front" organizations as the Civil Rights Congress and the Negro Committee. Not only the Cyanamid company but the Roman Catholic Church joined in the red-baiting to discredit the UE. Some workers who supported the UE panicked at this type of publicity. In English-language leaflets and on the pages of the CPC's foreign-language newspapers, the union responded by asserting that "Cyanamid workers know that the UE is a democratically elected union, by the members and for the members. No amount of red scaring will change this fact."⁵⁶ In the end, the UE won the right to represent Cyanamid workers by a narrow majority.

Bosnich attributed such ongoing rank-and-file support for "left-wingers" – as manifested not only by choosing the UE to represent them, but by their repeated elections as shop stewards and even chief stewards, and members of negotiating committees – to their view that the "left-wingers" were "strong fighters to fight the company." Indeed, Niagara's communist-led unions described themselves as "fighting" unions.⁵⁷ What they meant was that because of their adversarial relationship to employers and the state, they were more willing and able than mainstream unions to obtain good contracts for their members. Bosnich conceded, however, that many rank-and-file members were uninterested in political engagement on the left: "They were content to let the left-wingers carry the ball, as long as you only went so far. 'Don't get us involved in politics ... [and] leave our religion alone.' They used to say to me," recalled Bosnich, "we elect you because you are honest ... and you are a fighter. As long as you don't bring politics into our home, and into you telling me

55. Joe Bacon, president, UE Local 529, "Local 529 History," UE fonds, LAC. Bacon was a CCF supporter.

56. "Vote on Jan 14 & 15," leaflet, January 1953, UE Niagara Peninsula, 1953, UE fonds, LAC; Niagara Peninsula Reports, weeks ending 6 December 1952, 10 January 1953, and 17 January 1953, reel M-2344, UE fonds, LAC.

57. Leaflet issued by UE Organizing Committee, Niagara Falls, 26 November 1952, General Local Files, Local 536 1952, reel M-2356, UE fonds, LAC; Local 505, General Local Files, 1953, reel M-2344, UE fonds, LAC.

how I should vote or anything else, you're OK, you can stay there."⁵⁸ When he spoke of the UE as a democratic union, what Bosnich meant was that members could decide whether to elect leftist officers and also whether to support their causes.

Even if we accept that some of the prevarications of the leaders of communist-led unions were in response to the intense red-baiting of the Cold War, their lack of transparency concerning the link between these unions and the communists cannot be reconciled with their claims to union democracy. In other respects, however, Bosnich's analysis is in keeping both with the records of such unions and with subsequent historical interpretations. His belief that left-wing militancy accounted for rank-and-file support for leftist unions corresponds to historians' views that communists were influential in industrial unions because they were experienced, committed, and able.

Bosnich's recollection of rank-and-file indifference to politics is reflected in the records of the UE. When political committees of Niagara locals organized discussions about CPC policies such as opposition to the Marshall Plan, they attracted disappointingly small audiences. An attempt to show the link between the American plan and local concerns by explaining that it was responsible for layoffs and unemployment in Canada, and in Niagara specifically, was to no avail. Eventually the union directed its foreign-affairs campaigns, such as Reverend Endicott's peace initiatives that focused on China, specifically to local shop stewards, who were generally militant activists and thus constituted a more receptive audience.⁵⁹

III

THE MILITANCY OF COMMUNIST-LED unions, however, did not fully explain the loyalty of many of their members even during the Cold War years. If we define politics broadly, to refer to the complex ways whereby authority is deployed and resisted in society, we see that rank-and-file members of communist-led unions were not indifferent to all forms of politics. As they responded to their critics, these unions created oppositional consciousness among their members even while they helped them to become active citizens in their communities. Rank-and-file oppositional consciousness did not mean that most Niagara workers saw themselves as communists or socialists. Rather, many of them shared a more general sense of working-class interests that informed many of the policies of communist-led unions. The few existing interviews with rank-and-file union members from Welland who did not belong to communist-led organizations suggest that because they had no previous experience in the labour movement, for them communist-led unions represented

58. Mike Bosnich, interview with author, 20 October 1985, Welland.

59. Michael Bosnich to C. S. Jackson, 8 March 1948, Local 523, Welland, 1948, reel M-2340, UE fonds, LAC.

unionism in general. According to Maria Karas, "Well, before, ... mens go work. He working. But like boss he don't like him, he'll go out and he bring another one. Because he paid him or bring him something ... whiskey. But after like union you got different. Because you belong to union you got more years like seniority. You're working."⁶⁰ Stephen Bornemissza, who worked at the Empire Cotton Mill and at Page-Hersey, emphasized that the union gave workers a voice. After the union came in, he explained, "the people could speak up when they didn't like something. Because before, if you – anyone – spoke up, the next day you noticed that you no longer had ... your punch card. You could go home."⁶¹ Bosnich described the rank-and-file response thus:

People who came to this country stomach after bread, and who had suffered during the depression, and recognized that there was something wrong with the system. While they were here to help build up the country, and were willing to work, wanted to raise their families, became citizens of Canada, they still recognized ... that there was something wrong, that the system was not functioning ... so they supported left-wing causes. And even when they didn't support left-wing causes, they instinctively knew that a union was something different. It was an organization they could join because it would help them.

Upon further reflection, Bosnich added that these immigrant workers divided society along class lines: "You are part of the working class, and therefore your interests were different from the interests of the capitalist class. ... They had this sympathetic, even ideological – without party lines – understanding of where they fit."⁶² This class consciousness – in addition to the material gains that communist-led unions obtained for them – welded Niagara workers' loyalty to the UE, UTWA (later CTC), and Mine-Mill, even after these communist-led unions were expelled from Canada's main labour federations.

Niagara's communist-led unions helped to hone this oppositional consciousness during the Cold War years.⁶³ Contrary to the widespread depiction of this period as one in which unionized workers enjoying plentiful employment and high wages sank into complacency and left the running of their unions in the hands of union officials, the threat from CDUs and raids by anticommunist unions continued to fuel campaigns by the leadership and militant minority to mobilize more passive rank-and-file members to challenge the status quo inside and beyond the workplace.

