

Toronto 1919

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Article abstract

In their examination of the conflicts which followed the First World War, Canadian labour historians have tended to draw a sharp dichotomy between a “radical” west and a “conservative” east. Events in Toronto, however, which brought the city to the edge of a general sympathetic strike in late May 1919 cannot be explained in this way. The most notable feature of the Toronto labour movement was the degree of polarization within it. The potential clearly existed for a break with past forms of craft organization, towards a highly politicized industrial unionism. A powerful left wing, with wide support among newly organized, less-skilled workers, as well as workers with an immediate need for new forms of organization, was rapidly gaining dominance in the central bodies of the Toronto labour movement. Opposing them were the major beneficiaries of previous waves of organizing. These consisted, on the one hand, of union leaders who had helped shape the Toronto labour movement, and found key places for themselves within it. On the other hand, it also included a large number of workers who had established a stable bargaining relationship with employers, and a stake in the benefits their organizations had given them. This division meant that, from the outset, the possibilities for the establishment of a “One Big Union” did not exist, despite the enthusiasm that the western movement initially generated in Toronto. Conservative unions and leaders lost their dominance within the city's central union bodies but, by foiling the sympathetic general strike, were able to prevent the radicals from implementing an alternative strategy.

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JAMES NAYLOR

Résumé

In their examination of the conflicts which followed the First World War, Canadian labour historians have tended to draw a sharp dichotomy between a “radical” west and a “conservative” east. Events in Toronto, however, which brought the city to the edge of a general sympathetic strike in late May 1919 cannot be explained in this way. The most notable feature of the Toronto labour movement was the degree of polarization within it. The potential clearly existed for a break with past forms of craft organization, towards a highly politicized industrial unionism. A powerful left wing, with wide support among newly organized, less-skilled workers, as well as workers with an immediate need for new forms of organization, was rapidly gaining dominance in the central bodies of the Toronto labour movement. Opposing them were the major beneficiaries of previous waves of organizing. These consisted, on the one hand, of union leaders who had helped shape the Toronto labour movement, and found key places for themselves within it. On the other hand, it also included a large number of workers who had established a stable bargaining relationship with employers, and a stake in the benefits their organizations had given them. This division meant that, from the outset, the possibilities for the establishment of a “One Big Union” did not exist, despite the enthusiasm that the western movement initially generated in Toronto. Conservative unions and leaders lost their dominance within the city's central union bodies but, by foiling the sympathetic general strike, were able to prevent the radicals from implementing an alternative strategy.



Dans leur examen des conflits qui ont suivi la première guerre mondiale, les historiens canadiens du travail ont eu tendance à établir une nette distinction entre l'ouest “radical” et l'est “conservateur”. Toutefois cette dichotomie n'explique pas les événements de Toronto qui ont amené la ville au bord d'une grève générale de solidarité à la fin de mai 1919. L'aspect le plus notable du mouvement ouvrier à Toronto était son degré de polarisation interne. Il est évident qu'existait alors le potentiel d'un abandon des formes passées d'organisation des corps de métiers, au profit d'un syndicalisation industriel hautement politisé. On observe qu'au sein des principales composantes du mouvement ouvrier de Toronto, un puissant mouvement de gauche imposait rapidement sa domination, aidé en cela par l'appui massif des travailleurs moins spécialisés qui venaient de se regrouper, ainsi que par des travailleurs qui ressentaient le besoin immédiat de nouvelles formes

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d'organisation. Leurs adversaires étaient les principaux bénéficiaires des vagues précédentes d'organisation syndicale. D'une part, il s'agissait des leaders syndicaux qui avaient contribué à former le mouvement ouvrier à Toronto et qui s'y étaient taillés une place de choix. D'autre part, on retrouvait aussi parmi ces adversaires un grand nombre de travailleurs qui avaient établi une relation de négociation stable avec leur employeur et qui avaient un intérêt dans les avantages que leur procurait leurs organisations. Cette adversité signifiait que, dès le départ, il était impossible de constituer une "One Big Union" malgré l'enthousiasme que le mouvement venu de l'ouest avait d'abord suscité à Toronto. Les syndicats conservateurs et leurs chefs perdirent leur influence dominante au sein des principaux groupes syndicaux de la ville. Mais en évitant la grève générale de solidarité, ils empêchèrent les radicaux de mettre en oeuvre une stratégie de rechange.

