

# Communists and Auto Workers:

## The Struggle for Industrial Unionism in the Canadian Automobile Industry, 1925-36

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BEFORE THE UNITED Automobile Workers of America (UAW) chartered its first Canadian local, at Kelsey-Hayes Wheel, Windsor, in December 1936, there had been several "fruitless and sporadic organizing attempts in the Canadian auto shops."<sup>1</sup> This paper deals with the attempts of the 1920s and early 1930s, a period in which the organizing burden was borne almost exclusively by members of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). Despite growing interest in "the party," surprisingly little attention has been given to its primary orientation towards industrial struggle. Were Communists effective industrial organizers? What contribution — if any — did they make towards laying the foundations of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)? This paper is equally interested in the auto workers themselves. Did they, for example, as Irving Abella has argued, believe that "only American unions could provide the necessary muscle to protect and forward their interest?"<sup>2</sup> Was this why they gravitated to the CIO in 1936-7? In answering these questions, and particularly in attempting to analyze where rank-and-file ideas came from, we have to turn first to the industry and the workplace.

### 1

THE CANADIAN AUTO INDUSTRY is entirely a product of the twentieth century, the first home-produced car having been put together in 1901 by the

<sup>1</sup> Jerry Hartford, "The United Automobile Workers in Canada," *Canadian Labour*, 5 (1960), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1973), 23-4.

John Manley, "Communists and Autoworkers: The Struggle for Industrial Unionism in the Canadian Automobile Industry, 1925-36," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (Spring 1986), 105-133.

Canada Cycle and Motor Company in Toronto. By 1910, the year in which Ford of Canada (founded 1904) produced 1,000 units for the first time, American domination was well established, and by 1929, when the industry produced a record 262,000 vehicles valued at \$163.5 million, production was overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of the "Big Three:" Ford, General Motors (GM) of Canada (1918), and Chrysler (1925). Geographical concentration was equally marked. In 1926 southern Ontario contained 55 of the Dominion's 70 auto and auto parts plants.<sup>3</sup> Oshawa, site of the main GM plant, and the major "Border Cities" municipalities of Windsor, Walkerville, and East Windsor, which together embraced most of the other significant plants, had become virtually single-industry towns by the 1920s.

By the 1910s, the industry's high-wage reputation was attracting masses of workers to the auto towns. In 1913 Ford was paying its labourers and semi-skilled assemblers and machine operators rates between 32.5 per cent and 45 per cent above the going rate for common labour in the Border Cities. During the brief post-war boom, when accommodation could barely cope with the influx of labour, skilled and unskilled wages in Windsor were reported as "practically the highest... in any part of the Dominion." In 1925 average earnings in the industry stood at \$1,577 as against \$971 for the manufacturing industry as a whole.<sup>4</sup> In short, for the unskilled, a job in auto was the key to the craft worker's living standards.

High wages were taken as symptomatic of auto's vanguard status within Canadian industrial capitalism. Visitors to the auto plants, noting the innovations in layout, assembly-line techniques, and semi-automatic machinery, marvelled at "the wonderful organization which made it possible to put cars together with such speed and exactness."<sup>5</sup> Few could have found an answer to the *Border Cities Star's* triumphal question: "Where in all the history of industry has there been progress to compare with that rolled up in the manufacture of cars and trucks?"<sup>6</sup>

Assessing how auto workers felt about their situation is more difficult.

<sup>3</sup> C. Howard Aikman, *The Automobile Industry of Canada* (Toronto 1926); Robert Collins, *A Great Way to Go: The Automobile in Canada* (Toronto 1969), 36-42; M. McIntyre Hood, *Oshawa: Canada's Motor City* (Oshawa 1968), 123-31; Provincial Archives of Ontario (PAO), Labour Department Records, Files of the Senior Investigator, VII-1, Box 3, "List of Firms Furnishing Information Used in Summary, 1926;" "The Automobile Industry in Canada," *Industrial Canada (IC)*, 7 (1907), 781-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Labour Gazette*, (LG) 14 (1914), 968; *Report of the Superintendent of the Trades and Labour Branch, 1919*, Ontario Sessional Papers, No. 16, 1921; *First Annual Report of the Department of Labour, 1920*, Ontario Sessional Papers, No. 16, 1920; "Wage Earners' Progress in Canada Since The War," *American Federationist*, 36 (1929), 184-7; House of Commons, *Debates*, 9 March 1928, 1154.

<sup>5</sup> "Ontario Members Visit Border Cities," *IC*, 28 (1927), 68-69; Harold P. Armson, "Building 80 Cars a Day in Toronto's Ford Plant," *Canadian Machinery and Manufacturing News (CMMN)*, 31 (14 February 1924), 15-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Border Cities Star (BCS)*, 19 July 1928.

From the outside, workers in less favoured industries often looked on in envy. Some working-class observers went so far as to see the auto industry — and Ford in particular — as the prefiguration of a reformed capitalism, a view that horrified the radical left.<sup>7</sup> But even Communists were inclined to believe that auto workers had been seduced by the “fool’s paradise of Fordism.” Certainly they displayed little interest in the CPC’s earliest shop-gate agitation.<sup>8</sup>

The historians of Ford’s transnational operations attributed the apparent contentment of Ford’s workers quite simply to “better wages.”<sup>9</sup> Yet what Ford called the “wage motive” was not the only determinant of rank-and-file attitudes and behaviour. It was undeniably an effective carrot, but with it went the stick of knowing how easily high wages could be lost. Auto workers were well aware that they could be replaced with little trouble. Ford claimed that the vast majority of jobs in the Ford plants could be learned in the course of a single shift. One such job required a machine operator to load and unload a machine, which between times performed a sequence of four reaming and drilling processes on crankshafts held in a rotating jig; by 1924 Ford had 4,000 semi-automatic machines installed at the Ford City plant (incorporated as East Windsor in 1929) — as many as the total number of workers employed.<sup>10</sup> Whether machine operators or assemblers, the key quality was “nervous endurance to carry through dull, monotonous, fatiguing rhythmic operations.”<sup>11</sup> This quality was not in short supply.

The seasonal nature of production reinforced the auto workers’ sense of vulnerability. When the autumn slowdown began, leading into a virtual shut-down for all but toolroom staff, a labour reserve was produced which in turn facilitated the removal of recalcitrant elements. Before unionization, workers were less likely to take collective action on behalf of work equalization than to seek individual solutions by currying favour with foremen and supervisors. Favouritism also provided management with a pliable supply of informants.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> “Labor’s Claims Proven,” *Labor Leader*, 25 August 1922; “Labor Leader Attacks Miners’ Low Wages,” *Labor Statesman*, 12 March 1926 (reprinted from the *Alberta Labor News*); “Ford and Ford Methods — Degrading to Trade Unionism,” *Maritime Labor Herald*, 20 October 1923.

<sup>8</sup> *The Worker*, 22 August 1925; 16 July 1927.

<sup>9</sup> Mira Wilkins and Frank Ernest Hill, *America Business Abroad: Ford on Six Continents* (Detroit 1964), 53-4, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Ford in collaboration with Samuel Crowther, *Today and Tomorrow* (Garden City 1926), 183; Harold A. Armson, “Building A Car at Ford City,” *CMMN* 31 (26 June 1924), 41-8.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Reitell, “Machinery and Its Effects Upon the Workers in the Automobile Industry,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 116 (1924), 37-43.

<sup>12</sup> House of Commons, *Debates*, 6 February 1928, 212; Keith Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York 1968), 78; David Moulton, “Ford Windsor 1945,” in Irving Abella, ed., *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919-1949* (Toronto 1975), 155.

The nature of the job itself had a disciplinary impact. "Fordism" (a generic title) was characterized by a high degree of what American economist Richard Edwards terms "technical control," with workplace discipline imposed directly by the capacity of the individual machine or the pace of the assembly line.<sup>13</sup> Ford took technical control to its logical limits, refusing to offer piece-rate incentives and using the strictest imaginable workplace supervision (on both sides of the border Ford foremen were especially renowned for "viciousness") to maintain sustained, high-intensity production.<sup>14</sup> While Ford's competitors diluted the class antagonism inherent in technical control with infusions of welfare capitalism, Ford reveled in the fact that "no service to employees will take the place of wages," and expected total subservience by all employees to a rigidly enforced rulebook governing behaviour both inside and in the environs of the plant. Workers could be dismissed for smoking on the job, defacing walls, or running inside the plant; any caught stealing were dismissed and prosecuted; all were advised not to loiter outside the plant but to proceed directly home at the end of each shift, a recommendation that may well have been designed to keep workers out of the clutches of shop-gate agitators.<sup>15</sup>

In stark contrast to Ford's hard-faced approach, GM wound a cocoon of welfare capitalism around its workers. At Oshawa this policy had a particular resonance, built upon the continuing influence of the McLaughlin family, out of whose local carriage works GM of Canada had evolved.<sup>16</sup> No faceless organization man, company president R.S. McLaughlin was a notable local benefactor who remained close enough to his employees to play softball with them at GM's massive annual field day and picnic (as pitcher, of course), perfectly embodying the themes of mutualism and class harmony that GM strived to inculcate in its work force.<sup>17</sup>

In a period of minimal state social provision, GM offered quite substantial welfare benefits, including sickness pay (\$5.00 a week for a maximum thirteen weeks), and medical and dental insurance. Injuries sustained on the job were treated in a plant hospital. The physical and spiritual health of the work force was nourished by a superstructure of formally organized leisure activities, including a wide variety of sports teams and musical groups. GM consciously

<sup>13</sup> Michael Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Wayne State University, Detroit, UAW Oral History Collection (UAW-OHC), interview with John Eldon; Harvey Murphy to the editor, *Young Worker*, December 1925. The standard source on the organization of production at Ford is now Stephen Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day: Labour Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921* (Albany 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Ford Motor Company of Canada, Limited, *Rules and Instructions for Ford Employees* (Ford City 1925). The publication of this version of the rulebook coincided with the first shop-gate meetings.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, *A Great Way to Go!* Hood, Oshawa.