Countering employers' claims that their interests coincided with those of their workers was a key plank in the campaigns of communist-led unions. Believing that CDUs illustrated both management's deviousness and its antagonism to labour's goals, union activists sought to convince Niagara workers of

60. Mary Karas, interview by author, 26 November 1986, Welland.

61. Stephen Bornemissza, interview by author, 25 November 1986, Welland.

62. Bosnich interview, 11 November 1985.

63. Julie Guard reaches similar conclusion based on her analysis of the UE and gender. See Guard, "The 'Woman Question' in Canadian Unionism."

this view. They ridiculed such unions through articles and cartoons in labour publications. The following ditty performed the same function:

We're stupid and the boss is wise,
 I belong to the Company Union,
 And so they help us organize.
 I belong to the Company Union.
 The Company tries hard to please
 Us simple-minded employees.
 They even pay our lawyer's fees,
 I belong to the Company Union.
 ...
 We never talk of workers' rights.
 I belong to the Company Union;
 They tell us that it leads to fights.
 I belong to the Company Union.
 The Company has always said
 That men who talk like that are "red."
 We listen to the boss instead.
 I belong to the Company Union.⁶⁴

In their campaign against CDUs, militant activists paid special attention to unions supposedly affiliated with the Canadian Federation of Labour (CFL), a shady organization favoured by Niagara employers in the late 1940s and early 1950s that claimed to have 350,000 members when the Canadian Department of Labour estimated its membership at 200.⁶⁵ Not only did several Niagara companies sign contracts with unions claiming to be affiliated with the CFL, but at a time when they were dismissing and blacklisting bona fide labour organizers, they allowed CFL organizers to operate in their plants during work hours. Public relations firms working for the employers published CFL newsletters, and employers' lawyers represented CFL locals at hearings by the Ontario Labour Board. Here was proof, according to the rival UE organizers, that the CFL represented employers' interests. The union ridiculed management's public relations efforts at Foster Wheeler in St. Catharines: "All the personal letters and other propaganda cannot change a phoney from a phoney. Ask the CFL boys where their money comes from ... [and] how they get complete mailing lists of employees from the companies."⁶⁶

Labour publications tried to show that management was less than truthful when it spoke of the shared interests of employers and workers in other ways as well. A UE leaflet addressed to workers at McGlashan-Clarke, for example, challenged claims that workers owed loyalty to their employer. "First of all be loyal to yourself, your family and your fellow workers," the leaflet suggested. "You have no cause to be loyal to a management who consistently

64. "Join UE-CIO," undated clipping, in McKinnon Columbus file, OEB, BULSCA.

65. Patrias, "Employers' Anti-Unionism," 50.

66. Leaflet issued by Local 529, UE-CIO, 10 September 1947, vol. 27, file 34, UE fonds, LAC.



Leaflet issued by UE
Local 529, St. Catharines,
23 March 1949.

Vol. 20, file 28, UE fonds, LAC.

have exploited you by paying substandard wages and working you under substandard shop conditions, while at the same time amassing fortunes out of your efforts.”⁶⁷ *Silver Sparks*, the newsletter of Local 505 at McGlashan-Clarke and the International Silver Company, used the company’s claim that its employees were its first priority both to cast doubts on the sincerity of the company and to assert the legitimacy of workers’ demands based on the labour theory of value. Workers had a right to a measure of security, shorter hours, a union shop, sick benefits, and a hospitalization plan, the newsletter explained, “because [of] the labour of the men and women who dig the raw material from the earth, transport it, and work on it with hand and machine to produce the finished product. That is what adds value to the product and makes the profit which pays the dividends or adds to the company’s investment.”⁶⁸

Addressing specific postwar developments that aroused labour discontent, UE leaflets used production speed-ups to demonstrate the antagonistic interests of workers and employers. Employers benefitted from them through massive profits, while speed-ups not only increased pressure on workers but

67. Leaflet issued by Local 505, UE-CIO, Niagara Falls, n.d., International Silver Company of Canada Ltd. (hereafter ISC Canada), Niagara Falls, Ontario, Materials issued by Local 505 (hereafter Local 505 materials), vol. 33, file 7, UE fonds, LAC.

68. *Silver Sparks*, April 1949, ISC Canada, Local 505 materials, vol. 33, file 7, UE fonds, LAC.

Leaflet issued by Local 523
of the UE, 1950, vol. 28,
file 38, Gelling
Engineering Ltd.

Materials issued by Local 523,
1948–1950, UE fonds, LAC.



also led to layoffs.⁶⁹ Indeed, the UE in particular publicized the high number of workers who suffered from seasonal layoffs in Niagara, linking this phenomenon to massive unemployment during the Great Depression, which was still so fresh in the minds of workers at this time. The union tracked and publicized unemployment figures in Niagara during the postwar years, which were supposedly characterized by full employment.⁷⁰ To draw attention to this reality the UE encouraged the formation of local unemployment councils, brought petitions to local and provincial governments, and organized a car cavalcade to Ottawa.⁷¹ In practical terms the UE represented unemployed workers whose claims had been rejected by the Unemployment Insurance Office. When they succeeded in overturning this office's decisions, they publicized their success through photographs of recipients holding their benefit cheques.⁷²

Solidarity unions drew a connection between seasonal layoffs and employers' attempts to circumvent the principle of seniority, one of the most important gains of labour after World War II. They fought with management over the length of time for which workers could be laid off without losing their

69. *Silver Sparks*, August 1949, ISC Canada, Local 505 materials, vol. 33, file 7, UE fonds, LAC.