"Comrades and fellow-workers, I want to say that this May Day begins the history of Canada!" Three thousand listeners, wearing red badges inscribed "May Day 1919, Workers of the World Unite," sounded their approval; three cheers were given for social revolution. A second meeting, later in the day, served only to confirm the hope that Toronto workers would soon seize hold of their own destiny. On this occasion, between five and seven thousand people crowded the arena to express their solidarity with the Russian Revolution, honour working-class martyrs Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourg and the imprisoned Eugene Debs, and to demand the release of political prisoners in Canada jailed under the provisions of the War Measures Act. Among the speakers was R.J. Johns of Winnipeg, whose reception in Toronto convinced him that the One Big Union would soon gain a foothold in that city.¹ The meeting ended by singing the "Internationale" and "The Red Flag," rather than, the Toronto press noted characteristically, with "God Save the King."²

The May Day edition of the *Ontario Labor News*, published by the local machinists, and endorsed by the Metal Trades and Marine Trades federations, further revealed the depth of the radical challenge within the Toronto workers' movement. A front page article assailed the established "per-capita eating" leaders of the trade union movement for retarding the progress of labour.³ Editorially, it consigned the present form of working-class organization to the nineteenth century. Around Toronto, events appeared to confirm this view. That morning over four thousand trade workers in 232 factories set aside craft differences and downed their tools in unison, demanding not only an eight-hour day, but also employer recognition of, and negotiations with, their federation.⁴ Metal Trades Council vice-president John MacDonald emphasized the trajectory of the movement: "First we struck as trades, then we have struck as a federation, but the day will come when we

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1. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), MG10 A3, One Big Union Papers, Johns to Midgley, 7 May 1919.
 2. *Star* (Toronto), 2 May 1919.
 3. *Ontario Labor News* (hereafter *OLN*), 1 May 1919.
 4. *Globe* (Toronto), 2 May 1919; *Star*, 3 and 31 May 1919. The Metal Trades Federation consisted of twelve crafts; *Industrial Banner* (hereafter *IB*), 14 March 1919.

strike as a class.”⁵ For many, it appeared that day was about to arrive when, a fortnight later, the Toronto District Labor Council (TDLC) issued a call for a convention of Toronto unions to consider the question of a general sympathetic strike of the city’s workers.⁶

Canadian historiography concerning this period has overwhelmingly been concerned with the West. Yet if these events appear to reflect much of “the essence of western labour radicalism,”⁷ it is because many Toronto workers had reached similar political conclusions. As we shall see, the potential clearly existed in Toronto for a significant break with past forms of working-class organization. A powerful left wing, with wide support among newly organized, less-skilled workers, as well as workers with an immediate need for new forms of organization, was rapidly gaining dominance in central bodies of the Toronto labour movement. Ideologically, they were armed with a vision of highly politicized industrial unions that would sweep away craft unionism and its ineffective, conservative leadership. Yet the drama of Winnipeg was not played out in the streets of Toronto; no “Bloody Saturday” signalled the state’s defence of beleaguered capital. This difference is not adequately explained by reference to the presumed conservatism of Toronto workers, but rather by the deep polarization which had come to characterize the working-class movement in that city. Opposing the radicals were major beneficiaries of previous waves of organizing. These consisted, on the one hand, of union leaders who had helped shape the Toronto labour movement and found key places for themselves within it. On the other hand, it also included a large number of workers who had established a stable bargaining relationship with employers and a stake in the benefits their organizations had given them. These divisions represent distinct responses to the crisis engendered by industrial capitalism in an era of war and reconstruction. Workers in Toronto, as elsewhere, faced difficult choices.

The effects of the Great War, which provided much of the backdrop to events in the West, were, of course, national and international in their impact. Rapidly increasing living costs set against apparent government protection of war-time profiteers fueled popular anger and suspicion. A tight labour market, the product of munitions production and military recruitment, acted to spur trade union organization. However, despite its share of industrial disputes, Toronto was not a centre of conflict during the war. A very brief examination of two groups of workers illustrates this.