<sup>17</sup> See reports of the gala day in *Sydney Post*, 20 August 1927; *Labor Leader*, 17 August 1928; *Toronto Daily Star*; 12 August 1933, 10 August 1935.

used the success of the senior baseball team to encourage broader community identity with the company.<sup>18</sup>

While constructing an organic, non-conflictual perception of the work process, GM was keen to encourage a sense of the possibility of individual social mobility. Management urged employees not to think of the plant as a place "in which you are forced to make a living . . . but as a school that gives you every opportunity to develop." It stimulated property ownership by means of a "Corporation Savings and Investment Fund" and a "Modern Dwelling Houses Plan." While only 55.6 per cent of those eligible (employees of long standing) invested in the former, no less than 75 per cent of the entire Oshawa work force had company mortgages. GM also offered career advancement by means of a foremen's and supervisors' apprenticeship programme at its Walkerville truck plant and by membership in the "Oshawa Educational Club." Restricted to workers who had proved their personal motivation by enrolling in night school, this club was seen as the agency through which the company would produce "progressive, energetic young men that industry can look to for leadership in this era of keen competition and efficiency of production."<sup>19</sup>

GM's caring image extended into the way its advertisements portrayed the work process at Oshawa. GM workers were not the automatons of the Ford shops, but "veteran Canadian craftsmen . . . skilled as only those can be who have grown up with their trade. They have mastered each his task as only one can who loves it . . . and are perpetuating that traditional artisanship which is the just pride of Canadian labor."<sup>20</sup> By 1926, when this advertisement appeared, few Oshawa workers even remotely resembled "traditional artisans." With the exception of toolroom workers, most work groups had seen their trades broken down for execution by semiskilled workers and assemblers. Artisanal control had been absorbed into the privileged sphere of management; managers alone decided as one of their "inherent responsibilities and duties" how production would be carried out. Decisions might be taken "in the long-term interests of the business and, therefore . . . the mass of employees themselves," but in the short term, they were subject to the caprice of the market. "The speed of the assembly line," a business journalist observed, "varies in accordance with production demand."<sup>21</sup> While GM's paternalism was designed to keep the long-term perspective constantly in view, it also bred among workers a conviction that there were limits to what could be demanded in its name. In this contradiction lay the possibility of a breakdown in the organic consensus.

<sup>18</sup> *General Matters*, 15 June 1926.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; *I.G.*, 29 (1929), 964.

<sup>20</sup> *Manitoba Free Press*, 5 October 1926.

<sup>21</sup> UAW-OHC, interviews with Mort Furay and Joseph Pagano; *General Matters*, 15 June 1926. Arthur Murphy, "Production Schedule A Factor in Auto Quality," *CMMN*, 33 (11 June 1925), 15. This was one of a series of three articles on the GM plant, the others appearing in the issues of 13 August and 10 September.

For most of the 1920s the industry was a model of progress and contentment. It emerged unusually quickly from the 1920-1 depression and doubled its output and employment in the next five years, thanks in no small part to increased state spending on highway construction and repair.<sup>22</sup> In 1926, however, the industry entered a volatile period in which the threat of total destruction was followed by eighteen months of unprecedented boom. The detonator of this period was the Liberals' 1926 budget which, largely in response to a vocal western Canadian lobby, reduced the tariff on automobile imports in an attempt to reduce what were widely believed to be inflated Canadian prices. Although the auto companies immediately issued dire predictions that this spelled the demise of the Canadian industry, Mackenzie King covered himself by other provisions encouraging increased Canadian content in home-produced cars, and after a brief hiccup, industrial expansion resumed, particularly in the auto parts sector.<sup>23</sup>

One year after the tariff debate the industry was hit by fresh upheaval. For several years Ford had been experiencing increasingly sharp competition from GM, who offered against the pristine and solitary Model-T a comprehensive range of annually-changed models (and a vastly more dynamic marketing strategy). In Canada, however, Ford benefited from "enormous goodwill."<sup>24</sup> In 1926 Ford produced 54 per cent of total output and achieved record net profits of \$5.34 million. Nevertheless, when the parent company decided to replace the Model-T with the Model-A, the Canadian plants were included in "The Great Ford Shut-Down" from mid-1927 to early 1928. While the plants were comprehensively retooled, between 8,000 and 9,000 Canadian employees were laid off.<sup>25</sup>

These two events had a cathartic effect on the Canadian industry. The reduction in auto prices (the prices of basic Ford and Chevrolet models dropped from \$520 and \$730 in 1925 to \$495 and \$625 in 1928) reduced profit margins, forcing managers to think seriously about improved production methods. Henry Ford relished the prospect. "I can tell you," he observed, "those fellows over in our Canadian unit are going to manufacture more efficiently now. They'll have to."<sup>26</sup> Oshawa GM managers were less sanguine. Through the plant paper they broadly hinted that the plant might be shut down entirely if

<sup>22</sup> G.P. de T. Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada*, Vol. II (Toronto 1970), 247-9.

<sup>23</sup> House of Commons, *Debates*, 16 March 1925, 1179; "The Price of Motor Cars," *IC*, 26 (1925), 64; "The Budget," *Canadian Forum*, 6 (1926), 234; "The Importance of Canada's Motor Industry," *Labor Leader*, 16 April 1926; Tom Traves, *The State and Enterprise: Canadian Manufacturers and the Federal Government* (Toronto 1979), 102-13.

<sup>24</sup> Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford*, 194-202; *Monetary Times (MT)*, 80 (25 May 1928), 34; *Financial Post Survey of Corporate Securities, 1928* (Toronto n.d.), 207.

<sup>25</sup> For Ford's production figures, see W.R. Houston, *Annual Financial Review, 1920-30*.

<sup>26</sup> Ford, quoted in Aikman, *The Automobile Industry*, 41.

production standards failed to improve.<sup>27</sup> The Ford shutdown, on the other hand, acted as a direct stimulus to Ford's competitors, all of whom expanded plant capacity in an attempt to capture Ford's massive market share. Even when Ford resumed production, companies like Chrysler, Durant, Willys-Overland, and Studebaker refused to limit their aspirations and maintained high output to meet "insistent and ever increasing public demand."<sup>28</sup>

The boom affected auto workers in contradictory ways. Especially after Ford resumed operations they found themselves in unusually advantageous labour market conditions. But at the same time as virtual full employment was reducing their fear of sacking, they were experiencing a major employers' assault on labour costs. The 1927-9 period saw increasing employment of "American efficiency engineers," whose interventions invariably resulted in "alterations" to line speeds, methods of payment, and established working methods. Typically, Ford celebrated the achievement of record monthly output in August 1928 by firing 2,000 of its 9,000 workers and speeding up the line for the remaining 7,000 by 22 per cent. Several companies, including Chrysler, Dodge, and GM, introduced "group" bonus schemes which, while in certain circumstances offering opportunities for the group to exercise a measure of job control, offered several more than compensating advantages to management: they facilitated manipulation of the bonus, often undermined solidarity by turning faster and slower workers against each other, and forced veteran workers to pass on the tricks of the trade to newcomers. Other companies simply replaced adult male workers with inexperienced women and youths, at considerably reduced wages.<sup>29</sup> In these conditions, the auto companies' ability to maintain the complaisance of their workers was compromised.

## II

AT THE SAME TIME as shop floor tensions were emerging, unionization of the auto plants became a real possibility for the first time. During the war the independent, socialist-led United Automobile, Aircraft and Vehicle Workers of America established a short-lived local in Windsor, while in Toronto the International Association of Machinists had a brief flirtation with workers in a few auto plants.<sup>30</sup> But after the open shop drive of 1919-21, the IAM was driven

<sup>27</sup> *General Matters*, 15 June 1926.

<sup>28</sup> "Chrysler Expansion," *Saturday Night*, 43 (31 March 1928), 27; "Durant Profits Increase," *ibid.*, 43 (7 April 1928), 24; "Studebaker Will Expand in Canada," *CMMN*, 39 (14 June 1928), 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Oshawa Daily Times*, quoted in House of Commons, *Debates*, 30 March 1928, 1857; S.K., "Bosses Stool Pigeons," *The Worker*, 2 March 1929; Harvey Murphy, "Ford's Fake Trade Schools," *Young Worker*, July-August 1928; Murphy, "Auto Workers' Union Launches Drive," *ibid.*, April 1929; Joyce Shaw Peterson, "A Social History of Automobile Workers Before Unionization," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1976), 106.