70. Bosnich, "How the UE Transformed," 22.

71. Local 523, Welland-Crowland, Ontario, "Your Union at Work," 1953, 43, C. S. Jackson fonds, vol. 22, file 15, LAC.

72. Mike Bosnich to Jack Douglas, editor, *UE News*, 1 December 1949, General Local Files, Local 523, 1949, reel M-2341, UE fonds, LAC.

seniority. They also favoured plant-wide seniority, which would prevent the restriction of good jobs to preferred groups. As Ronald W. Schatz pointed out in his study of the UE at General Electric and Westinghouse in the United States, the danger of this policy was that it undermined worker community by threatening the job security of recently hired workers.⁷³ Such a policy, however, not only strengthened the position of workers vis-a-vis management; it was especially important to long-serving minority workers who had been excluded from better jobs by racist discrimination. The UE's attack on employers' insistence that expertise trump seniority rights, by pointing out that it could be used to get rid of older workers, also appealed to workers who had been denied the opportunity to obtain skilled jobs. Instead, the UE suggested that those with seniority be given a chance to show that they could quickly acquire the skills needed to do jobs other than the ones they habitually performed.⁷⁴

Labour media served not only to question management's sincerity, but to challenge the value and reliability – indeed, the control – of employers' welfare plans. Labour publications, for example, maintained that bonuses and profit-sharing plans – frequently used by employers after World War II to increase both worker productivity and loyalty to management – did not benefit workers. Bonus programs, designed to increase workers' productivity, automatically led to wage cuts. The bonus they received as a reward at best made up for such loss of wages, but at the same time it lessened worker control over the relationship between productivity and pay.⁷⁵ Profit sharing similarly reduced workers' control over the value accorded to their labour. Increased wages, which were subject to collective bargaining, represented a much more equitable reward for the work performed.⁷⁶

When Local 174 of the UTWA was involved in a bitter struggle to retain its position as the bargaining agent for workers at the Plymouth Cordage Company – which had had one of the earliest and most extensive corporate welfare plans in Niagara – it pointed out that the company's noncontributory pension plan could be revoked at any time. Management, the union explained, “use the scheme to blackmail you into submission to their wishes.” Unions, by contrast, attempted to protect workers' futures by making their pensions subject to contract negotiations.⁷⁷ Local 523 of the UE used a testimonial by Nelson Lamontagne, a union officer at the Electrometallurgical Company, to

73. Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 131.

74. Bosnich to Douglas, 1 December 1949, LAC.

75. “Ask Yourself These Questions,” leaflet issued by UE Local 529, vol. 20, file 25, UE fonds, LAC.

76. “Why?,” Yale & Towne Manufacturing Co., St. Catharines, Ont., Materials issued by Local 529, vol. 20, file 25, UE fonds, LAC.

77. Leaflet by G. V. Beckett, district organizer, 7 April 1949, Local 174, UTWA (AFL), Parent-Rowley fonds, vol. 12, file 8, 1947–49, LAC.

drive home this point in a 1950s pamphlet: "My name is Nelson Lamontagne and I have worked at Electro Metals for 9 years. Now thanks to UE negotiations I can look forward to \$100.00 Pension after 25 years."⁷⁸ As we saw, the workers of American Cyanamid, disappointed with their "independent union," invited the UE to organize them in 1952. The new union fought management to include a pension plan in collective agreements.⁷⁹ The UE's research director, Idele Wilson, pointed out that according to union surveys, most workers regarded the company-initiated pension plans, which were imposed unilaterally, as "forced savings."⁸⁰ Once their union succeeded in establishing new plans by collective bargaining, many workers wanted to withdraw contributions from the old plans and use them for other purposes, such as home purchases.

Opinion surveys, a common public relations tool used by management in the United States, do not appear to have been widely used in Canada. American Cyanamid in Niagara Falls, where the UE defeated a CDU in 1953, nevertheless relied on such a survey when its workers walked out during negotiations for their first contract with the UE. Union activists left little doubt about their distrust of such tactics. Because the company had turned down their request for a paid holiday on Coronation Day, they noted that Cyanamid workers would have been much happier had their employer offered a pay increase or a paid holiday instead of spending money on "high priced Quiz Masters from New York."⁸¹

The emphasis of communist-led unions on inclusivity without distinctions based on race, creed, or nationality reflected the leadership's awareness of the diversity of Niagara's population and the support that communist-affiliated organizations enjoyed within the region's ethnic groups. This emphasis helps to explain the support of immigrant and other marginalized workers for communist-led unions during and after World War II. The adoption of such egalitarian principles was not unique to Niagara. In fact, the preamble of the constitution of the UE's Canadian region (District 5) defined the equality of its members even more broadly, by declaring that the union's rank and file controlled its decision regardless of "craft, age, sex, nationality, race, creed or political beliefs."⁸² Some UE locals required members not only to respect this constitution, but also to take an oath declaring solidarity "with brother or sister workers regardless of race, creed, sex, color, nationality, political

78. "Your Union at Work," 1953, LAC.

79. "The Union Urges Speed," 19 September 1954, General Local Files, Local 536, 1954, reel M-2359, UE fonds, LAC.

80. Idele Wilson, research director, UE, to Hon. Milton F. Gregg, minister of labour, 30 July 1954, Correspondence and Circular Letters, Niagara Peninsula, 1955, reel M-2362, UE fonds, LAC.

81. Leaflet issued by Local 536 UE, 29 May 1953, Cyanamid, Niagara Peninsula, 1953, reel M-2357, UE fonds, LAC.

82. "Your Union at Work," 1953, LAC.

belief or affiliation.”⁸³ Such inclusivity was impressive in the broader Canadian context as well: not only was it sharply at odds with the nativism of the CDUS, but it was promoted when human rights activists were just beginning to campaign against racist prejudice and discrimination.

Communist-led unions also appealed to the shared culture and history of different minority groups. In battling the company union at the Plymouth Cordage Company of Welland, for example, the UTWA sent French Canadian workers a French-language letter signed by the presidents of UTWA locals in Quebec, urging them to reject the company union. French Canadian activists from Welland’s Page-Hersey, Electrometallurgical, and Empire Cotton plants, and Port Colborne’s INCO plant, also sent a letter in support of the textile union “aux canadiens français” to explain the disadvantages of company unions, invoking the proud record of French Canadian regiments during World War II, on the picket lines in Quebec, and in political struggles for rights and justice. Referring to the watershed 1949 strike by Asbestos workers, the letter asked, “Where would the workers of Asbestos be today if they had belonged to a company union? How would they have financed their strike?”⁸⁴

