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After the Strike — Labour Relations in Oshawa, 1937-1939

Laurel Sefton MacDowell

Contemporary historians of the Canadian working class have portrayed the period after the 1937 General Motors strike in Oshawa until the outbreak of World War II as one of slow growth and setbacks for the union movement, and between 1937 and 1939 union membership did decline. But an analysis of the repercussions of that strike and the impact of industrial unionism on the workers in their community, indicates that a new "class consciousness" emerged.

The 1937 Oshawa strike of General Motors (GM) employees was significant because it was the first major breakthrough for industrial unionism in the mass production industries in Canada. The effect of the strike on and beyond the community was also important because it changed the relationship workers had with management in the auto industry, it stimulated unionization in the auto and other industries in Oshawa, it created confidence and a new consciousness amongst many workers in the community which activated and politicized them.

Labour historians portray the period 1937 to 1939 after the Oshawa strike until the outbreak of the Second World War as two years of disappointingly slow growth and setbacks for the union movement because union membership figures fell.¹ Membership in Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)

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1 For example Desmond Morton has written, "As late as 1937... the CIO could boast of no real victories for all its efforts across Canada.... After only a couple of years, the CIO in Canada appeared to be stillborn." Desmond Morton, *Working People*, Ottawa, Deneau, 1984, p. 164. See also H.A. Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1948, p. 235, Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada 1900-1966*, Ottawa, Information Canada, 1968, p. 259, and Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, Toronto, Butterworths, 1983, p. 220.

affiliated unions in 1937 was 75,885, dropped to 64,000 in 1938 and to 55,000 in 1939. In mid-1939, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) expelled CIO unions affiliated to it and in 1940, the year the Canadian CIO Committee became part of the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), membership returned to the 1937 level and increased thereafter. In the same period TLC membership of mostly craft unions peaked in 1938 at 160,000, fell off until 1940 and began to increase again to 1941 to 144,000.² Historians have measured union strength solely in terms of the overall decline in union membership and hence have seen no continuity between 1937 when industrial unions made their first gains in Canada and the war years when thousands of workers joined unions.

The impact of industrial unionism on Canadian workers in their communities has been largely unexamined but using Oshawa as a case study, an analysis of the repercussions of the Oshawa strike to 1939 reveals the *meaning* of this new labour movement's emergence in Oshawa and by inference in other Canadian communities. The victory of the UAW resulted in immediate changes in labour relations in the Oshawa auto industry, it influenced other workers to organize, affected community life and local politics. The experience in Oshawa between 1937 and 1939 indicates that the UAW laid its organizational groundwork which later provided a solid basis for dramatic union growth during the war and that the roots of industrial unionism were developed during the depression years. As a result workers' expectations changed about their place in industry, a new "class consciousness" emerged and their demands for industrial unions changed both labour-management and community relations. Despite opposition and setbacks in 1938 and 1939, when the Depression ended, workers were ready to take advantage of the increased employment to create their own organizations, demand rights on the job to protect themselves and to organize in industry and politically.

OSHAWA STRIKE

The Oshawa strike has been examined thoroughly³ but, some highlights are reviewed in order to demonstrate what the workers believed they were doing by forming a union and striking and how their relations with the employer changed. In 1936, auto workers in Canada began to emulate their American counterparts and to organize. The General Motors workforce in Oshawa ignored the existing employee's association and formed a union. As George Burt, later the Canadian Director of the UAW remembered, "The company would hardly speak to us".⁴ Late in 1936, sit-downs occurred, secret

2 *Labour Organizations in Canada, 1937 to 1942*, Ottawa.

3 Irving Abella, ed., *On Strike*, Toronto, James Lewis & Samuel Publishers, 1974.

4 "Where was George Burt?", pamphlet, UAW Education Department, Industrial Relations Centre, University of Toronto., n.d., p. 14.

organizing continued until the union could operate in the open. In January, General Motors declared the highest profits in its history in Canada and the United States and simultaneously announced that its Oshawa employees would receive their fifth consecutive wage cut in five years; a month later, the company announced a speed-up of the production line. The combination of these events precipitated the Oshawa strike as did the dramatic victory in February 1937 of the UAW in Flint Michigan. Events in the Oshawa GM plant moved quickly after two hundred and fifty men in the body shop struck first, several Canadians contacted the UAW in Detroit to request organizational assistance and UAW organizer Hugh Thompson arrived on February 19 and signed up 4000 GM employees within a month into the new UAW Local 222.

The UAW's affiliation with the CIO caused some problems locally. Thompson was unable to rent a local hall for a membership meeting until "the union announced it would hold its ...meeting at the 'Four Corners', the busiest corner in Oshawa at noon on Saturday" and got the collegiate.⁵ The company refused to recognize the union; the workers refused to give up their union or its connection with the UAW and on April 18, 1937 the strike began.

Opposition to a "foreign union" persisted in the community and also came from most of the Ontario press and from all levels of government — especially Mitchell Hepburn's Liberal government in Ontario. The Premier vowed that the CIO would never gain a foothold in Canada, and he decided to break the union. Hepburn's opposition resulted from his concern that, as an article in *Canadian Forum* suggested: "If the CIO wins in Oshawa, it will get into the mines send stocks tumbling...It seems then that what is wrong with the CIO unions is not their foreign origin... nor their lawlessness and sit-down tactics ...but their effectiveness."⁶ Despite Mayor Alex Hall's assurances to him that the strikers were peaceful and that law and order prevailed, Hepburn sent in 400 policemen whom the press dubbed "Hepburn's Hussars". He instructed the Welfare Department to withhold relief from strikers (who received no strike pay) and their families. He opposed any assistance in settling the strike from the federal Department of Labour's conciliation service. The Premier's forceful intervention in the dispute precipitated the resignation of two cabinet ministers — Attorney General Arthur Roebuck and Labour Minister David Croll; Croll stated that his place was "marching with the workers rather than riding with General Motors."⁷ Thus the presence of the CIO polarized citizens in Oshawa and throughout the province. Hepburn urged the

⁵ R.B. Macleod and P.R. Foster, "'Greedy Paws': An Analysis of the General Motors Strike", Industrial Relations Centre, University of Toronto, unpublished paper, p. 34.