<sup>30</sup> Aikman, *The Automobile Industry*, 24; *Industrial Banner*, 21 June, 12, 19 July 1918; *The Globe*, 13-8 June 1918; *LG*, 17 (1918), 529.

out as a collective force from every large metal working establishment and pushed into redoubts in jobbing shops and, especially, railway roundhouses. The railway machinists who increasingly dominated the union were too absorbed by sectional concerns to worry unduly about organizing the unorganized. Leading Canadian official James Somerville repudiated industrial unionism in principle and specifically rejected an organizing campaign in auto on the grounds that there were insufficient skilled machinists to make it worth the union's trouble. When Detroit machinists coaxed the AFL into reluctant sponsorship of an auto recruitment drive in 1927, there was no complementary move in Canada.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the 1920s the case for industrial unionism as the means of organizing the mass production industries was made most consistently by the CPC. However, its united front policy of working solely within the craft union movement, hoping somehow to transform the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) into an activist body, was conspicuously unsuccessful. Most TLC unions saw the 1920s as a time for cautious consolidation after the upheavals of the immediate post-war years. Year after year, at TLC annual conventions, they gave thumbs down to Communist proposals. By 1925, the CPC had been forced to accept that there was no prospect of TLC support for industrial unionism. It briefly considered using its own Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) as the basis of an independent industrial union campaign, but chose instead to orient itself more and more towards the national union movement which was emerging in the mid-1920s and which culminated in the formation of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL) in 1927.<sup>32</sup>

By 1927 the CPC had established a small presence in the auto centres, particularly in the Border Cities.<sup>33</sup> The party's core lay in the ethnic communities: Ukrainians in Oshawa, Finns, Ukrainians, and other Slavs in the Border Cities. Its greatest support, and potentially the most significant, came from the eastern Europeans of East Windsor who comprised 25 per cent of the town's population in 1931 (compared with 9.5 per cent in Oshawa, 6.5 per cent in Windsor, and 0.1 per cent in overwhelmingly English and French Canadian Walkerville). The unusually large eastern European presence in East Windsor seems to have stemmed from a conscious Ford policy to recruit a polyglot work force, perhaps as a barrier to collective action.<sup>34</sup> As far as the CPC was con-

<sup>31</sup> Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Craftsman: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6 (1980), 40-2; Lewis L. Lorwin, *The American Federation of Labor: Histories, Policies and Prospects* (Washington 1933), 244-8; John Manley, "Communism and Canadian Working Class during the Great Depression: The Workers' Unity League, 1930-1936," (Ph.D. dissertation, Dalhousie University 1984), 18-9.

<sup>32</sup> Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 14-72.

<sup>33</sup> A party branch was only founded in Oshawa in 1925; the following year it made the largest single contribution to the District 3 (southern Ontario) "Agitation and Propaganda Fund." *The Worker*, 22 January 1927.

<sup>34</sup> Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Census, 1921*, I, 546; *Census, 1931*, II, 416. See



cerned, the presence of so many eastern Europeans in the industry's decisive plant gave it advantages that were lacking in Oshawa, where GM recruited almost exclusively from the surplus farm population of overwhelmingly English Canadian Ontario County.<sup>35</sup> The party always considered the Windsor area plants the most likely to respond favourably to organizing activity. In addition to its ethnic support, the party enjoyed a number of links with the "native" labour movement. As in several other cities, it used the International Hod Carriers' Union as an entrée into the Trades and Labour Council.<sup>36</sup> It also enjoyed support from IAM Lodge 718, which regularly invited Communists to address meetings of its "Labour Forum."<sup>37</sup> Detroit's proximity was another advantage, especially after Communists won control of the independent Auto Workers' Union (AWU) and its journal, the *Auto Workers' News*, in 1926. AWU secretary Phil Raymond gave Windsor Communists assistance whenever possible.<sup>38</sup> It is also likely that some of the 15,000 or so Windsor residents who commuted daily to work in Detroit would have come into contact with one or other of the Communist "shop groups" in the Detroit plants.<sup>39</sup>

Communists began holding regular shop-gate meetings at Ford in 1925, but these passed off uneventfully until 1927. In July of that year, CPC industrial director Tim Buck mounted his soapbox outside Ford, only to be hauled down and arrested. In reporting this incident, *The Worker* scored points against the sham of bourgeois democracy but insisted that the real significance of the event was the exposure of Ford's fear that its workers were "beginning to think."<sup>40</sup> Acting on this premise, the CPC sent in Harvey Murphy, a youthful comrade who a few years earlier had been secretary of the Ford City Young Communist League (YCL) branch, to lead an organizing drive.<sup>41</sup> It was therefore against all expectations that the rank-and-file eruption he had been sent to prepare for finally happened — in Oshawa.

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complaint about the employment of non-British workers at Ford, "Ford Employees Demand Increase," *The Globe*, 29 June 1918. In Detroit, Ford employed an unusually large number of black workers who "could be expected to be loyal, docile and anti-union." James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (Cambridge 1977), 18-25.

<sup>35</sup> Wayne State University, Robert W. Dunn Papers, Box 1, typed report on the 1928 Oshawa strike (unsigned, probably written by Harvey Murphy); Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Michael Fenwick Papers, Vol. 2, interview with Fenwick: Workers' Benevolent Association, *Friends in Need* (Winnipeg 1971), 109-11.

<sup>36</sup> Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 37.

<sup>37</sup> *The Worker*, 7, 14 March 1925.

<sup>38</sup> UAW-OHC, interview with Philip Raymond; Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington 1980), 46-59.

<sup>39</sup> *The Globe*, 17 October 1927; *MT*, 78 (27 May 1927), 4. Rumours that the United States planned to tighten entry requirements caused something of a panic during 1927.

<sup>40</sup> *The Worker*, 16 July 1927.

<sup>41</sup> PAC, David Millar Collection, interview with Harvey Murphy; Multi-Cultural History Society of Ontario, Toronto, interview with Murphy: Murphy to the editor, *Young Worker*, December 1925.

Between March 1928 and March 1929 eight strikes occurred in the auto industry. The GM Oshawa strike was by far the most dramatic. It was the only one to embrace a majority of the work force — around 4,000 of 5,000 workers — and its conclusion in ostensible victory for the strikers was seen at the time as a potential breakthrough for auto workers in both Canada and the United States. As CPC leader Maurice Spector put it, "Oshawa is a demonstration that the spell of industrial slavery can be broken even in the automobile industry."<sup>12</sup>

The specific cause of the strike was a cut in piece rates on the "trim line," but this was only the latest in a catalogue of mounting grievances. Foremen had lately become more and more abusive; the "cumulative earnings" system, a form of group bonus, had caused disputes; and an earlier piece-rate cut had been imposed in December 1927. In the course of these events, the recently installed plant committee — a company union in other words — had been exposed as fraudulent. The trimmers responded by reasserting their own group solidarity. Around 75 per cent were veteran employees with at least ten years of continuous service at GM. Most therefore could remember a time when they enjoyed craft status. Through the 1920s, however, they had seen their trade of making and installing "trim" — cushions, upholstery, and internal fittings — deskilled; for example, a substantial part of their work was now done by young women sewing machinists.<sup>13</sup> Their sense of injustice was further strengthened by an awareness that GM was doing very well. In fact, 1927 had been "the largest [year] in production and sales in General Motors history," and February 1928, usually a low production month, had set all-time records.<sup>14</sup> Finally, when the trimmers struck on 26 March they may have been aware that GM, with a revamped Ford looming on the horizon, would be anxious for a quick settlement.

The Oshawa strike offers some useful clues to the class consciousness of one significant group of auto workers (because of the ethnic composition and other special characteristics of the work force, broader generalizations cannot be made). It was clear from the start that the strike commanded widespread support. Although GM argued that other workers were forced to quit work when the 400 trimmers shut down the line on the Monday, by Thursday most of the 3,000 strikers were enthusiastically participating in marches and mass meetings. Notable here was the activity of the trim line sewing machinists,

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Spector, "The Outlook — The Oshawa Strike," *Canadian Labour Monthly*, 1 (1928), 3-6; "A Lesson from Canada," *Detroit Labor News*, 13 April 1928.

<sup>13</sup> On the deskilling of the trimming trade, see UAW-OHC interviews with Furay and Pagano. The following account of the strike is based largely on PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Files (SLF), Vol. 340, file 15; and James Pendergast, "The Attempt at Unionization in the Automobile Industry in Canada, 1928," *Ontario History*, 70 (1978), 245-62.

<sup>14</sup> Herb C. Braund, "Iron and Steel Market Review," *CMMN*, 39 (8 March 1928), 50; "General Motors Record Year," *Saturday Night*, 43 (17 March 1928), 40.

whose prominence — albeit after earlier caution — challenged the view widely held then that women were unreliable trade unionists. As the strikers' confidence rose, so too did their militancy. On Thursday they posted pickets for the first time, and that night they overwhelmingly rejected a recommendation from their strike committee that they accept the company's offer of independent arbitration and reinstatement of the trimmers. At this juncture GM was forced to withdraw the wage cut, but even then, as Friday night's mass meeting demonstrated, a sizeable body of strikers was prepared to stick it out until GM recognized an independent industrial union. It took all the persuasive powers of TLC vice-president Jimmy Simpson, who had forced himself into the strike leadership, to have union recognition referred along with other issues to a federal conciliation board.

The strikers' decision to affiliate to the TLC, which speedily enrolled 3,800 of them in International Automobile Workers' Federal Labour Union No. 18011, revealed the limits of their militancy. From the first day of the strike TLC and ACCL organizers had vied for the strikers' allegiance. The conciliatory posture of Simpson and IAM official John Young proved more persuasive, perhaps because it resonated with a residue of faith in the company, almost certainly because it was backed by the organizational strength and tradition of the international unions. The ACCL, on the other hand, had been in existence for barely a year, in which time it had gained a radical reputation arising from close association with the CPC.<sup>45</sup> Before long, this link was to prove embarrassing, but at the time of the strike, ACCL president Aaron Mosher was only too happy to have Communists operating as unofficial organizers. Unfortunately, the insistence of Harvey Murphy and CPC leader Jack MacDonald on "class struggle" tactics — militant picketing and outright rejection of state arbitration — only served to alienate the rank and file.

The left's only glimmer of hope lay in the fact that Simpson had been guilty of deception. The strikers had made it clear that they wanted an industrial union, and Simpson led them to believe that this had been granted. Industrial unionism, however, was most certainly not official TLC policy. "Federal" unions were usually transitory conveniences used to hold workers together until the appropriate craft unions could decide who were to be considered machinists, moulders, sheet metal workers, operating engineers, and so on. This process peeled off the skilled and some of the semiskilled, but left the remainder in limbo.<sup>46</sup> Asked to clarify matters, TLC president Tom Moore admitted that established policy would be followed, only for the first (and apparently only)

<sup>45</sup> Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 78-9.