5. *Star*, 2 May 1919.

6. *Star*, 14 May 1919; *IB*, 16 May 1919.

7. David Jay Bercuson, “Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897–1919,” *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII (June 1977): 156. Labour historians’ treatment of the postwar upsurge has generally been entitled the “Western Revolt”; i.e. Stuart M. Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900–66* (Ottawa, 1971): 164 and Desmond Morton, *Working People* (rev. ed., Ottawa, 1984): 113. This view has been challenged in Gregory S. Kealey, “1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt,” *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984).

In a number of Canadian centres, the struggles of machinists and civic workers threatened to explode into major tests of strength. In Toronto, these crises were successfully, if narrowly, avoided. Faced with the Imperial Munitions Board's refusal to insert fair wage clauses in munitions contracts, and with employers' unwillingness to concede workers' demands for a nine-hour day, industries in Hamilton and Toronto faced major disputes with their machinists in 1916. In Hamilton, this led to a bitter and disastrous strike, the effects of which persisted far past the Armistice.⁸ In Toronto, by contrast, employers generally accepted the report of the royal commission established to respond to the crisis. The basis for a united front by employers against the union's demands did not exist there. The machinists' union's ability to organize the craft thoroughly in Toronto, as well as an even greater demand for their skills, had enabled them to enforce a nine-hour norm late in 1915. By January 1916, fifty-three local firms had signed agreements with them on this basis.⁹ Although the employers and government had to scramble to avert a strike in sympathy with Hamilton workers, peace was generally maintained. Certainly less bitterness would be felt than in Winnipeg where machinists were kept at the job through the use of antipicketing injunctions and civil suits.¹⁰

The success of sympathetic strikes in forcing Winnipeg's city council to grant the demands of its civic employees in May 1918 is credited with convincing many unionists of the efficacy of the general strike as a tactic. A similar situation soon appeared to be developing in Toronto. The Civic Employees' Union had grown steadily, reaching eleven hundred members by February 1918, and perhaps fifteen hundred by summer.¹¹ Feeling its new strength, as well as the pinch of wartime inflation, it viewed the two dollars per week war bonus granted them as entirely inadequate. In response, the union called for a board of conciliation under the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, a forum which the union was convinced would recognize the justice of their demands. The board of control met in closed session and refused this request. Almost immediately, delegates to the TDLC raised the spectre of the recent Winnipeg strike as the consequence of continued refusal of "such an eminently fair method to straighten out the differences"¹² and it was decided to meet with the executives of local unions "to take definite action."¹³ The

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8. See Myer Siemiatycki, "Munitions and Labour Militancy: The 1916 Hamilton Machinists' Strike," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978); Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Craftsman: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 6 (Autumn 1980); Wayne Roberts, "Toronto Metal Workers and the Second Industrial Revolution," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 6 (Autumn 1980).
 9. *IB* 26 Nov. and 28 Jan. 1916. In March 1916, the International Association of Machinists claimed to have organized six hundred Toronto workers in the past ten months. By December 1916, all but two Toronto shops had conceded the nine-hour day; see *IB*, 29 Dec. 1916.
 10. David J. Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations and the General Strike* (Montreal, 1974), 56.
 11. *IB*, 8 Feb. and 12 July 1918.
 12. *IB*, 10 May 1918.
 13. *IB*, 14 June 1918.

TDLC continued to make the civic workers' case their own, for they were responding not only from a sense of injustice, but to a much older notion of community. The labour council had long felt it their right and duty, as representing the working-class citizens of the city, to take a hand in the workings of municipal government.¹⁴ Finally, a six-day strike by the civic workers, combined with reminders by the TDLC of what had occurred in Winnipeg, convinced the city council to agree to arbitration. All the demands made by the union, with the exception of a shorter work day, were granted by the board of arbitration.¹⁵ As in the case of the machinists, a dispute which had threatened to widen into a more generalized crisis was successfully defused.