The UE in Niagara reached out to immigrant workers in more practical ways as well. Union publications were frequently multilingual. In 1944 the UE held special language meetings in the ULFTA, Croatian, and Hungarian halls to discuss unions in their own languages, with an official of the union present to answer any questions. To solidify the union’s ranks among French Canadian workers, special meetings were held for them in Welland every Friday night.⁸⁵ When Local 637 of Mine-Mill was fighting to survive following the union’s ouster from the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), Bosnich, the UE business agent, provided interpreters to ensure that non-English-speaking members would understand discussions during meetings. He also used the resources and talents of Local 523 in Welland to publish Mine-Mill leaflets in four or five languages. Finally, French Canadian workers from Welland visited the homes of French Canadian INCO workers, to encourage them to support Mine-Mill.⁸⁶ Such services publicized Welland militants’ linguistic abilities beyond the peninsula. As George Harris, secretary-treasurer of the UE in Canada, wrote to Bosnich in 1949, requesting the translation of a letter from German to English, “it seems that whenever we want any of the world’s languages translated we go to Welland.”⁸⁷

83. Local 529 Constitution and By-Laws 1945, Local 529 Constitution, box: District 5, File: Local 529, UE fonds, University of Pittsburgh.

84. “Aux canadiens-français,” Local 174, Plymouth Cordage Ltd., Welland, Ontario, 1947–49, vol. 12, file 8, Parent-Rowley fonds, MG 31 B19, LAC.

85. C. R. Sullivan to C. S. Jackson, 15 February 1944, Welland Office, General, 1944, reel M-2338, UE fonds, LAC.

86. Peter Hunter to Ross Russell, n.d., St. Catharines Area, 1950, reel M-2341, UE fonds, LAC.

87. George Harris, secretary treasurer, District 5, UE, to Mike Bosnich, 25 November 1949,

Mine-Mill staff undertook a campaign to reform Canadian income tax regulations to help out union members with dependents outside Canada. They succeeded in convincing tax authorities that it was unfair to tax immigrant men as single if they sent a substantial part of their income to dependent family members in their countries of origin.⁸⁸ Thanks to these efforts, the *Income Tax Act* was amended to allow such immigrant men to be classified as “married.”

The importance of local concerns within communist-led unions is highlighted by the varying emphasis on ethnic inclusion in different locals. Joan Sangster found little evidence of such concerns between 1920 and 1960 in the UE locals in Peterborough, an overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic community. A UE organizer lamented that because there were so few foreign-born people in the town, ethnic organizations could not be called upon to combat racist prejudice.⁸⁹

We have already noted that, from their inception, communist-led unions had close ties to communist-led ethnic clubs. The clubs, which had been instrumental in the initial success of communist-led unions in Niagara, remained unflagging in their support for solidarity unionism. During a 1947 strike by Local 529 of the UE at Yale and Towne in St. Catharines, for example, the communist-led Association of Ukrainian Canadians, whose hall was adjacent to the Yale and Towne plant, turned their facilities over to the strikers, to serve as strike headquarters. The neighbouring community supplied hot drinks, sandwiches, and volunteers for the picket lines. Additional support came from the ladies auxiliary of Local 199 of the UAW in St. Catharines. Striking locals generally also explained their reasons to the communities in which they lived. They contrasted the advantages to the community, such as higher wages for working-class residents, with the hardship caused by corporations that used speed-ups to lay off workers and thus increase profits, and that often exported profits from Niagara.⁹⁰

The most dramatic example of Niagara working-class immigrant support for strikers occurred during the Canadian Seamen’s Union (CSU) 1946 and 1948 strikes against anti-union shipowners. Striking seamen faced tremendous odds in this battle. If shipowners succeeded in placing strikebreakers aboard their ships, the ships could sail away, leaving helpless striking seamen

General Local Files, Local 523, Welland, 1949, reel M-2431, UE fonds, LAC.

88. John Shedden, president, Local 637 IUMM&SW, to Norman S. Dowd, CCL, 2 February 1948, File: Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, Local 637, 1944–51, Canadian Labour Congress fonds, LAC.

89. Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920–1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 196.

90. “It’s Your St. Catharines – and Ours!” and “What’s Your Verdict,” newspaper advertisements by Local 529, UE, Yale & Towne Manufacturing Co., St. Catharines, Ont., Materials issued by Local 529, 1947, vol. 20, file 26, UE fonds, LAC; “To the Citizens of Niagara Falls,” *Niagara Falls Evening Review*, 25 July 1953.



Funeral of Tom Curran, president of UE Local 523 Welland, January 1950.

LAC: e011196431.

on the dock. Despite these odds, the CSU succeeded in obtaining the eight-hour day, job security, wage increases, and paid vacations for its members in 1946. Determined to defeat the militant communist-led union, however, shipping companies relied on the support of the Canadian government to sign contracts with the corrupt Seafarers' International Union. The fate of the CSU was sealed when pressure from the American Federation of Labour led to its ouster from the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada.⁹¹ Political scientists Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse describe the 1948 strike as "one of the most violent and controversial international labour battles in Canadian history."⁹² During both strikes, when striking seamen came ashore and camped along the Welland Canal, from Port Colborne to St. Catharines, to prevent shipowners from bringing in strikebreakers, Hungarian, Yugoslav, and English club women from communities along the canal cooked and distributed food up and down the long picket lines. They also collected pots and pans, towels, and

91. Whitaker & Marcuse, *Cold War Canada*, 318–341.

92. Whitaker & Marcuse, *Cold War Canada*, 174.

blankets to allow the strikers to become self-sufficient.⁹³ Niagara's communist-led unions decried the treatment of the seamen. They also raised funds and staffed picket lines all along the Welland Canal.