<sup>46</sup> Philip S. Foner, *The Policies and Practices of the American Federation of Labor 1900-1909* (New York 1977), 199-200. See also, however, the editorial "Federal Unions," *American Federationist*, 35 (1928), 1425-6, where it was stated: "It is obvious . . . that during the coming year we need to put emphasis on organizing federal unions in industries now unorganized. From such unions new national and internationals will emerge, strengthening the union movement all along the line."

issue of the federal union's journal to make a point of stressing the union's industrial character.<sup>47</sup> When the federal conciliation board announced its decisions on 4 May, growing doubts about the TLC hardened into antipathy.

Ignoring GM's recent announcement of record Canadian sales and profits, the board, on which Simpson represented the workers, unanimously accepted GM's case that Canadian productivity had to be brought into line with American standards. It also announced that union recognition was unacceptable and that GM would review wage rates in the autumn, prior to the introduction of its 1929 models. The ACCL's summary of these decisions seemed unanswerable: "If the bosses had had three representatives... instead of one they could not have received a report more favourable to their interests."<sup>48</sup> On the shop floor the results were disillusionment, apathy and, among some of the more militant, support for affiliation to "a more aggressive body."<sup>49</sup>

Against this background the CPC pushed ahead with its organization work and formed the Automobile Workers' Industrial Union (AWIU) in Windsor in June. In doing so, it effectively ended the united front period. Oshawa had provided final proof that the TLC was not genuinely committed to industrial unionism, and when Jimmy Simpson led an impressive delegation of international unionists (including the American Federation of Labor's Canadian-born secretary-treasurer Frank Morrison) at the inaugural meeting of a second TLC federal union in Windsor, Communists in the audience welcomed him with pointed comments about his treachery at Oshawa. Their persistent heckling brought the meeting to a premature end and reduced Simpson to a tirade against "agents of Soviet Russia who would have the workers gain their ends by civil war, instead of by peaceful appeal to their employers."<sup>50</sup> It also brought the expulsion of local party organizer Charles Sims from the Essex County Trades and Labour Council.<sup>51</sup>

The AWIU openly organized on a militant, class-struggle basis rooted in the immediate preoccupations of the rank and file. Its programme called for 100 per cent industrial unionism, across-the-board wage rises, abolition of bonus systems, overtime at time-and-a-half, a standard eight hour day and 44-hour week, and systematization of shift work with regular changes of night shifts and

<sup>47</sup> *Toronto Daily Star*, 31 March 1928; *The Steering Wheel*, 15 June 1928 (a copy of this publication is on file at Wayne State University, Reuther Library); Spector, "The Outlook."

<sup>48</sup> "Report of Board in Dispute Between General Motors of Canada, Limited, and Certain of its Employees," *LG*, 28 (1928), 452-53; "Border Cities Workers Go One Better," *Canadian Unionist*, 2 (1928), 21.

<sup>49</sup> James Alexander Pendergast, "Labour and Politics in Oshawa and District," (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1973), 32.

<sup>50</sup> *BCS*, 18, 19 May 1928. See also *Detroit Labor News*, 25 May 1928; *Canadian Congress Journal*, 7 (1928), 30-31.

<sup>51</sup> "Windsor Trades Council Expels Communist," *Canadian Congress Journal*, 7 (1929), 28.

advance notice of any changes.<sup>52</sup> The *Auto Workers' News* claim that workers began flocking into the new union from the moment of its appearance was an exaggeration. There were, nevertheless, signs of real growth. Several locals were formed in the Border Cities, with others in Oshawa and Toronto. In November, Aaron Mosher personally welcomed the union into the ACCL at the first AWIU national convention in Toronto.<sup>53</sup> And in January 1929 the union began talks with the Detroit AWU out of which came plans for international strike assistance and a revamped set of demands. The union now made plant safety a major issue, but added "political" demands for state unemployment insurance and equal pay for equal work "regardless of age, sex or race."<sup>54</sup> In April the union concluded a period of apparently steady institutional growth by launching a journal, the *Auto Workers' Life*.<sup>55</sup>

Independent corroboration of AWIU growth was provided by the decision of the leading union-busting organization, the Corporations' Auxiliary, to move its operatives from the TLC Windsor federal union to the AWIU.<sup>56</sup> That this action, however, was one of preemption rather than desperation can be seen by looking at the seven strikes which followed Oshawa. These show that AWIU influence remained very limited among rank-and-file auto workers. They are summarized in Table I.

With the exception of the final strike in the sequence, all were "lightning" strikes lasting no more than a day and usually only a few hours. They always involved wages — "uncertain" group bonuses were a recurring theme— and complaints about intensified working conditions. Some involved walkouts, others were "on-the-job" affairs with workers shutting down their part of the line and negotiating directly with management. In general, rather like the Oshawa strike, they had a *demonstrational* quality. Workers were not posing an all-out challenge to their employers, but were trying to gain relatively modest concessions which, in a period of boom, could be granted. On only one occasion, at Studebaker, was the AWIU directly involved, and here workers used the threat of joining it to wrest concessions. At Dodge, management

<sup>52</sup> Wayne State University, Dunn Papers, Box 1, Communist Party of Canada, District 3, "To All Automobile Workers in the Border Cities," leaflet, June 1928.

<sup>53</sup> *The Globe*, 5 November 1928; *Canadian Unionist*, 2 (1928), 53; *The Worker*, 17 November 1928.

<sup>54</sup> Wayne State University, Henry Kraus Papers, Box 1, "Program of the National Provisional Committee for the Organization of a National Industrial Auto Workers' Union," undated; Dunn Papers, Box 2, "Minutes of the Conference on Organization of the Auto Workers," Detroit, 13 January 1929; PAC, Canadian Labour Congress Papers, Vol. 146, "Auto Workers! Unite! Manifesto to the Automobile Workers of Canada," undated.

<sup>55</sup> *Auto Workers' Life*, April 1929, copy in Reuther Library.

<sup>56</sup> Wayne State University, Joe Brown Papers, "Espionage-Labor" File, "Statement of John Scarbury, 22 January 1929." This provides details of Scarbury's recruitment and activities. For more on the Corporations' Auxiliary, see Fred Rose, *Spying on Labor* (Toronto, probably 1939), 6-19.

TABLE I  
 Strikes in the Canadian Automobile Industry, March 1928-March 1929

Date	Plant	Group involved	Duration	Cause	Result
March 1928	GM (Oshawa)	initially trimmers, later entire plant	one week	speedup, bonus, etc.	compromise
May 1928	Willys-Overland (Toronto)	body assemblers	hours	for daily rates	unclear
July 1928	Chrysler (Walkerville)	100 trimmers body workers	hours	"uncertain" bonus	lost
August 1928	Studebaker (Walkerville)	40 assemblers	hours	wage rise	won
August 1928	Canadian Top and Body (Tilbury)	29 body workers	one day	wage rise	lost
March 1929	Ford (East Windsor)	various departments	hours	reduction in working day (no overtime payments)	won
March 1929	Dodge (Toronto)	chassis assemblers	hours	group bonus	won
March 1929	GM (Oshawa)	tool and die makers	two and one-half weeks	wage cuts, victimization	lost

Sources: PAC, SLF, Vol. 340, Files 15, 40; Vol. 341, Files 65, 83; Vol. 342, Files 14, 16, 19. *Labour Gazette, The Worker, Auto Workers' News.*

responded to evidence of growing union activity by quickly conceding the strikers' basic demand for a return to individual piecework.<sup>57</sup>

This is not to say that the auto companies were content to buy industrial peace. They employed organizations like the Corporations' Auxiliary to infiltrate and undermine the union. It was relatively easy for operatives to win official positions in the union at a time when most of its activities were clandestine; at the end of 1928 at least three members of the Windsor executive were Corporations' Auxiliary plants. Information they provided helped Ford and Chrysler identify and fire twenty activists in January 1929. Exposure of their activities only served to discredit the union further.<sup>58</sup> The union's inability to defend its members from victimization was underlined by the defeat of the GM toolroom strike in March 1929.<sup>59</sup> Union membership was not something to be entered into without careful consideration.

When the auto campaign was getting under way, it was natural that Murphy and Sims should look to party members to set an example by joining it. However, most members were "in no particular hurry to join . . . and even in some cases refused to do so." A common point of view was: "let the English workers join first."<sup>60</sup> Although this outlook reflected a genuine belief that Finns and eastern Europeans were particularly vulnerable to dismissal, Murphy and Sims — and the dominant pro-Bolshevization faction in the party itself — interpreted it as political resistance to the "new line" of independent Communist leadership of strike struggles. Sims clashed with Nicholas Zenchuk, leading spokesperson for the Ukrainian group in the Windsor party, on this issue, came off second best, and was recalled to Toronto.<sup>61</sup> Yet in his absence, Murphy pursued an identical line, ordering party members to join the AWIU or face expulsion. As the protagonists of the "new line" saw it, without this action "there would have been no campaign at all." The "rights" saw it differently, believing that Murphy's "big stick" methods had produced a "complete lack of confidence in the party leadership."<sup>62</sup> Whichever was correct, the reluc-

<sup>57</sup> *The Worker*, 25 August 1928; 6 April 1929.

<sup>58</sup> "Statement of John Scarbury, 22 January 1929;" *Auto Workers' News*, March 1929; Wayne State University, UAW-OHC, interviews with Sam Sage and Philip Raymond.