As the war drew to an end, it became clear that the ability to avoid a conflagration in the city or, more accurately, to confine it to a series of brush fires, had concealed the extent of working-class resentment that had developed. What was to ignite it was the Borden government's orders-in-council banning strikes and severely limiting other forms of activity. While labour organizations were divided, and often disoriented, in their response to the war, they shared a common commitment that in its wake would come "real democracy."¹⁶ Regardless of the degree of support given the war effort, it was agreed that the sacrifices would mean little if "kaiserism" were to rear its head in Canada. The suspension of democratic rights on the eve of victory spelt a clear warning.

There is a danger that while the people of the countries in Europe that up to now have been under the iron heel of despotism are throwing off the yoke of their oppressors, the workers in Canada, unless they wake up, may find themselves still further enslaved.¹⁷

When, for instance, Social Democratic Party (SDP) leader Isaac Bainbridge was arrested for seditious libel for his publication of antiwar literature, the TDLC came unanimously to his defence. The delegate who seconded the motion to do so explained that he was not a socialist, but perceived a clear case of political persecution.¹⁸

The prohibition of strikes was particularly offensive, undermining as it did labour's last line of defence against inflation and "industrial autocracy." The leadership of the Trades and Labor Congress and of the international unions had pursued a strategy of attempting to interest the federal government in a policy of

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14. For a discussion of the TDLC's role in municipal politics see Wayne Roberts, "Studies in the Toronto Labour Movement, 1896-1914," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1978, 202-15.
 15. Public Archives of Canada (PAC), RG 27, vol. 310, Department of Labour, Strike and Lockout files, 18(173); *IB*, 28 June, 5, 12 and 19 July and 16 Aug. 1918.
 16. *Eg. IB*, 22 Feb. and 22 March 1918.
 17. *IB*, 8 Nov. 1918.
 18. PAC, MG 28, 144, Toronto District Labor Council (TDLC) Minutes, 6 June 1918; *IB*, 14 June 1918.

consultation with labour involving labour representation on government committees and commissions, along the model of the National War Labor Board in the United States. The Borden government's actions revealed how little this course had achieved. The government's main body to prevent disruption in strategic industries was soon to prove, in fact, particularly irksome to Toronto workers. One after another, the Labour Appeal Board rolled back awards made by boards of conciliation under the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act in the cases of Toronto blacksmiths, ship carpenters, and patternmakers and, in the case of Canadian Express Company employees, ruled against the eight-hour day.¹⁹

Armistice in Europe signalled the opening of hostilities within the Toronto labour movement. On 16 November 1918, a mass meeting called by the labour council to protest the orders-in-council attracted one of the largest crowds ever seen at the Labour Temple. The officers of the TDLC were openly unenthusiastic about the protest and, citing the recent revoking of some of the more objectionable orders, attempted to cancel the meeting. The hall exploded in shouts of "traitor" and "fakir." Herbert Lewis, a well-known socialist in the machinists' union proposed a motion:

That this meeting register a vigorous protest against government by Order-in-Council, which prohibited free speech, the holding of public meetings, and the unfettered use of the press, that the Cabinet was simply a committee of Parliament, and that it had illegally usurped the representatives of the people.²⁰

TDLC President Conn attempted to rule the motion out of order on the grounds that the meeting was called only to protest the no-strike order-in-council that had been rescinded. Finally, when Lewis suggested that the war had been ended by German workers rising in revolt, rather than by Allied arms, Conn decided enough was enough and adjourned the meeting. However, only by turning out the lights to the hall was the meeting stopped, and even then it continued informally on the street outside the Labour Temple for another two-and-a-half hours.

The "official" version of this event presents an interesting comment on the composition of the labour movement.

[I]t was apparent that an organized effort was engineered to pack the labour headquarters and this was shown conclusively when even before 7.30 p.m. hundreds of people, largely of foreign origin, forced their way into the assembly hall and jammed it to the doors. When President Conn assumed the chair it was clearly apparent that many in the audience were not trades unionists, a large number of women were present who could not possibly have belonged to any trades union, and it was clearly to be seen that any business transacted would not be representative of the sentiments of the trades union movement of the city.²¹

19. TDLC Minutes, 17 April 1919; *Star*, 20 Jan. 1919.

20. *Star*, 18 Nov. 1918.