IV

ALTHOUGH WOMEN WERE ACTIVE supporters of communist-led solidarity unionism, communist-led unions in Niagara were not as committed to addressing women's concerns as they were to countering racism. On paper, both the UTWA and the UE promoted gender equality in the post-World War II decade.⁹⁴ According to Julie Guard, the UE – thanks to the presence of women activists within its ranks – paid greater attention to the needs of female workers than many other unions during the 1950s. The UE's emphasis on gender equality during the war and postwar years, Guard believes, rested on the notion of gender neutrality rather than on recognizing the special needs of female members.⁹⁵ The union supported such demands as equal pay for equal work, for example, without questioning the gendered designation of jobs in plants. Even in this militant union, economics – specifically, the desire to safeguard men's wages – and not gender equity was frequently the main impetus behind equal pay for equal work campaigns. The leadership hung on to such views despite the presence of female activists in the union who pursued not only working-class but also feminist goals. Women delegates to party conventions challenged the male leadership. They felt secure in pointing to women's needs because they were employed in factories where women comprised a large proportion of the workers.⁹⁶ In her local study of women workers in Peterborough, however, Sangster reaches different conclusions, although local plants organized by the UE employed large numbers of women. In Peterborough, the family wage ideal continued to dominate the thinking of both male and female workers.⁹⁷ That ideal dominated in Niagara as well, where relatively few women worked in the plants represented by the UE. The initiative for addressing gender issues in Niagara seems to have come from union officials, not from the rank and file. Some of the publications of Niagara locals reported discussions on gender questions at the district level. Some

93. Worker correspondent Mrs Sándor Pataki, *Kanadai Magyar Munkás* [Canadian Hungarian Worker], 20 June 1946.

94. "Plymouth Cordage Workers," Local 174, Plymouth Cordage Company Ltd., Welland, Ontario, Correspondence 1947, 1949, vol. 2, file 15, Parent-Rowley fonds, LAC.

95. Julie Guard, "Fair Play or Fair Pay? Gender Relations, Class Consciousness, and Union Solidarity in the Canadian UE," *Labour/Le Travail* 37 (Spring 1996): 155, 175–176.

96. Guard, "Fair Play or Fair Pay?"

97. Sangster, *Earning Respect*, Chap. 7, "Resistance and Unionization."

even bemoaned the fact that in Niagara locals women were far less outspoken than women in UE locals elsewhere.⁹⁸

Discussions of gender-based wage discrimination in the UE's local at International Silver in Niagara Falls illustrate the dominant concern with safeguarding men's wages in the communist-led union. Local 505 used arguments similar to those that communist-led unions employed to promote antiracism in its efforts to combat gender inequality. It linked working-class interests and women's rights by suggesting that dividing workers along gender lines served the interests of employers. "We are fully aware of the purpose of the management to keep women instead of men since they are paid such a low rate of pay, but why should unskilled labour be paid at a different rate ... whether it is male or female?"⁹⁹ Niagara locals showed less commitment to steps that would have benefitted only female workers. Despite recognition of the unfairness of gendered pay differentials, the union signed some contracts that merely narrowed the difference, thus perpetuating such practices. In some cases, moreover, Niagara locals presented the UE and its protests as male undertakings, casting "wives and sweethearts" in supporting roles.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, other communist-led unions in the region expressed support for the gendered, heteronormative notion of women and children being supported by male breadwinners. The newsletter of Mine-Mill Local 637 in Port Colborne cited Pat Conroy's speech in favour of the family wage at the World Federation of Trade Unions approvingly. Conroy declared that Canadian trade unionists had worked "to abolish the exploitation of supplementary labour such as that of married women," adding that the trade unionists were striving "to extract sufficient social value for each industry to give each man an adequate income to maintain his wife and family."¹⁰¹

The domination of such contradictory views of gender equality even among leftist women was not limited to the workplace. The short-lived campaign in St. Catharines by local supporters of the Housewives Consumers League (HCL), a communist-led organization that protested against high prices for consumer goods in 1948, captured the equivocation of militant unionists and their supporters on gender issues. Niagara's community unions embraced the campaign against high consumer prices. In 1951, the UE Local 505 newsletter *Silver Sparks* dismissed corporate reasoning that higher prices for consumer

98. Joe Vigna, "Report on the Problems of Working Women at District Council," *Shop Talk*, Cyanamid, Intl. Silver, McGlashan, General Local Files, Local 505, 1954, reel M-2358, UE fonds, LAC.

99. G. Ettinger, president, Local 529, to Charles Daley, minister of labour, 29 March 1955, Correspondence and Circular Letters, Local 529, reel M-2362, UE fonds, LAC.

100. Leaflet dated August 1953, Local 505, Niagara Falls, reel M-2357, UE fonds, LAC.

101. *The Link*, 9 September 1948, Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers International Union, Local 637, Port Colborne, Ont., 1944–51, International Union Correspondence, box 31, Canadian Labour Congress fonds, LAC.

products were caused by workers' demands for higher wages or the higher cost of materials, pointing instead to corporate insistence on inordinately high profits.¹⁰² In St. Catharines, UAW Local 199 and its ladies auxiliary sponsored a deputation of the HCL to the municipal council. These unionists responded sharply when councillors greeted League members with suspicion, questioning them about their relationship to the CPC. The Niagara United Labour Council, which brought together communist-led unions affiliated with the CIO and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), accused the council of red-baiting, explaining that thousands of Niagara residents supported the Niagara United Labour Committee (NULC) campaign against high prices. Ironically, it was a letter from a woman, Ellen Halden, secretary of the UAW's local women's auxiliary, that captured the persistence of a contradictory attitude toward women among solidarity unionists. She endorsed the HCL campaign, denouncing the municipal council as reactionary for failing to do so and condemning its use of "the communist issue" to question the legitimacy of this political initiative by women. At the same time, however, she also admonished council members for "failing to conduct themselves as gentlemen in their dealings with delegations who appear before them, particularly when the delegation is composed of members of the weaker sex."¹⁰³

By 1953 some female UE members in Niagara seemed to recognize that women themselves would have to tackle discriminatory attitudes within their union. Women from UE Local 529 at Yale and Towne announced, "There are many problems facing women in industry today, [and] Yale and Towne women are no exception. Several ... girls at Yale and Towne have decided to start a social evening where we can, without the interference of men, talk over some of our problems we are confronted with at the shop." With a touch of humour, the leaflet concluded with "Everybody welcome – must be female."¹⁰⁴ A number of women employed by International Silver in Niagara Falls attended the St. Catharines meeting as well.

The modest size of many of Niagara's industrial plants meant that unlike larger locals, whose members belonged to a single plant, here bargaining units often included more than one workplace, thus providing organizational structures that favoured breadth. In Welland, for example, the workers of a number of metallurgical factories (Electrometallurgical, Page-Hersey Tubes, and

102. *Silver Sparks*, March 1951, ISC Canada, Local 505 materials, 1950–52, vol. 33, file 8, UE fonds, LAC.