⁶ Felix Lazarus, "The Oshawa Strike", *Canadian Forum*, Vol. XVII, No. 197, June 1937.

⁷ Irving Abella, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

federal Minister of Immigration to prevent the entry into Canada of John L. Lewis's "paid agitators".⁸ But he was looking in the wrong direction; workers were organizing from inside the plants, not outside.

Hepburn's intervention prolonged the strike and supported the company's opposition to the union. From an undercover agent Hepburn knew that CIO activity was increasing in other Ontario industries, that Local 222 was not receiving financial support from the UAW, despite union president Homer Martin's public promises, and that the local union was in trouble. As the union negotiating committee was anxious to conclude an agreement as soon as possible, and as GM wanted to resume production so as not to lose the British Commonwealth market to Ford and Chrysler, a contract was finally negotiated, ratified in a membership vote and signed in Hepburn's Toronto office to end the 15 day strike.

When the autoworkers returned to their jobs, they had won a reduction in hours, an increase in wages, seniority provisions, a grievance procedure, a rest period and a clause which prohibited discrimination for past or future trade union activity. Yet, Hepburn claimed a victory because the UAW had not been formally recognized. The contract was ambiguous. It read:

This agreement shall continue in force until and so long as and concurrent with the agreement between General Motors Corporation in the United States, dated February 11th and the United Automobile Workers of America. This agreement covering the Oshawa factory of the company is signed on behalf of themselves and their successors in office representing the employees of the company who are members of the local union.⁹

The workers believed they had won, reaffirmed publicly that Local 222 was affiliated to the UAW and allied to the CIO, and the company knew that in reality it was bargaining with the UAW.

The Oshawa strike was a turning point in the history of the Canadian labour movement, and had important repercussions¹⁰ because as the first, large and successful organizing drive in the mass production industries, it inspired other Canadian workers to organize and gave impetus to other CIO unions. Government opposition made organizing more difficult, but workers persisted in joining the UAW as the polarization between the two sides precipitated by the strike spilled over into the community. In Oshawa, the strike was a catalyst for change, which after the conflict took place in labour relations, community life and local politics.

⁸ John L. Lewis was head of the CIO in the United States.

⁹ *Collective Agreement between General Motors of Canada and its employees*, n.d., Hepburn papers, PAO.

¹⁰ Irving Abella, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

LABOUR RELATIONS IN OSHAWA, 1937-1939

The union's labour relations goals in the 1930's were firstly, to establish a more formal relationship with the employer, and secondly to extend its membership in the auto industry. The settlement of the Oshawa strike resulted in three agreements with General Motors which covered its plant employees in Oshawa, Windsor and St. Catharines. Once signed, the contracts had to be implemented and this posed a challenge in a situation where the plants were newly organized and the employers were both hostile and inexperienced in dealing with a union.

J.L. Cohen the union's legal counsel, became embroiled in resolving contract issues and implementing workable solutions at the shop floor level. As early as April 29, 1937 the new grievance committee met with management representatives. Cohen concluded that twenty-six individual complaints were not legitimate grievances and told UAW International President Martin that "although I have asked the management for a report upon each case...I explained to the committee at the same time privately, that they must be careful about dealing with such matters." Cohen believed that some additional complaints would be resolved satisfactorily. "The glaring instances of discrimination, I propose to deal with in an informal manner by direct personal contact... with Mr. Highfield."¹¹

A more serious problem related to demands from some production workers for increases in base rates which the company refused as it correctly observed that there was no provision for such increases in the agreement (except for female bonus employees) because of the negotiated reduction in hours. Apparently during negotiations Cohen had been apprehensive about the effect of reduced hours without a compensating pay increase, "but at that time everybody concerned seemed to be convinced that the men would be perfectly satisfied." The union negotiators were naive because the resulting loss in net earnings created unrest and the pay issue nearly resulted in another strike as did cases of management manipulation of hours to avoid paying overtime to employees working long hours. Cohen urged the international union and the local committee to develop a clear policy on base rates for male production workers but the time needed for discussion gave the company an advantage as it took out ads in the local press that warned the employees about outside influences; the resulting confusion after the strike made the union vulnerable. The Ontario Department of Labour mediated the pay dispute which resulted in a negotiated memorandum of agreement.¹²

¹¹ J.L. Cohen to Homer Martin, 29 April 1937, File 2609, Vol. 7, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

¹² J.L. Cohen to Homer Martin, 11 May 1937, *op. cit.*

Two aspects of this post-strike situation are significant. Firstly, both parties — management and the union — met frequently to administer the agreement and to deal with the employees' grievances. During 1938, management attended meetings with the union's grievance committee reluctantly at first and then regularly, about every two weeks as individual cases were discussed, resolved or investigated further by management by the next meeting.¹³ As a result of this process, until 1939 (when the company finally signed an agreement that formally recognized the UAW and not just the local employees committee), a wary relationship developed, the union became a player, and labour management relations were conducted differently after the strike than before, when GM had had an unfettered management prerogative. There were setbacks for the union, and management continued to test it, but the union remained on the scene and the frequent contact formed the basis for a mature bargaining relationship in the future.

Secondly, as this relationship developed, both sides gained knowledge and experience in their new roles so that labour relations in the Oshawa auto industry became more sophisticated. In April 1937, Cohen reported to Homer Martin how much educational work there would have to be "with a group of men as yet untrained in the trade union approach." He found the union committee "unprepared even for the mechanics involved in handling grievances. There has been no attempt... to examine any questions prior to the sessions [with management] or to sift out undesirable cases." Cohen explained their functions to the grievance committee and suggested "that they fix regular hours during the week for meetings of the committee at union headquarters, when grievances can be presented and discussed and the policy determined."¹⁴ Cohen also referred to management's lack of experience at this time. As the workers learned, their confidence on the job increased and was reflected in the community.