<sup>59</sup> PAC, SLF, Vol. 342, file 14; "Displacement of Workers in the Auto Industry," *The Worker*, 20 April 1929. The union member at the centre of the strike, "Comrade Giles," may well have been Charles Giles, previously secretary of the Oshawa local of the International Moulders' Union from 1924 until its demise in 1926. If so, it supports the thesis that skilled workers were often in the vanguard of industrial unionism.

<sup>60</sup> Sam Carr, "Why So Many Failures in the Industrial Work," *The Worker*, 4 May 1929; Charles Sims, "Pre-Party Convention Discussion: Some Opinions," *ibid.*, 8 June 1929.

<sup>61</sup> Multi-Cultural History Society of Ontario, interview with Stewart Smith.

<sup>62</sup> Beckie Buhay, "On the Inner-Party Situation," *The Worker*, 30 March 1929; Fred Shoemith, "Comrade Buhay's 'Self-Criticism' — of the Other Fellow," *ibid.*, 13 April 1929.

tance of even party members to risk joining the AWIU helps explain why relatively few non-party members joined it.

The logic of the "new line" led inexorably to the CPC's split from the ACCL. As the party moved to the left, adopting the extreme rhetoric of the "third period," the ACCL was no less keen to divest its Communist connections. In April 1929 the *Auto Workers' Life* featured articles by Aaron Mosher and ACCL secretary-treasurer William Burford alongside another by Tim Buck. Three months later, the ACCL expelled the AWIU for non-payment of per capita dues, despite an appeal from Murphy that a sudden downturn in production had made dues difficult to collect.<sup>61</sup> That downturn, anticipating the October slump by five months, virtually buried the AWIU.<sup>62</sup> Five years passed before it reappeared.

### III

ACCORDING TO THE *Financial Post*, the slump in the auto industry was the result of "over-extended production and a glut of used cars that could not be moved . . . aided and abetted by lack of stock market profits."<sup>63</sup> This explanation missed the crucial factor that around 30 per cent of total Canadian production was exported, mainly to the British Empire. In 1930 alone, as Australia, New Zealand, and others moved towards economic autarchy, Canadian export sales fell by 56 per cent; between 1929 and 1932 output and value of production fell by 77 per cent.<sup>64</sup> Some companies were hit harder than others. Ford, in particular, was badly damaged by falling export sales, and by 1933 had fallen behind GM and Chrysler in domestic sales. (Table 2)

For auto workers the 1930-3 period was "very trying . . . many hundreds of men did not get even part time work." Annual employment fell from 16,400 to 8,000 nationally; at Ford the work force fell from 7,100 to 2,174 between 1929-32. Workers had to bribe their way into jobs (paying \$80.00 in one case that came to light) that became increasingly unpleasant and decreasingly remunerative. Ford made a typically quixotic attempt to raise wages until in 1931 it was forced to join its competitors in cutting them. By 1933 the basic daily wage at Ford had fallen from \$7.00 to \$4.00. Companies resorted to running production at maximum speed for one or two days a week, making the

<sup>61</sup> The paper also contained an article by American CP journalist Robert W. Dunn, who at the time was preparing a study of the industry: PAC, CLC Papers, Vol. 103, M.M. McLean to W.T. Burford, 7 June, 16 July 1929; Burford to all ACCL Labour Councils, 23 July 1929.

<sup>62</sup> The union failed between August and November. See Arthur Seal to Murray Body Strike Committee, Detroit, reprinted in *Auto Workers' News*, August 1929; ACCL Third Annual Convention, "Report of the Executive Board," 4 November 1929.

<sup>63</sup> *Financial Post Business Year Book 1930 (FPBYB)* (Toronto, no date), 67.

<sup>64</sup> *FPBYB 1932* (Toronto, n.d.), 95; *FPBYB 1933* (Toronto, n.d.), 57; O.J. MacDiarmid, "Some Aspects of the Canadian Automobile Industry," *Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, 6 (1940), 261; Canadian Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Facts and Figures of the Automobile Industry* (Toronto 1959), 3.



work more stressful and physically hazardous. Forced to rush more and more, workers became increasingly susceptible to injury but would report only the most serious accidents rather than gain a reputation for "carelessness."<sup>67</sup>

TABLE 2  
Domestic Sales by the "Big Three" in Eastern Canada, 1931, 1933

	1931	1933	percentage change
GM	20,700	14,800	-28.5
Ford	13,300	7,200	-48.8
Chrysler	7,000	8,290	+18.4

Source: *Financial Post Year Book 1934* (Toronto n.d.), 69 (annual figures based on a simple extrapolation from first eleven months).

Mass unemployment effectively eliminated the possibility of open resistance. Workers typically felt that strike action carried "little opportunity of gaining anything" and were rarely tempted to try it. There were departmental strikes at GM in April 1930 and January 1932, both in protest against wage reductions, the latter seeking to limit a cut in piece-rates to 33 per cent. In November 1932 a dozen polishers and buffers at Oshawa's Coulter Manufacturing Company struck for the reinstatement of three of them who had asked for an increase. All twelve were reinstated, but only after publicly retracting a statement critical of the company and replacing it with another declaring their "confidence that our employers . . . will pay a living wage to efficient workers." These were the only auto strikes deemed worthy of recognition by the federal Department of Labour.<sup>68</sup>

Union activity in such conditions was out of the question. In March 1930 the ACCL chartered the Canadian Brotherhood of Automotive Employees, initially aiming at the organization of garage mechanics but planning "at the first opportunity . . . to organize in the manufacturing field."<sup>69</sup> Nothing more was heard of it. Later the same year, the Communists' recently-created Workers'

<sup>67</sup> *Report of the Department of Labour, 1931, Ontario Sessional Papers, No. 10, 1932; Report of the Department of Labour, 1933, ibid. No. 10, 1933; General Motors Cuts Salaries in Canada, Labor Statesman, 30 October 1931; "\$6 Minimum Wage Restored by Ford," Toronto Daily Star, 22 May 1935; Border Cities Labor News, 24 May 1932; "Ruthless Exploitation in Windsor Ford Motor Shop," The Worker, 6 October 1934; "Unemployment Hits Workers in Automobile Centre," ibid., 13 December 1930; Moulton, "Ford Windsor 1945," 154-5.*

<sup>68</sup> PAC, SLF, Vol. 345, File 22; Vol. 350, File 1; Vol. 353, File 166.

<sup>69</sup> PAC, CLC, Papers, Vol. 146, John Dowling, "Good News for the Auto Worker," undated leaflet; Vol. 152, W.T. Burford to A.E. Wood, 6 March 1930.

*Unity League (WUL) attempted to revive the AWIU, but by mid-1931 had only managed to build one functioning shop group at Chrysler. In general, as Windsor organizer George Andrew reported, since the onset of the Depression the party's factory work had "not improved to any extent."*<sup>70</sup> Almost all Communist activity was located among the unemployed.

Through the National Unemployed Workers' Association (and later the unemployed councils) the party maintained contact with the masses, some of whom at least could be expected to provide the basis for later industrial intervention. The movement in Windsor was highly developed, capable of working round immediate issues like evictions and relief payments as well as conducting mass public agitation. Its successes supported an unusually effective electoral push, which at its peak saw three "united front" councillors elected in East Windsor in 1933; and its resilience was a constant source of surprise and dismay to those who believed that only "foreigners" could be drawn to the left. Communists actively strived to dissolve sectional barriers within the working class. Their platforms would typically contain speakers from all the main ethnic and racial groups in the Border Cities.<sup>71</sup>

During the early 1930s Communists learned how to operate more effectively in clandestinity. Instead of relying on shop-gate meetings, which workers in any case largely avoided, they developed "social" and "personal" methods of work. If a party member managed to find work, a political task was to seek out one or two rank-and-file workers who seemed sympathetic to unionism, discover their opinions, and if possible start a union shop group. The first step was often simply a visit to the individual's home, followed by an informal coffee party. Once a group was started, it would be enlarged in the same way, using the rank and filers' contacts. This work was slow and unheroic, but it did bring modest dividends. By spring 1933 around a hundred unionists were spread across fourteen shop groups in eight Border Cities plants. Each group met regularly to vet prospective members, discuss grievances, and engage in political discussion, usually based on readings from *The Worker* and *Workers' Unity* with occasional forays into Marx, Engels, Lenin.

<sup>70</sup> PAO, Communist Party Papers, 2A 1133-34, 2A 1164-65. George Andrew, "Report of Work and Situation in the Border Cities," No. 1, 21 March 1931, No. 2, 11 April 1931.

<sup>71</sup> Multi-Cultural History Society of Ontario, interviews with Harry Binder and William Kashtan (both were young party members gaining industrial experience); "How To Organize Local Councils of the NUWA," *Party Organizer*, June 1931; Department of National Defence, Directorate of History, Ottawa, File 161.009 (D63), William Griesinger to District Officer Commanding, Military District No. 1, 17 September, 18 December 1931; *ibid.*, Windsor City Police, report re: "Communist Meeting at Lanspeary Park," 3 September 1931, 1 May 1932; Francis Graham Stevens, "A History of Radical Political Movements in Essex County and Windsor, 1919-1945," (M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1948), 89-113.

and Stalin. An embryonic local union executive existed in the shape of a central "shop council," to which each group sent a delegate.<sup>72</sup>

For most of 1933 around one-third of the Border Cities' male population remained jobless, which explains why very few auto workers would have anything to do with unionism. Yet developments elsewhere produced evidence of an approaching economic and political upturn. The American industry was riddled with strikes in 1933, and observing one of the bitterest, at Briggs Auto Body in Detroit, Windsor mayor David Croll detected "a change of temper which is very significant."<sup>73</sup> Closer to home, Windsor workers saw the rise of the Workers' Unity League (WUL) during strikes in southern Ontario's shoe and furniture industries. In the course of the crucial Stratford furniture strike, Communists brought a strikers' delegation to Windsor to attend a rally on behalf of the release of the CPC leaders imprisoned in 1931. The strikers' arrival transformed the event into an impromptu Stratford solidarity rally.<sup>74</sup>

If the "demonstration effect" of such events did not produce an immediate mobilization of Windsor auto workers, it undeniably stimulated the CPC into raising the tempo of organization. During winter 1933-4 WUL organizers, notably Sam Scarlett and Fred Collins, frequently visited the area. According to Royal Canadian Mounted Police sources, the situation in the auto plants would have to be "very closely watched," as Communists were making a major effort "to induce discontent among the workers." In February, with the industry rapidly emerging from the slump, the RCMP decided that despite making "some headway . . . particularly through the Foreign element," the CPC had almost certainly failed to disrupt the industry.<sup>75</sup> Exactly a month later, on 26 March, the Auto Specialties plant was struck.