21. *IB*, 29 Nov. 1918.

Not only was it clear that the left was becoming an organized force, but also that the relative gender and ethnic exclusivity of craft unionism was about to be challenged. Moreover, as the battle immediately spilt over into the TDLC itself, it is apparent that the sentiments expressed at the meeting were already reflected within Toronto's unions. The actions of the council's executive in stopping the meeting were, in fact, the subject of the TDLC's next three meetings. By the third meeting a dispute over delegates' credentials led to two hours of pandemonium and the meeting degenerated into a war of song with socialists cheering the Bolsheviks and singing "The Red Flag" and conservatives cheering St. Patrick, followed by a rendition of "Auld Lang Syne"!²²

The semiannual election of officers of the TDLC in January 1919 provided the first clear test of strength in the battle over the political direction organized labour was to follow. The presence of 258 accredited delegates — the greatest number ever to attend a council meeting — attested to the interest created by recent events and the effectiveness of the campaign for the two slates. With some hyperbole, a conservative leaflet described the election as "a struggle... as to whether the international trade union movement or the Socialist supporters of Trotsky and the Russian Bolsheviks shall control the District Labor Council."²³ On this occasion, the conservative forces led by Arthur O'Leary and W.J. Hevey won without great difficulty, but a number of developments would very soon undermine their dominance.²⁴

The first of these was the widening scope of protests against continued arrests under the orders-in-council banning specified literature and left-wing organizations. The result was to provoke into action two of the largest unions in the province: the machinists and the carpenters. The first case involved Arthur Skidmore, a machinist employed by the Grand Trunk Railway in Stratford and an executive member of the Stratford Trades Council. Late in December 1918 Skidmore was sentenced to thirty days in jail plus a five hundred dollar fine (or a further six months) for possessing two copies of *Canadian Forward*, the paper of the SDP, that had been published before the ban. In Stratford the response was immediate: the local trades council unanimously voted to call the city's workers out on a general strike to obtain Skidmore's release. In Toronto, Machinists Lodge 438, whose president was Herbert Lewis, voted to demand that the machinists' Toronto District Lodge call all its members out on strike. In turn that body, representing four thousand Toronto machinists, voted to ask the TDLC to call a general strike. Before it could act,

22. *IB*, 29 Nov., 13 and 27 Dec. 1918; *Star*, 20 Dec. 1918; TDLC Minutes, 17 Nov. and 5 Dec. 1918. For some background to debates in the TDLC see Michael Piva, "The Toronto District Labour Council and Independent Political Action: Factionalism and Frustration, 1900–1921," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 4(1979).

23. *Star*, 17 Jan. 1919.

24. TDLC Minutes, 2 and 16 Jan. and 6 Feb. 1919; *IB*, 24 Jan. 1919.

however, the federal government intervened and Skidmore was released from jail and his fine remitted. Ontario workers had tasted their own collective power.²⁵

Within a few days, similar events would occur even closer to home, and with potentially greater consequences. In Toronto, an ex-police officer and munitions worker, Charles Wilson, was found with a variety of socialist literature and sentenced to three years in jail and a fine of five hundred dollars. A week later, hundreds of members of the carpenters union attended police court to see one of their members, Harry Cheesman, sentenced to six months — a lighter sentence, explained the magistrate, as Cheesman was only a “tool” rather than “an active agent.”²⁶ The consequence of these arrests was to mobilize a much broader layer of workers than had packed the Labour Temple two months earlier to protest the no-strike order. Ontario’s major labour paper, the *Industrial Banner*, reflected in this case the sentiment of many workers still weakly influenced by the growing socialist movement in Toronto unions.