A new labour relations approach began in 1937 despite disruptive management tactics and the Ontario government's continued hostility to the union and the "CIO" which Hepburn portrayed as a communist, alien organization during the 1937 election which he won. As Cohen told a UAW conference in May 1937,

The political tendency here, at least for the moment, is ...one of utilizing every force in the power of the state to stem the tide of labour's progress. CIO affiliation, the question of dealing with Union representatives rather than only with

¹³ Reports of Shop Committee meetings and meetings with management, 14 January 1938; 26 January 1938; 1 February 1938; 16 March 1938; 13 April 1938; 27 April 1938; 14 May 1938; etc., File 2611, Vol. 8, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

¹⁴ J.L. Cohen to Homer Martin, 29 April 1937, *op. cit.*

a Shop Committee has become here a political issue and it is an issue that every employer is taking advantage of.¹⁵

Federal authorities also obstructed the UAW as it had problems shipping its newspaper, the *United Autoworker* to Canada when police seized papers in several communities, including Oshawa, and union officials were told by customs to pay duty on them. Eventually Cohen received assurances from the departments of National Revenue and the Postmaster General that they would not prohibit the importation or transmission through the mails of the publication.¹⁶

Within the UAW, persistent factionalism between the communists and the non-communists was an internal debilitating factor militating against the union's growth. The conflicts began in Detroit, grew in Ontario after the Oshawa strike and resulted in Millard's defeat as UAW Canadian Director at the 1939 UAW convention.

After the Oshawa strike, despite increased contact with management, Local 222 had trouble holding onto its membership, as long layoffs "chiefly engendered through scarcity of work"¹⁷ in the winters meant many workers were unable to pay union dues. Employee turnover depleted the membership rolls, created unrest and morale problems. In the absence of a system of automatic check-off of union dues, union finances suffered as did the local's ability to represent employee interests effectively. The pattern of signing collective agreements with the local union but omitting mention of the UAW continued for the UAW locals in Oshawa, as well as in agreements between Local 199 and McKinnon Industries in St. Catharines and between the amalgamated Windsor local, Local 195 and various branch firms of GM in that city until 1939, the first year of the war. In 1938, the UAW was organizing Chrysler, which signed no agreements but conceded the union a limited role in presenting workers' grievances.¹⁸ Ford of Canada remained untouched. In 1938 Local 222 formed an internal reorganization committee and a ladies' auxiliary to bring back wayward members into the union and it persisted in trying to get official recognition from the company, to help consolidate its membership, its place in the industry and in the community "so that for industrial purposes, public and political purposes and organizational purposes, the suggestion that

¹⁵ Minutes of U.A.W.A. Conference, 30 May 1937, p. 4-5, File 2616, Vol. 8, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

¹⁶ R. Lawrie to J.L. Cohen, 10 January 1938; J.L. Cohen to R. Lawrie, 11 January 1938; J.L. Cohen to C.H. Millard, 14 October 1937, File 2640, Vol. 10, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

¹⁷ A.M. Phillips to J.L. Cohen, 11 January 1938, File 2644, Vol. 10, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

¹⁸ *Labor Leader*, 28 April 1938.

the U.A.W.A. is an outlaw organization would be repudiated.”¹⁹ The union recognition issue had to be settled first while “union security” and automatic dues check-off was not fought for until the 1945 Ford strike in Windsor.

One effect of the Oshawa strike was increased requests for organizational assistance from both auto and other workers as the UAW slowly extended its organization in the Oshawa auto industry. A Canadian membership of 5000 and growing was a healthy situation but the union still had to consolidate, develop clearer policies and greater administrative efficiency,²⁰ in order to combat GM’s attempts to try to undermine it, with as Millard wrote to Martin, attempts “to minimize in the minds of the members all the gains made through the organization.”²¹ The UAW also had to expand; it organized other Oshawa plants including the W.E. Phillips Glass Co. and the Duplate Safety Glass of Canada Ltd., feeder plants supplying car glass to GM. Their employees unionized because of conditions in the plant and the pro-UAW atmosphere amongst workers in Oshawa. On May 10, 1937, Phillips signed an agreement with its employees,²² which provided for a 50 hour work week, modest wage increases, seniority provisions applying to promotion, discharge and layoffs, and a grievance and arbitration system,²³ and the agreement was renewed in December 1937 on the same terms but with no recognition of the UAW. The UAW broadened its base in Oshawa, Windsor and St. Catharines by 1938 with the “marked gains in the feeder plants” associated with Local 222. A strike at Ontario Steel Products over the renewal of a first contract had the unanimous support of the workforce, Local 222 (UAW) and the Oshawa Trades and Labour Council. A *Labor Leader* article declared that “the boys of Ontario Steel are carrying the torch for every union man in Oshawa.” The union pressured city council to discuss the strike in an emergency session and after a short walkout, a new contract was concluded on “terms satisfactory to both parties.”²⁴

A UAW regional conference of that year reflected its organizing efforts and was attended by 33 delegates who represented 7500 members. As Regional Director Millard concluded in his 1938 report, the condition of the union in Oshawa was sound²⁵ and part of a growing network of UAW locals. The

19 J.L. Cohen to Homer Martin, 30 March 1938, File 2611, Vol. 8, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

20 J.L. Cohen to Homer Martin, 3 May 1937, File 2615, Vol. 8, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

21 C.H. Millard to Homer Martin, 12 May 1937, *ibid*.

22 J.L. Cohen to Homer Martin, 11 May 1937; C.H. Millard to Homer Martin, 12 May 1937, *ibid*.

23 Memorandum, 14 June 1937, File 2612, Vol. 8, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

24 *Labor Leader*, 13 October 1938; 27 October 1938.