As in other industries at this time, the moment of industrial upturn restored a measure of confidence and aggression to workers who had been impotent in the face of four years of accumulating grievances. Between January and April 1934 most auto companies were working a five-day week, and there were even labour shortages in trades such as trimming, metal finishing, and machine moulding.<sup>76</sup> There was still too high a level of unemployment to expect a mass upsurge of industrial struggle, but some workers in some plants were willing to

<sup>72</sup> James Cochrane, "Winning Our Way to the Factories," *Workers' Unity*, May 1933.

<sup>73</sup> Wayne State University, Joe Brown Papers, Scrapbook 1, *Detroit Leader*, 11 February 1933, clipping.

<sup>74</sup> *The Worker*, 14 October 1933.

<sup>75</sup> Department of National Defence, File 161.009 (D63), RCMP reports re: "Labour Conditions and Unemployment -- Western Ontario District," 3 November 1933, 2 March 1934, 6 April 1934; W. Griesinger to District Officer Commanding, Military District No. 1, 27 February, 28 March 1934.

<sup>76</sup> *The Globe*, 2 May 1934; *MT* 92 (9 February 1934), 10; PAC, SLF, Vol. 461, File 71, "Summary of Employment Conditions in the Province of Ontario, Week Ending 17 March 1934 — Windsor;" "Canada's Motor Industry," *Canada's Weekly*, 104 (4 October 1934), 13.

take on their employers. Their renewed confidence was the basis of a revived Auto Workers' Union.<sup>77</sup>

Party strategy concentrated on organizing the smaller auto parts plants rather than tackling one of the major producers prematurely.<sup>78</sup> The three plants where strikes took place were all relatively small, with between 35 and 250 workers, as were four other plants reportedly on the brink of strike action. Such plants were easier to shut down and simply less intimidating than a Ford or a Chrysler.<sup>79</sup> An additional factor of some importance was that wage levels and working conditions were appreciably inferior in the parts sector, which existed in an almost colonial relationship to the primary producers. The latter took advantage of the much higher degree of competition among components firms to set low prices and buy on a "hand-to-mouth" basis, placing orders only to meet immediate production demand. Parts companies typically alternated between dizzying bouts of high intensity production and protracted periods of inactivity, regardless of which their employees had to be on constant — unpaid — standby.<sup>80</sup>

The Auto Specialties plant produced malleable iron castings for the "big three." At the time of the strike, the plant was working flat out; workers therefore knew they were striking at an opportune moment. The strike began when a delegation of fifteen workers presented management with a detailed set of demands, only to have them rejected and several of their leaders fired. By the end of the day, all 250 workers in the plant joined the strike. Their demands reflected a wide range of concerns: recognition of the AWU and of a union shop committee, replacement of piece-rates by hourly rates ranging between 40 cents for women to 60 cents for the most skilled (moulders, coremakers, sandmixers, oventenders, furnace workers and millwrights), a rising scale of payments for moulders' apprentices with the maximum to come within a year, and an eight hour day with overtime at time-and-a-half.<sup>81</sup>

Management was clearly caught unawares by the strikers' organizational readiness. Within hours of the walkout, many of the strikers were active on committees for negotiations, relief gathering, picketing, publicity, and work-

<sup>77</sup> When the union reappeared, it had mysteriously dropped "industrial" from its title.

<sup>78</sup> Editorial, *The Worker*, 31 March 1934; PAC, SLF, Vol. 361, File 79, BCS, 14 April 1934, clipping. Much of the following discussion of events in Windsor is based on four files — Vol. 361, Files 71, 79, 80, 122. Henceforth these will be designated simply by the file number.

<sup>79</sup> This was characteristic of the WUL's experience at this time. Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 267-8.

<sup>80</sup> C. C. Edmonds, "Tendencies in the Automobile Industry," *American Economic Review*, 13 (1923), 422-41; Josephine Grimshaw, "Problems and Policies of Labour and Management in the Automobile Industry in Relation to Prices, Competitive Conditions and Economic Structure," (M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1946), 24, 104-6, 124-6.

<sup>81</sup> SLF, File 71, BCS, 26 March 1934, clipping.

ers' defence. Pickets were immediately set up at the plant and outside the Federal Employment Office, which was rumoured to have called in strike-breakers from Hamilton. Already they were armed with leaflets setting out the strikers' case. Picketing was carried on around the clock, sustained by coffee and hot meals provided by a permanent strike kitchen. This was located in nearby Hungarian Hall under the supervision of Windsor's leading woman Communist, Georgia Ketcheson. The party presence was underlined on the morning of 27 March, when several hundred of the area's unemployed were mobilized to support a mass picket of the plant gates. An impressed *Border Cities Star* reported: "Hundreds of picketers crowded the sidewalk in front of the plant, forming an impenetrable chain of moving humanity that stretched for several city blocks."<sup>82</sup>

Faced by this solid front, management quickly made consecutive offers of improved wages. The negotiating committee rejected the first out of hand, but presented the second, which seemed to meet most of the wage demands, to a mass meeting that night. When it was explained that neither flat hourly rates nor union recognition had been granted, the strikers voted unanimously to remain out. Local WUL organizers James Cochrane and Douglas Stewart, both Communists, had no need to whip up a militant mood, but instead took pains to emphasize that the strike had arisen entirely from economic conditions. They even urged strikers to refrain from provoking the police! At the same time, they successfully urged rejection of a proposal to call on David Croll's services as an independent mediator and saw to it that the meeting ended on a suitably militant note by having it send messages of solidarity to striking shoe and furniture workers in Kitchener.

This emphasis on moderation almost certainly stemmed from the WUL's fear that the state was preparing a fresh anti-Communist purge. The previous month had seen the publication by the Ontario attorney-general's office of the pamphlet *Agents of Revolution*, which purported to show that the WUL was part of a Moscow-inspired conspiracy; it had already been used at Kitchener in an attempt to discredit the WUL's efforts.<sup>83</sup> When Fred Collins arrived from Kitchener to assume leadership of the strike, he continued this conciliatory approach. He managed to convince the negotiating committee to resume talks with management, and after the committee wrested further concessions — overtime after ten hours, installation of showers, recognition of a shop committee — he urged acceptance of the improved offer at a mass meeting in Hungarian Hall. Against him, a sizeable section of the work force insisted that there should be no return to work without formal union recognition and a binding contract. Collins answered these points by arguing that with 80 per cent of the work force in the union, formal recognition was unnecessary and that the big auto companies would never allow the smaller plants to grant union

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 28 March 1934, clippings.

<sup>83</sup> Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 298-301.

recognition. Having won the objectors over, Collins concluded the meeting by calling for three cheers each for the AWU, "a proletarian country," and "a proletarian world."<sup>84</sup>

In Collins' view, it was better to settle a strike with some gains than to go for total victory and risk total defeat. Even small victories built up workers' confidence and experience, preparing them for higher levels of struggle; premature combat often brought defeat, and out of defeat came demoralization.<sup>85</sup> The party felt that the situation in Windsor, if handled correctly, could "now develop into a second Stratford."<sup>86</sup> The Stratford strike had produced an ideological breakthrough which helped the WUL make a major incursion into light industry. Windsor represented an opportunity to make a similar breakthrough in "basic" industry.

In the wake of the Auto Specialties strike, the situation looked highly promising. The union gained a second victory in a strike at Windsor Bedding, a supplier of auto upholstery, gaining its main demands of a minimum wage of 35 cents an hour and recognition of a shop committee in less than a day.<sup>87</sup> A third strike began at Canadian Motor Lamp in East Windsor, and there were confident rumours of strikes at Walker Metal Products, Dominion Forge, Sandwich Foundry, and Canadian Motor Products. The union even felt able to show its face at Chrysler and Ford, where it raised the organizing slogan "back to \$7 a day!" All this euphoria collapsed, however, when the Canadian Motor Lamp strike ground to defeat.

At the beginning of this strike, there was no indication that it would end differently from the others. The plant's 108 workers displayed high morale, strike organization was effective, and, once again, the unemployed displayed exemplary solidarity — 2,000 turned up on one occasion when it was rumoured that strikebreakers were to be brought in. Defeat stemmed not from human failure, but from unfortunate timing (although that could be attributed to an error of judgement). Unlike the case at Auto Specialties, production at CML had been very spasmodic. One of the strikers' main demands was for payment while they were on standby. When they struck during a slow period, management was happy to let the strike drag on. By the end of the first week the AWU's relief-gathering capacity had been exhausted, and when East Windsor's city council overruled the pleas of its three "united front" councillors to place the strikers on relief, morale faltered. The longer the strike progressed, the more the company and the *Border Cities Star* red-baited the union. After two weeks Fred Collins again arrived to lead negotiations. He found that while picket lines were being honoured, the union core consisted of only twenty

<sup>84</sup> SLF, File 71, BCS, 29 March 1934, clipping.