103. Office of the City Clerk, St. Catharines Records, 1928–74, RG 343, Housewives Consumer Association (1948), BULSCA. For a study of the movement in other parts of Canada, see Julie Guard, "Canadian Citizens or Dangerous Foreign Women: Canada's Radical Consumer Movement, 1947–1950," in Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta & Frances Swyripa, eds., *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 161–190.

104. "Women's Social," 4 March 1953, Weekly Reports, Niagara Peninsula, M. Bosnich, 1953, reel M-2344, UE fonds, LAC.

Reliance Electric) belonged to a single, composite local: Local 523, the largest and most active UE local in the region. Welland also had a service local (517) that brought together the employees of Crowland Council, garage mechanics, and the workers of several dairies and a brick-making factory. Mainstream unions at this time paid scant attention to such small units. For that very reason, workers who belonged to the local were grateful and loyal to the UE.¹⁰⁵ Those of McGlashan-Clarke and International Silver – the silverware makers – belonged to Local 505; in Niagara Falls only the more numerous Cyanamid workers formed their own UE local. Yale and Towne workers and those of English Electric in St. Catharines belonged to Local 529 until the English Electric employees decided to join the USWA. In the case of strikes, communist-led unions lent one another extensive financial and moral support.

To promote a sense of working-class community during the massive organizing campaigns of World War II, militant activists established the NULC, which brought together both AFL and CIO union locals in which communists were influential, such as the International Gas and Chemical, Automobile,¹⁰⁶ Textile, and Electrical workers unions. As the UE, the CTC, and Mine-Mill grew more isolated following their ouster from Canada's mainstream labour federations, the importance of the NULC for increasing their influence and financial base, and for expanding and strengthening their connections to local workers, grew even more important. The USWA, the leading anticommunist union in the CCL, called on all its Niagara locals to disavow the NULC. To defend against such attacks, NULC members intensified publicity campaigns through newspapers, leaflets, and union broadcasts on the St. Catharines radio station CKTB.¹⁰⁷ Keeping silent about its links to the CPC, the NULC publicized its actions on behalf of the entire labour movement, such as its campaigns for decent labour laws, to outlaw company unionism, for a forty-hour work-week, for organizing the unorganized, and against raiding. It also acted on behalf of the wider community, fighting against high prices and for affordable housing.¹⁰⁸ The NULC prided itself in bringing together AFL and CIO unions. Although it called on all area locals to join it, however, most unions without influential communist members shunned the NULC.

105. On similar developments in Sudbury, where Mine-Mill organized a similar, though much larger, general workers' local, see Donald Dennie, "Le local 902 du Mine-Mill: Les dix premières années (1949–1959) du syndicat des travailleurs de la ville et du district de Sudbury," in Steedman, Suchnigg & Buse, eds., *Hard Lessons*, 50–68.

106. Representatives of the Unity faction of Local 199 attended.

107. See, for example, Local 535, St. Catharines, 1953, General Local Files, reel M-2344, UE fonds, LAC.

108. "Statement of Niagara United Labour Committee in Reply to the 'Leadership' of United Steelworker's [sic] Union," Niagara United Labour Committee, 1949, reel M-2341, UE fonds, LAC.

V

THE CLEAREST EXAMPLE of solidarity unionism in Niagara was the role of militant union activists in local politics. Such unionists – many of whom were communists – were elected to positions in a number of Niagara municipal councils. Members of Mine-Mill, for example, served on Port Colborne's municipal council.¹⁰⁹ Communists were also elected to the councils in Niagara Falls and neighbouring Stamford Township.¹¹⁰ Because of the numerical significance of minority workers in Crowland's population, it was in that township that the influence of militant unions in local politics was most pronounced. As Bosnich explained, "we in the union, and particularly the foreign-born people, we had a deliberate policy, and the policy was that we elected people to political office wherever we could, based on their working-class consciousness, and based on their empathy and outright support of the union. And we in turn in the union, used to work up slates of people that we wanted elected."¹¹¹ Significantly, the names of noncommunist pro-labour candidates – such as Armour McCrea, a CCF supporter from Welland – also appeared on such slates.

Residents of Crowland, including immigrant workers with only a limited command of English, viewed the township council as their representatives. Confident that they had the right to make themselves heard, and would be listened to, residents did not hesitate to attend council meetings and raise their concerns. "The general attitude in Crowland Council was that you didn't have to have an appointment," explained Bosnich.

You didn't have to write a letter to the council that you wanted to appear as a delegation. You just walked in and sat down in the council chamber and we had a special item on the agenda for new business, and anybody can get up on the floor and say "Hey, Mr. Reeve, I've got a problem and I want you to discuss it." This referred to any kind of problem – dog problems, flooding of cellars, school business, anything. It was much more informal than in Welland. Many of the people who came could speak only broken English. The ethnic make-up of the council was helpful. The Councillors could usually speak Ukrainian, Polish, Croatian, Italian.¹¹²

Peter Santone, a Crowland barber of Italian origin who generally supported the Liberal Party, also served on Crowland council in the 1940s. He characterized the council meetings in the same way as Bosnich.¹¹³ The UE also took advantage of the informal council meetings to intercede directly on behalf of

109. "Announcement of meeting on proposed amalgamation of Humberstone and Port Colborne, where councillors who are union members will speak," File: Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers, Local 637, Port Colborne, Ont., 1944–51, LAC.

110. "Civil Security Intelligence Summary January to March 1939," in Kealey & Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins*, vol. 2, part 5, 376–377.