25 *Labor Leader*, 30 June 1938; Report of C.H. Millard, 26 November 1938, File 2609, Vol. 7, p. 4, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

conference established a national committee to try to negotiate a master agreement with GM for all of its plants in Canada as the union continued to push for its formal recognition as the sole bargaining agency for GM employees. The conference's goals reflected a gradual approach as it delayed making the closed shop an issue. It formulated work rules whereby any employee who was discharged would have his case reviewed by company and union representatives; in dealing with grievances, the worker and his supervisor were to be present and a time limit was included. As the delegates began to develop their views on the seniority system, wage rates, job classifications, wage differentials between the skilled and apprentices, hours of work and overtime rates, their resolutions on these rules later would be reflected in labour law jurisprudence.²⁶ While the full import of the union's growing role was not always reflected in membership statistics, nevertheless victory in Oshawa in 1937 stimulated growth and policy development in the UAW as well as changes in the industry's conduct of labour relations and these changes predated management's official recognition of the UAW and its dramatic membership growth.

The outcome of the Oshawa strike motivated other workers in the city to organize. The All Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL) formed a union of 50 bread salesmen who joined the Bakers' and Dairymen's Industrial Union, which in September 1937 signed an agreement with the Pure Milk Company, in October concluded a contract with Oshawa Dairy Ltd,²⁷ and by November 1938, it had contracts with all but one small dairy in Oshawa. The ACCL also successfully organized the civic employees. It had a cooperative relationship with the UAW and the CIO unions because it recognized its own limitations. As ACCL official Norman Dowd explained to a local organizer,

While the Congress believes that Canadian workers are capable of conducting their own negotiations with employers, it has not had the resources which would enable it to step in and organize the workers whom the CIO is going after on a large scale and therefore will not take any action which would make the CIO campaign less effective.²⁸

Such a policy of unity and cooperation facilitated the merger in 1940 between the ACCL and the Canadian CIO Committee.

By August 1938, there were also steel locals in Oshawa which amalgamated to become Local 1817 Steelworkers' Organizing Committee (SWOC). The new local elected a representative to the TLC convention, assisted the

²⁶ Memo, Brantford meeting, 26 September 1937, p. 2-4, File 2614, Vol. 8, J.L. Cohen Papers, NAC.

²⁷ A.R. Mosher to A.C. Phillips, 27 January 1937; Agreement with Oshawa Dairy Ltd., 4 October 1937, File 6, Vol. 50, CLC Papers, NAC.

²⁸ A.E. Keay to N. Dowd, November 1938, File 5, Vol. 50; N. Dowd to J. Shortt, 30 June 1937, File 6, Vol. 50, CLC Papers, NAC.

ongoing organizing drive at Pedlar's steel fabricating plant and inaugurated a ladies' auxiliary.²⁹ A new labour council was established in April 1938 so that members of different unions could meet, fraternize and discuss common problems. As a result of the UAW's victory at GM in 1937, its continued growth and its assistance to other unions, more workers determined to organize and the city gradually became a more worker-oriented community.³⁰

CHANGING WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITY LIFE, 1937-1939

Union initiatives after the Oshawa strike led GM employees to form other organizations which included a ladies' auxiliary, a bowling club, a Rod and Gun Club and a credit union. The ladies' auxiliary was an attempt to maintain membership in Local 222. The Rod and Gun Club reached out to other Oshawa workers and included firefighters, bakers, dairymen and others in its membership, as did the credit union. The union's education committee held a monthly meeting with entertainment. One such meeting in 1938 was addressed by Bill Dennison — a member of Toronto's Board of Education who in 1928 had helped organize a union in GM's stamping department. He told the audience that he was glad to see that "the winning of the strike in Oshawa last spring had given a terrific impetus to all kinds of union organization" in the city and elsewhere in the province. Local 222 formed a Players' Club which performed a "social" play call "Steel" which portrayed the harsh working conditions and tense atmosphere of a steel mill, as well as the stressful home life of workers who were forced to live in relative poverty.³¹

The proliferation of such organizations enhanced the position of auto-workers in the community and gave all workers a stronger presence in Oshawa. Gradually, the city was changing from being a "company town" to becoming a "union town". It is difficult to determine which developments contributed most to this change in atmosphere but the founding of a new Oshawa Trades and Labour Council was important. At its first meeting, Sam Lawrence (the lone CCF-labour MPP from Hamilton who was defeated in 1937) installed its officers who represented the UAW, the SWOC and the International Typographical Union (ITU). Lawrence told the meeting how beneficial the council would be for Oshawa's over 5000 unionized workers. Referring to the growing polarization in the city and province over the issue of unions, he said that Premier Hepburn objected so strongly to the CIO "because it would organize labour to a degree where they [workers] would be able to have their will expressed. The new council president, W.J. Smith also referred to class

²⁹ *Labor Leader*, 18 August 1938.

³⁰ *Labor Leader*, 14 April 1938; 28 April 1938.

³¹ *Labor Leader*, 12 April 1938; 14 April 1938; 28 April 1938.

polarization and agreed with Lawrence that workers were coming into their own as they completed plans for a labour temple and a newspaper. The labour council gave union members a meeting place and an opportunity to fraternize. It publicized organized labour's pronouncements on local and national issues in the community and it served as a training ground for "labour stalwarts".³²

A "labour press" was started — a weekly newspaper called the *Labor Leader* edited by labour radical William E. Noble. A committee of trade unionists supervised the paper, worked with the editor and as the first editorial which explained its *raison d'être* affirmed, "It is intended to make this a truly labour organ." Since the trade union movement had "made its appearance", it had met with a great deal of criticism, so that if organized labour was to present its point of view and "take its rightful place in the community", it would need a vehicle for expression. The paper had the support of the city's unions, the co-op society and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). In its first edition, UAW Local 222 president C.H. Millard brought greetings and concluded in a sermon-like fashion: "May our paper prove a champion of justice, a herald of new hope and a Leader on the high road of real democracy..."³³

Hampered by a shortage of funds, the *Labor Leader* lasted less than a year but became the *Oshawa Labor Press* which was published until 1941. Its press reports depicted workers organizing on the job, politically and for social and recreational purposes. All such activities were interrelated and reflected the vitality of the working-class community, a new consciousness and a determination to improve workers' depressed economic situation and low social status. Besides unions, broader workers' organizations existed like the unemployed workers' association and the WEA. In 1938 the WEA offered lectures by university professors on subjects of concern to workers as well as classes in labour and co-op leadership and enrolled its largest number of students in its history in Oshawa. The Oshawa and District Progressive Co-operative Ltd. whose operation was controlled by its members, was founded in 1936, but its growth and influence had "accelerated since union organization in the city."³⁴ Originally it operated with associate stores, but in October 1937, it opened a small grocery store on Simcoe Street North whose volume of business grew so quickly that larger quarters were needed. The new store on Simcoe Street South had a meat counter, a modern cafeteria, a large hall in the back and a smaller one upstairs, where the *Labor Leader* reported, unionists and progressives were working hard to further organization.