<sup>85</sup> Fred Collins, "Victory of Big Significance to All Automobile Workers." *The Worker*, 7 April 1934.

<sup>86</sup> *The Worker*, 14 April 1934.

<sup>87</sup> SLF, File 80.

militants. Most of the rest wished to go back. After discussions with the Dominion's conciliation officer, M.S. Campbell, Collins convinced the militants to return to a curious settlement whereby the East Windsor police commission would supervise the company's promise to increase wages in line with the federal cost-of-living index. The most telling commentary on this settlement from the WUL viewpoint was the silence of the Communist press.<sup>88</sup>

This defeat was the first of a series of AWU reverses. Ford and Chrysler staved off union activity by first granting wage increases, then by firing suspected unionists. When the economic upturn subsided in May, all companies used layoffs to discipline their workers. Auto Specialties shattered the union at a stroke by laying off the entire night shift, where many of its most active members were clustered. At Windsor Bedding, AWU activists were gradually picked off, and those who tried to keep the shop committee going found that they were being shunned by the rank and file. By the autumn the AWU no longer existed in these two plants.<sup>89</sup>

In reviewing the disintegration of the union at Auto Specialties and Windsor Bedding, the party concluded that the main problem had been inexperience. Rank-and-file workers simply did not know how to sustain union activity in their workplaces. The answer, equally simply, was hard work and greater determination, as shown by the metal miners of Flin Flon and Noranda who had built unions "despite an even more rabid terror than exists in the auto plants."<sup>90</sup> But this ignored the fact that it was one thing to launch a union and quite another to keep it going: the metal miners' unions failed to survive their first strikes!<sup>91</sup> To sustain a public life, unions had to prove their capacity to protect their members and convince them that union membership brought material benefits unattainable by autonomous workplace action. When the situation turned against the union at the Auto Specialties plant, some workers, not entirely without justification, began to argue that they could have won their strike without the AWU.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> SLF, File 79, particularly M.S. Campbell, memo re: "Strike of Employees of Canadian Motor Lamp Company Ltd., East Windsor, Ontario," 25 April 1934.

<sup>89</sup> *Auto Workers' News*, 19 May 1934; D.G. "Mass Lay-Offs in Automobile Factories as Border Industries Slow Down," *The Worker*, 26 May 1934; SLF, File 122, BCS, 29, 30 May 1934, *Toronto Telegram*, 31 May 1934, clippings: "Special Automobile Issue," *The Worker*, 6 October 1934; Moulton, "Ford Windsor 1945," 131. The union actually staged a successful two-day strike at Windsor Bedding for the reinstatement of leading activist, Peter Schwansky, in May (File 122). But that was its last act of defiance.

<sup>90</sup> *The Worker*, 6 October 1934.

<sup>91</sup> On the metal-mining strikes of 1934, see Dan Glenday, "Thirty Years of Labour Relations in the Mining Industry in Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec, 1934-1964," in *De L'Abbitibi-Témiskaming* 5 (Rouyn 1979), 86-9; Robert Robson, "Strike in the Single Enterprise Community: Flin Flon, Manitoba — 1934," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 12 (1983), 63-86. See also the party's account of the Noranda strike in *Communist Review*, July-August 1934.

<sup>92</sup> *The Worker*, 6 October 1934.

By October the party had reluctantly conceded that it lacked the capacity independently to sustain an auto union capable of winning mass support. It kept its shop groups going, albeit once again clandestinely, and attempted to organize around a militant "auto workers' code" developed in response to rumours that Mitchell Hepburn's recently-elected Ontario Liberal administration intended to include auto in an ambitious, New Deal-inspired programme of industrial reconstruction.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, however, Fred Collins was stating publicly that the union was open to a takeover bid.<sup>94</sup> He was undoubtedly aware that the American AWU had sent its members into the burgeoning AFL federal locals and was on the brink of dissolving itself.<sup>95</sup> He may have hoped that his offer would nudge the TLC into a revival of its federal union policy, or that the ACCL might again intervene. In any event, neither stepped forward. After a catastrophic municipal election campaign in December 1934, when Ford's intervention, threatening the sack for any worker found to have voted for the left, led to a rout of East Windsor's united front candidates, the AWU quietly disappeared.<sup>96</sup>

#### IV

DURING 1935-6, COMMUNIST ACTIVITY barely rose above the level of the latter part of 1934. Some shop groups managed to persevere. The Moulders' Social Club quietly sustained a union presence in Oshawa, while at the Ford assembly plant in Toronto activists were able to produce the *Ford Auto Worker* on a fortnightly basis.<sup>97</sup> Communists were active in one of only two auto strikes in 1935, at Oshawa's Fittings Foundry, and in the only 1936 strike, at Kelsey-Hayes Wheel in Windsor (the exception was at Hudson-Essex, Tilbury).<sup>98</sup>

The most striking feature of the Communist role in 1935 was what the party did not do: it failed to make any contact with the emerging UAW. *The Worker's* single report of the UAW founding convention in August 1935 emphasized the stand of Frank Dillon, AFL president William Green's appointee to the UAW presidency, against full industrial unionism. The implication was that the UAW did not represent a major advance.<sup>99</sup> Why this reticence and misjudgement? One reason was a simple failure to analyze the forces that were coming together in the new union; another was that the party's political analysis of the period

<sup>93</sup> Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 311-3, 340.

<sup>94</sup> *Proceedings of the First Canadian Congress Against War and Fascism*, Toronto, 6-7 October 1934, 10.

<sup>95</sup> Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions*, 128.

<sup>96</sup> Stevens, "Radical Political Movements," 124-5.

<sup>97</sup> *The Worker*, 4 June, 2, 5, 7 November 1935.

<sup>98</sup> *TDS*, I, 2 November 1935; Department of National Defence, File 161.009 (D63), A.E. Reames, Superintendent "O" Division RCMP, report re: "Unemployment Conditions - Western Ontario District," 6 November 1935; *New Commonwealth*, 20 April 1935; PAC, SLF, Vol. 368, File 46.

<sup>99</sup> *The Worker*, 31 August 1935.



precluded any strengthening of American influence in the Canadian labour movement. By early 1935, the CPC had concluded a slow reversion to united front tactics. At the trade union level it had a fixed idea about the process of unity: this would come through amalgamation of the WUL, ACCL, and TLC (and possibly the Catholic *syndicats* of Quebec) and would produce an "All-Inclusive Federation of Canadian Labour."<sup>100</sup> Only in November, when first a plenum of the CPC central committee then the WUL national convention decided to seek trade union unity by returning to the international unions, was the party able to call wholeheartedly for auto workers to convert their anti-boss sentiments into UAW membership.<sup>101</sup>

If the upturn in class struggle in 1934 was based primarily on a marginal shift of the labour market in favour of the working class, how is the apparent subsidence of struggle in 1935-6 to be explained? The labour market continued to improve; Ford's payroll, for example, rose from 4,140 in 1934 to 6,371 in 1935.<sup>102</sup> Both GM and Chrysler expanded plant capacity and began producing more of the final product in their Canadian plants (GM's decision to build a transmission plant at its McKinnon Industries subsidiary in St. Catharines resulted from strikes in the Toledo and Cincinnati plants which produced Oshawa's transmissions).<sup>103</sup> Despite staffing reductions in some departments, resulting from technological innovation, there was a relative stabilization of employment. A rising level of struggle might have been expected.

Part of the reason for a drop in open strike activity lay with the willingness of employers to pass on some of their increased profits in higher wages. Another partial explanation is that workers were reacting to the defeat of the most decisive confrontations in 1934 by shifting from open conflict to informal workplace activity, probing the limits of managerial tolerance while limiting risks to themselves. An ability to wrest "do-it-yourself" concessions may well have fed generally into the sentiment arrived at by the Auto Specialties work force. Evidence of such rank-and-file activity is necessarily difficult to obtain. Nevertheless it certainly existed. Workers in the axle department at the McKinnon plant provided one example. As was common in the plant, they were paid on the group bonus system, but while this was as unpopular with them as with most work groups, they had a popular group leader who organized work tasks and distribution of the bonus in a "fair and reasonable" way. When management decided, apparently against his wishes, to relocate him, the entire shop signed a "round robin" threatening to strike if his transfer was not rescinded. They won their point.<sup>104</sup> The Communist *Daily Clarion* reported from Oshawa that several departments in the GM plant had experienced brief stoppages that

<sup>100</sup> Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 329-35.

<sup>101</sup> "Solidarity Wins Point," *The Worker*, 4 April 1936.

<sup>102</sup> *Toronto Daily Star*, 9 November 1935.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 2, 4 May, 16 July, 16 August 1935.

<sup>104</sup> "Solidarity Wins Point," *The Worker*, 4 April 1936.

"successfully bought back intolerable conditions and miserable wages." Typical was a one-hour strike by the trim line sewing machinists.<sup>105</sup> Workers in the hub and drum department at Kelsey-Hayes Wheel had only to meet together for the first time and talk about taking action against speedup for management to announce a 5 cents an hour raise.<sup>106</sup>

*Building a union was much more difficult than winning minor concessions.* Reports in the party press openly admitted that despite widespread dissatisfaction and unrest, there was no real support for a fresh organizing drive. One Ford worker summed up the situation: "We need a union at Ford's as well as other shops, but we need the work too, and it is worth your job to even speak unionism at Ford's."<sup>107</sup> Throughout 1936 the UAW displayed no greater capacity than the AWU to do more for workers than they could do for themselves. When it finally crossed the border, it did so reluctantly and with mixed results.