111. Bosnich interview, 11 November 1985.

112. Bosnich interview, 5 December 1985.

113. Peter Santone, interview by author, Welland, October 1985.

needy residents. On 8 March 1945, for example, a delegation from the union requested that “the council look into the case of Lovich Olah and his wife and eight children who are badly in need of further assistance.”¹¹⁴

The civic engagement of a significant segment of the township’s population was evident in the existence of opposing ratepayers’ associations. The members of East Crowland Memorial Ratepayers’ Association, representing a predominantly Anglo-Celtic area, elected management representatives from Atlas Steels, perhaps the staunchest anti-union employer in the region. The Crowland Ratepayers’ and Tenants’ Association represented voters from the working-class district in the vicinity of the large plants, most of whom were of “foreign extraction,” and many of whom were also leftists, although not necessarily communists. Sidor Crouch, one of the leaders of the Crowland Ratepayers’ and Tenants’ Association, for instance, was also a founding member of the Ukrainian Workers’ Mutual Benefit Federation, a noncommunist Ukrainian left-wing organization.¹¹⁵ The ratepayers’ and tenants’ association frequently sent militant UE representatives to the council.¹¹⁶ The candidates did not declare a political affiliation. Voters supported them because, as one Crowland resident, who was neither a CPC member nor a sympathizer, explained, these candidates “were more for the working-class people.” They tried “to make it easier for the working people,” for example, by keeping their taxes down and making “the big companies” pay more.¹¹⁷

Councillors succeeded in changing local practices in the interest of workers. They adjusted the costs of water and electricity, for example, by ensuring that homeowners’ rates did not go up as quickly as the rates paid by industries. The men elected because of community-based union support also made sure that most municipal work, such as the building of sidewalks, was classified as general taxation rather than as local improvements, so that it would be paid for by general taxes rather than by homeowners alone. On the other hand, councillors initiated the unionization of municipal employees, from office clerks to road workers, by the UE. The men elected to Crowland’s school board were cautious with the taxpayers’ money, but progressive enough to recognize – and explain to their constituents – “why it was necessary to pay a little higher taxes to get better education.”¹¹⁸

But representations to Crowland council, frequently though not always inspired by communist-led unions, were by no means limited to

114. Crowland Council minutes, 8 March 1945, Township of Crowland fonds (hereafter Crowland fonds), AO.

115. Patrias, *Relief Strike*, 14.

116. Mike Bosnich to Jack Douglas, 22 November 1947, Welland Office, 1947, reel M-2340, UE fonds, LAC; Bosnich interview, 5 December 1985.

117. John Kozlowski, interview by author, Welland, 9 December 1986.

118. Mike Bosnich, interview by author, Welland, 20 September 1985.

bread-and-butter issues. At the end of World War II, delegations of communist-led union members obtained council's endorsement of compulsory collective bargaining rights and union security.¹¹⁹ At a time when labour activists were just beginning their campaigns for legislation against discrimination based on race (although rarely including sex-based discrimination), Crowland council endorsed resolutions demanding equality in job opportunities and wages regardless of sex, colour, creed, and political belief.¹²⁰ Immigrant workers from countries devastated by the war, such as Poland and Yugoslavia, obtained the council's support to ship food and clothing to their countries of birth.¹²¹ During the CSU strike, Crowland council's protest against the presence of provincial and mounted police in the township implicated the state in supporting anti-union employers. It called upon both federal and provincial governments "to allow strikers a chance to improve their economic position without provocation and intimidation by the massing of hundreds of police officers" in the area.¹²²

Starting in 1945, Crowland residents also turned to their municipal council for assistance in environmental matters. Stopping industrial pollution in their community was their chief goal. Some requests were presented by large delegations of ratepayers; others came from their representatives from the local ratepayers' and tenants' association. They identified the chief polluters as the Electrometallurgical Company (later Union Carbide) for smoke emissions and dust and various railway companies whose engines emitted black smoke while stopped in Crowland. It was a measure of the residents' influence that these corporations promised to stop or limit such pollution.¹²³ The ratepayers' and tenants' association not only promoted municipal parks to provide healthy outdoor meeting places for Crowland workers, but also persuaded Crowland council to sponsor public entertainment by various ethnic groups in these parks.¹²⁴

We will never know for certain which ideas in particular influenced Crowland's citizens to support left-wing candidates in municipal elections. Clearly, however, enough working-class electors were convinced that the leftists best represented their interests to assure their election throughout the period under consideration here. In 1960, when Welland and Crowland amalgamated, the ward where most workers of immigrant origin resided continued to elect solidarity union representatives to municipal government.

119. Crowland Council minutes, 12 April 1945, Crowland fonds, AO.

120. Crowland Council minutes, 15 September 1945, Crowland fonds, AO.

121. Crowland Council minutes, 8 December 1945 and 18 January 1946, Crowland fonds, AO.

122. Crowland Council minutes, 13 June 1946, Crowland fonds, AO.

123. Crowland Council minutes, 10 May 1945 and 26 June 1951, Crowland fonds, AO; Bosnich, *One Man's War*, 90.

124. Bosnich interview, 5 December 1985.

Solidarity unionism in Niagara had a lighter side as well. Efforts to engage rank-and-file members and supporters included cultural and recreational activities. Such an approach had many precedents among leftists in Canada and abroad. The problem of sustaining full attendance at union meetings was an important reason for adding cultural and recreational undertakings to their agendas. As early as 1944, C. R. Sullivan, the UE's business agent in Niagara, assigned one night a week to "amusements, picture shows etc." to keep members engaged in their locals.¹²⁵ The signing and renewal of union contracts was generally celebrated with banquets, dances, and picnics. Stags held to encourage bonding among male unionists reflect the dominance of male culture in Niagara's unions. Such social occasions were often combined with various union campaigns, bringing leaders from outside Niagara to speak to the region's workers.¹²⁶

Although the UE's stags suggest the dominance of "manly" culture, the union offered culture and recreation for women workers and workers' families as well. The ladies auxiliary and INCO's Local 637 in Port Colborne, for example, established the "3-3 Committee" specifically to promote closer collaboration between the union men and women through recreational activities. Its first undertaking was a card party.¹²⁷ Celebrations such as Christmas and May Day were designed for families. Even more significant was the opportunity given to militant unionists to send their children to the Pickering and Fort Erie camps of the Independent Mutual Benefit Federation, a communist-led multiethnic organization.¹²⁸ St Patrick's Day dances were for adults, men and women alike.