As the city became more unionized, cooperation grew amongst workers both inside and outside the city. When for example, workers at a shoe plant

³² *Labor Leader*, 14 April 1938; 24 November 1938.

³³ *Labor Leader*, 14 April 1938.

³⁴ *Labor Leader*, 19 May 1938; 30 June 1938; 24 November 1938.

in Perth went on strike, the ACCL enlisted the support of *all* Oshawa unions in a boycott of shoes being produced by "scab" labour, and invited Oshawa shoe store owners to join the boycott. When the textile workers in Peterborough were organizing a union and conducted an eight week strike, Local 222 UAW sent union member Nora Adams to Peterborough "to help girls in the textile union and give guidance to those who wanted to join the UAW."³⁵

Although it was small, the ACCL's Bakers' and Dairymen's union was active on behalf of *its* members and of all workers within the community. It established an unemployment and sickness fund for its members, held union picnics and, like the UAW, expanded its contacts to the churches and the city council. It celebrated May Day 1938 by holding a church parade to which it invited all other unions. The UAW band was asked to lead the parade and as the *Canadian Unionist* reported, "This made labour history in Oshawa, being the first church parade ever held by a union." In July 1938, this same union started a legal aid clinic to provide workers with legal services at minimal cost.³⁶ Such programs benefitted everyone and were in keeping with the mood of the city which an ACCL organizer described: "Things are very interesting here in Oshawa at present and with this city becoming union conscious [it] has the desired effect of bringing more members into our local."³⁷ The steelworkers' union provided recreation for all Oshawa workers by holding Saturday night dances at their Steel Hall which formerly was the Orange Hall.³⁸

On November 24, 1938 an article in *Labor Leader* predicted that if the history of social trends were ever written, the historian would note the rapid emergence in the previous 18 months of the worker "in this city from company vassallage to comparative economic freedom within that time. He [sic] would also observe the increase of cultural outlets for workers — institutions which did not exist before" and would comment on the "absence of company patronage in these things and the ability of such projects to stand upon their feet purely upon their merits." The *Leader* noted that the recent expansion of workers' organizations and activities began with the unions in Oshawa whose development changed workers' consciousness of their role on the job, in their relationships with employers, with other workers and in the town.

The unions of course rank first. We have advanced from the day when each man accepted what was offered to him, or made the best bargain he could with his

³⁵ A.C. Phillips to N. Dowd, 7 February 1938; N. Dowd to A.C. Phillips, 11 February 1938, File 6, Vol. 50, CLC Papers, NAC; *Labor Leader*, 12 May 1938.

³⁶ *Reports to Canadian Unionist*, May 1937; July 1938; File 6, Vol. 50, CLC Papers, NAC.

³⁷ A.C. Phillips to N. Dowd, 21 April 1937, *ibid.*

³⁸ *Labor Leader*, 6 October 1938.

employer....Now with the collective force of all unionists, each man feels that a more just agreement can be concluded. He feels that he has greater security of employment, for if there is any dispute touching his work, and if he feels that he is being discriminated against, he can appeal to his union, with the assurance that it will attempt to secure justice for him.³⁹

Naturally this more self assured and organized working class had an impact on the community but also on politics.

PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS

The Oshawa strike and the "CIO" issue had immediate political repercussions throughout Ontario. Hepburn won considerable public support in his opposition to the CIO union movement, which he exploited in his alleged "victory" over the CIO in Oshawa and in an anti-CIO platform in the 1937 Ontario election, which he won by a wide margin. The final vote was 64 seats for Hepburn — 2 less than in 1934, a gain of 6 seats for the Conservatives to 23, no seats for the CCF (for a loss of one), Liberal-Progressives 2 and UFO 1. The CCF ran 37 candidates (a record number not affiliated with either old line party) but, emerged with its smallest vote in a provincial election — 78,000.⁴⁰ During the campaign in Oshawa, Conservative leader Earl Rowe supported in an advertisement "the right of the worker to belong to the union of his own choosing, Canadian or International, craft or industrial," and on September 27, 1937 he publicly opposed Hepburn's anti-CIO campaign and urged the free association of workers (but promised also to defend law and order) before a crowd of cheering workers.

The Premier chose Oshawa for a wind-up of his campaign and October 5 "amid catcalls and jeers...declared that the recruiting of police (during the CIO incident) had not been for Oshawa alone but for Communist uprisings in Hamilton and Toronto." With the two parties differing on the CIO issue and workers' rights, and with the CCF's weak base even compared to communist strength in the union and city, most Oshawa workers voted for the Conservative Party but it was not enough to defeat Hepburn's government. In the politically polarized post-strike city, Gordon Conant, a prospective minister, received middle class support and "caused one of the sensational surprises of the Election by getting a 2,000 majority in Ontario, seat of the Oshawa CIO strike."⁴¹ Hepburn won his own seat in Elgin by 5,300 votes while Rowe was

³⁹ *Labor Leader*, 24 November 1938.

⁴⁰ *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs (CAR)*, Vol. 35, 1937-38, p. 177; G. Caplan, *The Dilemma of Canadian Socialism: The CCF in Ontario*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1973, p. 83. His statistics are slightly different from the CAR.