When James Napier began sounding out his immediate colleagues about taking action against deteriorating conditions in their department at Kelsey-Hayes, he knew next to nothing about union developments in the auto industry. When he sought information on the subject, he came under the influence of CPR member Jack Wright, who fed Napier "a steady dose of communism" whenever he visited the tool crib. Wright pointed Napier in the direction of the UAW and CIO, whose charismatic leader John L. Lewis made a major impression on the young Scottish expatriate.<sup>108</sup> By the time management tried to buy off union sentiment with a voluntary wage increase, Napier and a number of departmental colleagues were committed to forming a union. Coincidentally, when these developments were taking place, the UAW was just about to call a strike at Kelsey-Hayes' Detroit plant. When Napier and two colleagues, French Canadian Roy Nantais and Austrian Nick Klinger, made contact with UAW organizers Walter Reuther and Richard Frankenstein, the Americans encouraged them to press ahead and convinced them that "the auto union was best for us." Yet the position regarding affiliation remained sufficiently fluid for Napier and five fellow activists to discuss the issue with the Windsor business agent of the Bricklayers' International Union, Percy Fisher, who urged them to join the IAM. When they informed him of their decision to seek an industrial union charter, Napier alleges, he sold them out to the company. All but one (who could not be identified) were fired within days. These firings brought matters to a head.<sup>109</sup>

As ever, Communists were quickest to react. The party immediately called a street meeting at which 38 Kelsey-Hayes workers took out union cards; they were speedily chartered as UAW Local 195. On 16 December, UAW organizer

<sup>105</sup> M.L., letter to the editor, *Daily Clarion*, 21 November 1936.

<sup>106</sup> James Napier, *Memories of Building the UAW* (Toronto 1975), 8-10.

<sup>107</sup> "Ford Plant Union Talk Seizes Men," *Daily Clarion*, 8 August 1936.

<sup>108</sup> Napier, *Memories*, 8.

<sup>109</sup> PAC, SLF, Vol. 380, File 190; Wayne State University, Henry Kraus Papers, Box 7, "Strikers Feel Information Carried by Spotters Cause of Strike," undated.

and American CP member Tom Parry was sent in to take charge of negotiations for the reinstatement of the six men. He found that 100 of the plant's 185 workers were already in the union. When management refused even to admit him, Parry called a strike, and for four hours Canada was treated to the spectacle of its first "sitdown." After the police quietly removed the strikers, the struggle reverted to the standard pattern of Communist-led strikes: militant picketing, arrests, strong solidarity from the unemployed, strikebreaking, and vibrant mass meetings. A new factor, however, was the role of the UAW.

During the two weeks of the strike (16-29 December), the Windsor workers received strong verbal support from the Detroit UAW leadership. At a mass meeting on 19 December, Richard Frankenstein inspired wild enthusiasm when he promised the Windsor strikers that the union would insist on simultaneous settlement of the Detroit and Windsor strikes. Pledging the support of Kelsey-Hayes' 4,500 Detroit workers, he urged the Canadians to increase their efforts on the picket line and make sure that "no-one goes into that damned plant tomorrow." Thus emboldened, the Windsor strikers fought a pitched battle against police and strikebreakers the following morning. Their efforts kept the scabs out, but they also led directly to the arrest of five pickets, most notably Tom Parry, who was then held in custody until the strike's conclusion. On 22 December the strikers' morale was seriously dented when the UAW sent its Detroit members back to work. When Dominion conciliation officer M.S. Campbell arrived in Windsor on Boxing Day, no doubt having spent Christmas in pleasanter circumstances than the strikers, he was able to convince the 70 remaining strikers that there was little chance of gaining the victimized men's reinstatement. On 29 December they returned to a 5 cents an hour increase, a settlement comparable to that gained in Detroit. In fact, the Detroit union leadership greeted the settlement as "a signal victory." In Napier's view, however, "Reuther sold us out."<sup>110</sup>

Napier's judgement seems to lend support to Irving Abella's contention that UAW affiliation was of doubtful value to Canadian workers.<sup>111</sup> At best, the UAW leadership saw the Windsor strike as a sideshow to the main event: Victor Reuther fails even to mention it in his family history.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, during the spring of 1937 the UAW's Communist vice-president Wyndham Mortimer personally intervened to gain the reinstatement of the six men.<sup>113</sup> The UAW's reluctance to commit substantial resources to a Canadian organizing drive was based less on a dismissive view of Canada's importance than on a single-minded commitment to unionization of the central GM plant at Flint.

<sup>110</sup> Napier, *Memories*, 15; Wayne State University, Joe Brown Papers, Scrapbook 4; *Detroit News*, 30 December 1936; SLF, Vol. 380, File 190.

<sup>111</sup> Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour*, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Victor Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW: A Memoir* (Boston 1976), 140-1.

<sup>113</sup> Napier, *Memories*, 17.

Michigan. Meanwhile, it was actually damping down on rank-and-file militancy elsewhere, leaving aspiring unionists in, for example, Atlanta no more likely to receive support than in Windsor.<sup>114</sup>

Union growth depended greatly on rank-and-file initiative, which in turn benefited from a sense of the union as a social force. The vast majority of American auto workers lacked that sense; barely 25 per cent of them had joined the UAW by December 1936. It was much harder for their Canadian counterparts to feel involved in a still largely absent industrial union movement. The CIO remained generally reluctant to push into Canada, and the situation was further complicated by the TLC's refusal either to outlaw its industrial union wing — as the AFL demanded — or to accept a more purposive organizing role among the unorganized.<sup>115</sup> Thus the job of nursing the industrial union tendency continued to lie with individual militants, such as the unemployed workers who doggedly sold the *United Auto Worker* outside plant gates. They helped pave the way for the creation of Local 199 at McKinnon Industries in late December. But even here, as a *Daily Clarion* correspondent noted, "we have only scratched the surface."<sup>116</sup>

The situation was finally transformed by the UAW victory at Flint in February 1937, an event with as cathartic an impact on American as on Canadian auto workers. Before Flint, UAW membership stood at 88,000; in the next six months it soared to 400,000. The GM Oshawa strikers who gave the UAW its first major breakthrough in Canada were thus participants in a transnational class struggle based on the confidence that stemmed from belonging to a working-class organization of proven potency. Whatever the limits of the UAW's material contribution to the Oshawa strike, it was the strikers' identification with the industrial union and the CIP that gave them the inspiration to exploit their objective resources.<sup>117</sup> Could the Oshawa strikers have accepted the UAW's inspiration and rejected its leadership? This is doubtful. In the previous decade they had learned a good deal, albeit in fragmented fashion, about unionism. Support for the UAW reflected some of the lessons they had absorbed. It was an unambiguously industrial union; it had humbled one of the giants of the industry; it was ready to recruit Canadian members; and there was no alternative to it.

<sup>114</sup> Keeran, *The Communist Party*, 158-9; Neil Herring and Sue Thrasher, "UAW Sit-down Strike: Atlanta, 1936," in Marc S. Miller, ed., *Working Lives: The 'Southern Exposure' History of Labor in the South* (New York 1980), 172-83.

<sup>115</sup> J.B. Salsberg, "What Faces the Trades Congress?" *Daily Clarion*, 8 August 1936; Trades and Labour Congress, *Report of Proceedings of the 52nd Annual Convention*, Montreal, 8-12 September 1936; Salsberg, "Where Our Congress Fell Short," *Daily Clarion*, 3 October 1936.

<sup>116</sup> Reports from Frank Haslam, *Daily Clarion*, 19 December 1936, 9 January 1937.

<sup>117</sup> Abella's contention that "Not one penny of aid came from the United States" is not strictly true. The UAW paid the fees of J.L. Cohen, the left-wing lawyer who did much of the negotiating for the Oshawa strikers. PAC, J.L. Cohen Papers, Vol. 7, File 2609, George F. Addes to J.L. Cohen, 10 May 1937. Cohen's fee was \$2,450.

## V

WHAT, THEN, can be concluded about CPC efforts in the auto industry? First and foremost, it is clear that extravagant claims are inappropriate: neither the AWIU nor the AWU were capable of the mass transformation of consciousness, the cultural breakthrough, that made workers believe they had the power to make and win demands. In 1928-9 the AWIU made a modestly successful start, ultimately defeated by party infighting, employers' repression and, most decisively, the reluctance of rank-and-file auto workers to risk their desirable jobs in all-out strikes. In 1934, the AWU benefited from the militant impulse engendered during the moment of economic upturn, but failed to consolidate its opportunities, not least because of the contemporary success of the Workers' Unity League in mobilizing a significant minority of the Canadian working class.<sup>118</sup> Communist forces were simply too thinly spread to give many WUL interventions a reasonable chance of success. Nevertheless, the "red" unions were responsible for unparalleled efforts to convince auto workers that their collective future lay with industrial unionism. Raucously at plant gates, quietly in small discussion groups, and furtively on the shopfloor itself, Communists pushed this message and built an organizing cadre. In strikes and, at least as important, unemployed agitation, they gave workers the experience of struggle that fostered class consciousness, undeniably awakening the passive majority to the possibility of challenging industrial subordination. While it is an exaggeration to argue that Communists alone built the UAW in Canada, they can be credited with laying most of its foundations.

<sup>118</sup> See "B.C. Workers Can Give Strike Relief for Loggers," *B.C. Lumber Worker*, 25 April 1934. This article pointed out, in an attempt to answer complaints that the WUL "down east" was not doing enough to support striking Vancouver Island lumber workers, that the WUL was at that very moment conducting strikes of Windsor auto workers, coal miners in Cape Breton and New Brunswick, Kapuskasing loggers and Kitchener shoe workers. Since all of these drained the WUL's financial strength, it was incumbent on the working class in any particular area to provide the solidarity needed to sustain the strike.

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