In the absence of many entertainment opportunities, union members and their families – regardless of ethnic background – attended dances, card nights, and musical performances in these ethnic halls and sent their children to camps run by ethnic mutual benefit associations. The operettas performed at the Hungarian Hall in Welland appeared magical to the young Mike Bosnich: "I used to watch Bert Pajzos perform in these Hungarian operettas. They were beautiful. They were dressed in the hussar costumes, and I used to sit there as a young boy with my mouth wide open. I couldn't understand a word, but the music, and the singing, and the costumes, were just out of this world." The appeal of such entertainment was especially great for adults and children who

125. Sullivan to Jackson, 15 February 1944, LAC.

126. Mike Bosnich to George Harris, 5 August 1949, General Local Files, Local 523, Welland, 1949, reel M-2341, UE fonds, LAC.

127. *The Link*, 27 November 1946, 2, Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, Local 637, Port Colborne, Ont., 1944–51, International Union Correspondence, box 31, Canadian Labour Congress fonds, LAC.

128. "UE members are invited to send their children to I.M.B.F. children's camps," General Local Files, Local 523, Welland, 1953, reel M-2344, UE fonds, LAC.



UE Aces, city of Welland-Crowland Inter-City Softball Champs, 1950. Mike Bosnich at centre of standing line.

LAC: e011196433.

had no other access to “theatre or anything.”¹²⁹ In 1949, the Welland Local 523 purchased a building that it hoped to transform into a labour centre. The centre would have a library, recreation rooms, billiards, ping pong tables, a meeting hold, and “even a beverage room.”¹³⁰

Employers’ efforts to inspire worker loyalty through cultural activities provided additional motivation. Union organizers and officials watched the employers’ actions and tried to match them. Because many large Niagara employers sponsored their own sports teams, the UE did so as well. Men from UE shops, for example, made up the UE Aces softball team and distinguished themselves in the region.¹³¹ By the 1950s, however, access to commercial sports appealed to the rank and file even more than participatory amateur leagues. Efforts to organize an excursion for the workers of the Electrometallurgical

129. Bosnich interview, 20 September 1985.

130. Leaflet addressed to UE members, March 1949, General Local Files, Local 523, Welland, 1949, reel M-2341, UE fonds, LAC.

131. “UE Softball Team Going Great Guns,” UE *Voice* of Local 523, July 1951, General Local Files, Local 523, Welland, 1951, reel M-2342, UE fonds, LAC.

Company of Welland to a hockey game in Toronto in 1946 illustrates this competition between employers and communist-led unions to gain worker loyalty by giving them access to spectator sports. "The Chief Steward of Electro Metals, Brother Ed St. Hilaire is organizing a bus load from his department to attend a hockey game in Toronto," wrote Bosnich to R. Russell. "It appears that the company officials are trying to short-circuit this move by Brother Ed, and take it over themselves. They are spreading propaganda that it is almost impossible to buy Blue Tickets unless the company gets them." Bosnich then asked UE leaders, including Jackson, to buy a block of tickets for the union, explaining that it would be important to prevent the company from playing the role of "good guys" with their employees by chartering buses to take them to hockey games.¹³²

VI

BY 1960 SOLIDARITY UNIONISM had succeeded in attaining many of its stated goals both at workplaces and in the wider community. A very high percentage of Niagara's workers were unionized and their wages were among the highest in Ontario.¹³³ Workers who were not of British descent had gained entry to all jobs in local plants and their positions were guaranteed by union-secured seniority rights. Minority workers (with the exception of women) were also well represented in union leadership. Bosnich's words best describe rank-and-file gains thanks to solidarity unionism: communist-led unions, he believed, "overrode nationalities," enabling immigrant workers "to have a say in their wages, working conditions, and to have some modicum of control over their futures ... to finally avoid ... the discrimination that existed for many years, to manage to build up a system of jobs security." The union "for them was an organization that was long overdue ... that would give them the chance for self-respect and ... decency." "That," Bosnich held, "was more important to them than even the money or the seniority."¹³⁴ Union activists elected to municipal offices ensured that local politics were responsive to working-class interests. They required large employers to contribute more to local taxes and to pay more for utilities and local improvements. They also forced the worst industrial polluters in the region to curb their emissions. By contributing to the success of solidarity unions in Niagara, in the middle decades of the 20th

132. Michael Bosnich to C. S. Jackson, 7 November 1947, St. Catharines Office, 1947, reel M-2340, UE fonds, LAC.

133. "Districts of Major Labour Market Areas by Proportion of Paid Workers Organized," Department of Labour, Economics and Research Branch, *45th Annual Report*, 1956, Labour Organization in Canada, 13; "Average hourly wage rates for labourers, male, in manufacturing by city, 1951, 1952, 1953," Department of Labour, Appendix to circular no. 2684, Canadian Manufacturers Association fonds, Industrial Relations General, 1947-48, LAC.

134. Bosnich interview, 11 November 1985.

century immigrant workers and their allies succeeded in redefining citizenship in Niagara communities to allow formerly marginalized groups to have a voice in their communities.

Despite such significant accomplishments, however, solidarity unionism in Niagara came up against forces that it could not affect: global developments such as automation, capital mobility, and deindustrialization. These transformations could not be tackled at the local or regional level. Plant relocation from Niagara to areas with cheaper, non-union labour began as early as 1955 with the closure of McGlashan Clark and relocation of production to Perth, Ontario. By the early 21st century, deindustrialization in Niagara had led to a massive decline in manufacturing jobs. Today, unemployment rates in such formerly thriving industrial towns as Welland are among the highest in Ontario and Canada. Not surprisingly the number of foreign-born workers settling in Niagara is not large. Many of those who do come are refugees, drawn to the region by its proximity to the US border and by the low cost of housing. Niagara's workers now find employment in lower-paid, often non-unionized jobs in the service sector. In Niagara, as elsewhere in Canada, moreover, membership in all private sector unions – mainstream and communist-led ones – declined precipitously. Although such massive restructuring means that organizing workers requires new approaches by the labour movement, the strategies and goals of solidarity unionism, far from becoming obsolete, can still be useful for mobilizing workers in this region. Engagement with issues outside the workplace such as unemployment, environmental protection, and human rights are as pressing now, if not more so, as during the period described here. Coalitions of social activists, including union members, can still play a key role in ensuring full membership for workers in Niagara's communities regardless of age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and expression.

The author thanks Wayne Thorpe and the Labour/Le Travail anonymous readers for reading and commenting on this study.