⁴¹ *CAR*, Vol. 35, 1937-38, p. 176-178.

defeated in Simcoe East. Interestingly, the two former cabinet ministers who broke with Hepburn on the CIO issue won their seats easily — Arthur Roebuck with a majority of 6,700 in Bellwoods (Toronto) and David Croll by 4,000 votes in Windsor-Walkerville with support from Liberal voters and active support from the communists.⁴²

The Oshawa strike and the CIO issue further alienated Hepburn from Mackenzie King and their dispute about the involvement of the RCMP during the strike helped divide the Liberal party. The Ontario Conservative party also split over the CIO issue when Lieut. Col. George A. Drew, the party chair of its campaign committee, supported Hepburn's position. In 1937 Drew ran unsuccessfully in Wellington South as an Independent Conservative and attacked the CIO as a "communist controlled" organization.⁴³ After Hepburn's re-election, Drew sought the leadership and was elected in July 1938 as Rowe's successor. In his election bid he promised to keep the CIO out of Canada — a commitment which Millard noted would not be appreciated by thousands of Conservatives who were members of CIO unions.⁴⁴ The political polarization precipitated by the strike continued in Oshawa and other centres and though Hepburn won the 1937 election, his swing to the right caused the Liberal party over the next six years to lose support among the growing ranks of organized workers in Ontario. After many battles with the communists, the CCF gradually emerged as the party of labour in Ontario, wherever there was a unionized, politicized working-class constituency.⁴⁵ Workers in Oshawa and other industrial centres did not forget Hepburn's actions in the Oshawa strike and as a result the CCF made gains. The political developments following the strike help explain Premier Hepburn's intense antagonism to the CIO movement, which was adamant during the strike, bordered on the hysterical in the 1937 provincial election and remained intense, as in 1941 when Hepburn used his police to intimidate miners and to suppress unionization in Kirkland Lake. The newly organized workers became his political opponents. Undoubtedly his opposition was attributable partly to his business connections in the mining industry (as Abella has claimed), to his rural roots (as biographer Neil McKenty has written) and to the state of the economy in the depression. But it also was his political response to the emergence of a more conscious and activist working class, one that had an increasingly significant presence in

⁴² Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1975, p. 106. The communists at this time favoured a "popular front" but had less antipathy towards the Liberals than the CCF, which they viewed as a competitor on the political left.

⁴³ G. Caplan, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁴⁴ *Labor Leader*, 1 December 1938.

⁴⁵ Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1968; Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973. Both monographs examine Communist-CCF conflicts in some detail.

many Ontario communities. That group not only was organizing trade unions but was running slates of labour candidates in municipal council elections in support of Hepburn's political enemies, like the CCF and his ex-Cabinet Minister David Croll. The results of CCF-labour cooperation were not instantly converted into trade union membership figures or CCF seats. But by the 1943 Ontario election, this new political alliance was potent and caused the CCF to outflank the Liberal party and become the province's Official Opposition. This new combination of forces began in the late 1930's, not after the start of the war.⁴⁶

Locally in Oshawa between 1937 and 1939, industrial workers became more active politically. In 1937, the Labour Representation Association (LRA) was formed by 95% of the unions and progressive organizations to secure labour representation in politics and to organize for the 1938 municipal election. It succeeded in electing a council with a labour majority, as well as a labour member to the board of education. After almost a year in office, Mayor McLeese defended the labour representatives as the most active and effective council members and the *Labor Leader* agreed that "in spite of all the dirges that have been sounded by the old gang, the four corners are still in the same old place and the city hall, such as it is, still stands."⁴⁷ Labour appointees to municipal boards and commissions injected new life into them. The reform council lowered the tax rate for the first time in years, installed new playgrounds and repaired roads in all sections of the city, reorganized departments, consolidated Oshawa's by-laws, updated its building code, and modernized its licensing system. In the belief that city employees had a right to a living wage, council increased their hourly rate; it sponsored a Civic Community Day to raise money for charitable purposes with the support of 66 local organizations, including the unions, which the mayor had requested participate. When it was over, he thanked the unions for their involvement and noted that labour had made "a deep impression in our city as a really constructive and progressive force." Local politicians were becoming more sensitive to the working-class constituency which elected them.

As the 1939 municipal election approached, the "labour" aldermen visited union meetings to seek workers' support. The *Labor Leader* endorsed them because "these men have acquitted themselves splendidly in the teeth of

⁴⁶ G. Caplan, *op. cit.* A central theme of this book is that the CCF did abysmally electorally in the depression years and then with the onset of the war, full employment and high production levels it did very well. Caplan sees this as a paradox. Like the other historians mentioned, he underestimates developments in the late 1930's which heightened CCF-trade union ties earlier than he suggested. In consequence, the study does not stress working class efforts to resist the effects of the depression and to organize both industrially and politically so that such conditions would not recur.

⁴⁷ *Labor Leader*, 3 November 1938; 10 November 1938; 22 December 1938.

sometimes frivolous, but more often vindictive and unprincipled criticism."⁴⁸ In contrast, the *Oshawa Daily Times* remained lukewarm toward the labour councillors and backed the group on council which opposed the labour group. Polarization in the local press reflected community class divisions, which emerged when the council passed a resolution advising the welfare board to buy union-made goods. Industry and most newspapers opposed the policy as selfishly serving labour's needs; the *Labor Leader* retorted that "the Labour group in council was certainly elected by the Labour element of the city of which the citizenship is largely composed" to serve labour's needs and there was nothing wrong with that.

In the 1939 municipal campaign, the LRA announced labour slates for council, for the public utilities commission (with two names, including George Burt of the UAW) and for the board of education (with two names "Slim" Phillips and Wally Blasky, members of the Bakers' and Dairymen's union).⁴⁹ The *Labor Leader* editorialized that those opposed to labour slates were really opposed to labour representation. Those who "squawked" about the entry of "politics" into municipal affairs and about "class" representation had supported non-labour and anti-labour elements in previous councils who practised "class politics" aggressively. Eventually the *Oshawa Daily Times* endorsed three or four labour men on a council of ten (in a city that was mostly working class as the labour press pointed out) but remained critical of the current labour councillors for their radical ideas and "inelegant utterances".⁵⁰

Besides slates, for which the *Labor Leader* urged its readers not only to support but to plump, the LRA developed a platform for its candidates for efficient administration and to relieve workers coping with the effects of the depression like work schemes on a work and wage basis, an upgraded food relief allowance, and a house-building scheme of affordable workers' homes. They urged the federal government to adopt both unemployment insurance and national medical insurance. For the board of education, they advocated free school books for primary and secondary school students and the greater use of the school by ratepayers; for public utilities they called for equal hydro rates for all residential users and improved street lighting. Their platform was progressive, egalitarian and in tune with workers' needs. The labour press urged support for the labour platform, encouraged the unemployed in Oshawa to vote and argued that a city in which the majority of taxpayers were workers should have a council with a labour majority. As Alderman Bates (on the labour slate)

⁴⁸ *Labor Leader*, 14 April 1938; 17 November 1938; 24 November 1938.

⁴⁹ *Labor Leader*, 24 November 1938; 22 December 1938; *Report to Canadian Unionist*, 7 December 1938, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ *Labor Leader*, 8 December 1938.

said in his bid for re-election, "an honest workingman is the only one that can know a working man's problems and give consideration to his needs."⁵¹

In opposition to the labour slate, a "Citizen's Committee" slate that was supported by the *Oshawa Daily Times* did not put forward a formal platform, but appealed for "democracy" and the electorate's trust that they would do a good job. The labour press saw them as representative of business and the wealthy. In what was described as "the worst mudslinging, muck-raking election fight that [sic] Oshawa has ever been subjected", the labour press charged that the "bogey" of communism was introduced to confuse and frighten voters and the *Oshawa Daily Times* of supporting the "Citizens' Committee" slate in order to safeguard the "open shop". Coincident with the municipal campaign, that newspaper had a dispute with its own employees in which it refused collective bargaining. Hence, many labour supporters were suspicious of that paper's political motives.⁵² By 1939, the local electorate was not only polarized but both sides were organized for the contest.

"Every Mean Trick in Election Game Used in Desperate Effort to Wipe Out Labour's Candidates" screamed the headline of the January 5, 1939 edition of the *Oshawa Labor Press*, which reported the victory of the "Citizens" representatives. A minority of four labour aldermen were returned to council; Mayor McLeesh was defeated by 250 votes out of a total of 8,948 votes cast.⁵³ The *Labor Leader* blamed the outcome on the combined organizations of the Conservative and Liberal parties working against labour, the use of disreputable tactics and some election irregularities. It saw the election as a setback for labour and the LRA, yet it was cautiously optimistic about the future because labour candidates had received many more votes than in the previous year. For example, Phillips was defeated for the board of education but nevertheless received over 3,500 votes.⁵⁴ In the face of red-baiting, mudslinging and active organizing by the Citizen's Committee to get voters out to defeat labour, 45% of taxpayers had voted "Labour". It was noted that "such hustle and bustle on election day has never been witnessed in Oshawa" as it was the first time the "big shots" had to really work to get into city hall.⁵⁵ While workers were more politicized in this polarized environment, by 1939 there was an organized backlash by their opponents who were resisting being replaced (as had happened in 1938) with considerable success.

Communist-CCF rivalry added complexity to the local situation and affected political alignments within the UAW and in the city. The communists

⁵¹ *Labor Leader*, 22 December 1938.

⁵² *Labor Leader*, 29 December 1938.

⁵³ *Oshawa Labor Press*, 5 January 1939.

⁵⁴ *Report to Canadian Unionist*, January 1939, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ *Oshawa Labor Press*, 5 January 1939.

had been active in the formation of the UAW but during the strike non-communist leaders like CCFer Charles Millard emerged and friction increased as the two parties on the left competed for working-class support and influence in the labour movement. Such conflict intensified as the CCF developed a policy towards unions,⁵⁶ deciding in 1937 "to back the trade unions fully... by providing organizers... and by organizing groups of workers interested in forming unions... In every community there is the opportunity for the CCF... to build up closer relations between the unions and the political labour movement."⁵⁷ From being a party of individual members organized in constituency associations, in 1937 the CCF national convention decided to encourage the affiliation of unions and in 1938 the Ontario CCF amended its constitution accordingly. The CCF intensified its activities amongst trade unions in Oshawa as its Industrial Relations Committee urged its local constituency organizations to contact union locals to organize reliable CCFers. Millard supported this strategy but it made him a target of attack by the communist faction organized within the UAW. The communists advocated a "popular front" of all workers and progressives and the LRA reflected this united approach.⁵⁸ In pursuit of its goal for more "labour" representation, the LRA worked with progressives, the CCF, the Communist Party (CPC) and the Independent Labour party (ILP). Distrusting the communists, the CCF had declined to participate in such a "united front" in other centres particularly after the 1937 Ontario election when the CPC contested seats where the CCF believed it had a chance to win and supported Liberals like David Croll and Arthur Roebuck.⁵⁹ But in Oshawa, the CCF had to affiliate to the LRA to contest the 1939 municipal election if it wanted to be a player. Millard was unhappy with this decision and one month after the municipal election, he met with national and provincial CCF executives to discuss "the organized influence of the communists in the trade unions as compared with the complete lack of CCF influence." He urged the CCF to become more active in the unions, to remain separate from the communists in political campaigns and he wanted the CCF trade unionists to oppose the communists within the labour movement. Gradually he would have his way in these matters but not without setbacks⁶⁰ as factionalism continued to break out intermittently in the war years.

⁵⁶ John Manley, "Communists and Autoworkers: The Struggle for Industrial Unionism in the Automobile Industry 1925-36", *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 17, Spring 1986, p. 59-82.

⁵⁷ Gad Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 67, 71.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the "popular front" policy see Ivan Avakumovic, *op. cit.*, ch. 4; Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left*, Scarborough, Ont., Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1977, ch. 5.

⁵⁹ Ivan Avakumovic, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁶⁰ E. O'Connor, "Charles Millard: A Socialist in the Trade Union Movement", unpublished essay, York University, n.d., p. 15, 16.

Accompanying organizational growth in 1938, factionalism within the UAW between the communists and the CCFers increased. By 1939, the communists controlled Local 222 in Oshawa except the presidency (Millard), the St. Catharines local and the two large Windsor locals. Millard's support of the CCF and of international union president Homer Martin resulted in his defeat at the 1939 Cleveland convention as Canadian Director of the UAW. George Burt won with the backing of the communists — an association which would last until 1947 — and in April 1939, Millard was appointed CIO representative for Ontario and thus remained an active presence in Oshawa. Gradually the CCF forces in the UAW grew and the CCF-labour connection in Oshawa became closer and politically important, but because the communists started with more support, the CCF developed more slowly there than in other industrial centres. In 1939, the CCF recruited trade union candidates for the expected federal election but in Oshawa, Millard and David Lewis were unsuccessful in persuading the UAW to support the CCF at that time. When the federal election was held in 1940, Mackenzie King's Liberals won easily. Politically, at all levels, Oshawa's workers experienced ups and downs but their activism derived from their unionization and their greater class consciousness, and they persisted in organizing politically in Oshawa and other industrial centres in the war years with dramatic consequences and increased working-class support for the CCF.

CONCLUSION

In his famous preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson wrote that "the working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time." Class as he defined it is a "historical phenomenon", which can be shown to happen in human relationships.⁶¹ In Oshawa by 1937 an identifiable industrial working class already existed as a social, economic and cultural group, but, despite previous abortive attempts during the 1920's to form a union in the auto industry, it was unorganized.⁶² In 1937, as a result of the Oshawa strike, UAW Local 222 was formed, won improvements and was recognized by the employer informally in negotiations and in settling grievances. Thereafter, between 1937 and 1939, while membership grew slowly, it is clear that the Oshawa strike had far-reaching repercussions. It was in the late 1930's that the organizational basis of the industrial union movement and labour-management relations in a major part of the Canadian auto industry was laid. As workers learned to handle grievances, devised a strategy for winning fuller

⁶¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, Penguin Books, 1964, p. 9.

⁶² John Manley, *op. cit.*

union recognition and organized in greater numbers, the unionization of auto workers led to broader community organization. The winning of collective bargaining rights with the major Oshawa employer, influenced other workers to form unions in Oshawa and elsewhere.

After the Oshawa strike, a new class consciousness amongst that city's industrial workers emerged. While the industrial union movement polarized the community, it forced changes not only in the labour relations of the auto industry but in the politics of the community. Thompson has stated, "class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited and shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs."⁶³ In the late 1930's, workers in Oshawa participated in a range of new organizations and activities which resulted from their unionization and they created new local political alliances. Their activism expressed an identity of interests, a sense of class pride and a desire for greater security as they strove to improve their status in the local community and society as a whole. One Brantford worker expressed the change in this way. UAW leader George Burt asked him why he had joined the union "and he answered, it used to be in this town if a man asked for a raise, it was an insult and he'd probably get fired. It is not like that anymore."⁶⁴

The Oshawa strike "kick-started" the industrial union movement in Canada. It was a beginning, but it did not stop there and then start up again after the commencement of the war. There was continuity between the period of slow unsteady growth in the late 1930's and the boom in union membership in the war years. In those communities where the CIO unions gained a toehold in the late 1930's, there were ramifications in class relations locally as the unionisation of industrial workers resulted in a new "class consciousness" and underlay the industrial and political changes which were the real legacy of industrial unionism. That union movement got its first real boost in Canada during the Oshawa strike of 1937 and the repercussions of the strike had long-term results, which could not immediately be converted into membership gains, but became apparent as the depression ended, the war economy accelerated and the labour movement expanded greatly. The measure and meaning of workers' activities is underestimated by statistics. If workers were struggling and sometimes losing strikes and elections, they nevertheless were engaged in coping with the problems of industrialization in the context of an economic depression and in forming democratic institutions at work and in society. Hence, in the Canadian context they figure as agents of history in the Thompsonian sense.

⁶³ E.P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ "Where Was George Burt?", *op. cit.*, p. 41.

Les relations du travail après la grève d'Oshawa, 1937-1939

Les historiens canadiens du travail ont qualifié la période entre la fin de la grève chez General Motors (G.M.) à Oshawa en 1937 et le déclenchement de la Seconde Guerre mondiale comme en étant une de croissance lente et même de reculs pour le mouvement syndical. D'ailleurs, le membership syndical a baissé entre 1937 et 1939. Cependant, une analyse des répercussions de cette grève et de l'impact du syndicalisme industriel sur les travailleurs à l'intérieur de leur communauté montre qu'une nouvelle croissance de classe est apparue.

En se référant aux travailleurs de l'automobile d'Oshawa comme étude de cas, un exemple des relations du travail et des développements politiques et sociaux entre 1937 et 1939 indique que la grève d'Oshawa a eu des répercussions profondes à long terme. En termes de relations du travail, l'implantation et l'administration des conventions collectives consécutives aux conflits de 1937 a forcé les parties à se rencontrer régulièrement. Graduellement, malgré les tensions existantes, les parties ont appris à travailler ensemble à un point tel que G.M. a officiellement reconnu les TUA en 1939, une organisation en croissance constante.

Cette victoire des TUA a amené la syndicalisation de d'autres travailleurs à Oshawa et a provoqué la création d'un conseil du travail et la prolifération d'autres organisations et activités de travailleurs dans la communauté.

L'expérience acquise par les travailleurs à partir de ces changements dans l'industrie de l'automobile et dans l'organisation de la ville a provoqué une plus grande confiance et une nouvelle conscience de classe les motivant à devenir plus actifs politiquement dans les élections municipales. C'est durant cette période que la base des relations du travail dans une grande partie de l'industrie canadienne de l'automobile a évolué et que de nouvelles alliances politiques se sont façonnées. Comme conséquence, le CCF s'est montré plus intéressé envers le mouvement syndical industriel causant ainsi d'une part une concurrence accrue avec le Parti communiste eu égard à l'allégeance des travailleurs et d'autre part une baisse d'appui pour les libéraux ontariens. Il y a donc eu continuité entre la période immédiate d'après-guerre et les années de la Seconde Guerre : le membership syndical a explosé. Les nouvelles attitudes des travailleurs d'Oshawa et les résultats de leurs actions étaient l'héritage du syndicalisme industriel.