As has been said the workers believe they have been unfairly dealt with. It is not foreigners, but British born workers who have had the heaviest sentences imposed upon them and a belief has been engendered that in more than one case they have been singled out because of their trade union activities.²⁷

Large protest meetings were held in rapid succession. On Sunday, 12 January, twelve hundred attended a Workers’ Political Defense League protest; subsequent mass meetings were organized by the Building Trades League, comprising nineteen unions, on Monday night, the Carpenters District Council on Tuesday, and the machinists on Wednesday.²⁸ Most interesting was the carpenters’ meeting which attracted three thousand to Massey Hall. Tom Moore, president of the Trades and Labor Congress “had the worst time of any of the speakers.” Despite his express commitment to work for the freeing of political prisoners, his avowal of “constitutional means” raised storms of opposition from several hundred in the audience. Moore’s comment, that “I did not come here to seek popularity,” seemed close to the truth.²⁹ Ten days later, before the carpenters could present the federal government with its petition with over ten thousand names, Watson and Cheesman had their sentences drastically reduced to thirty and fifteen days respectively. The lessons of the Skidmore case had been reinforced.

25. *IB*, 27 Dec. 1918; 3 Jan. 1919; *Star*, 20 and 31 Dec. 1918 and 1 Jan. 1919. For comments of the police magistrate who sentenced Skidmore, see *Star*, 14 Jan. 1919.

26. *Star*, 9 and 16 Jan. 1919. For a fuller discussion of these events, see Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal, 1981), 30-12.

27. *IB*, 17 Jan. 1919.

28. *Star*, 10 and 13 Jan. 1919.

29. PAC, RG 6 E, Chief Press Censor, clipping, n.d., “Extremists at Toronto Heckled Labor President.”

While the abrogation of civil rights was a major catalyst in radicalizing large numbers of workers,³⁰ the transformation of the organized labour movement was to have even greater consequences. A favourable labour market, along with a greater commitment to organizing previously unorganized sectors, combined to create organizational breakthroughs for the unions and political triumphs for the left. Once again the machinists were key to this process. During the war, the trade had experienced rapid expansion, and machinists' lodges, particularly Lodge 438, based in Allis-Chalmers and other large shops of the city's west end, grew rapidly.³¹ Moreover, the International Association of Machinists made an important turn to organizing less-skilled "specialists" — including, for the first time, women — hired during the war to work on specified machines. The rapid growth of specialists' Lodge 1005, as well as a new lodge of automobile workers, reflected a preliminary step towards challenging some of the assumptions of craft unionism.³² The impetus to organize these workers was, of course, an ambiguous one. Certainly, organizing the specialists was an effective means by which skilled craftsmen could defend themselves from cheaper "diluted" labour. Yet the skilled machinists who took part in a major strike at the Willys-Overland airplane works in support of two fired women workers in June 1918, saw no contradiction in claiming that they "gained nothing by striking," and only "wished to help those who were lower down, the specialists and the women."³³ After the war, the machinists were to demand that no further specialists be hired, and that existing specialists receive the existing machinists' rate after four years' service.³⁴

The machinists' success in broadening their organization and in winning the nine-hour day led them to conclude that the long-sought eight-hour day could only be won through the unity of all metal trades workers. Their numerical strength and strategic clarity led them to play a central role in the Metal Trades Federation of twelve crafts established in January 1919. A similar body had existed before the war, but had collapsed in the aftermath of the machinists' defeat in 1907 and because of the prewar depression.³⁵ The postwar federation was seen to be substantially different. For the first time, the federation presented the employers with a common schedule based upon the machinists' demands for an eight-hour day, with a half-holiday Saturdays, double-time for overtime, shift differentials, and the closed shop.³⁶ In the eyes of the *Globe*, and of the Employers' Association, this was industrial unionism.³⁷

30. See, for instance, testimony to the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, *Evidence*, 2823-4, 2877.

31. *IB*, 22 Jan. 1915 and 11 Jan. 1918.

32. *IB*, 4 April 1919.

33. *World* (Toronto), 13 June 1918; PAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts, 1918(84).

34. *Star*, 5 April 1919.

35. See Roberts, "Studies. . .," 118-9.

36. *Labour Gazette* (hereafter *LG*), Jan. 1919; *Star*, 5 April 1919.

37. *Globe*, 29 April 1919; *Star*, 29 and 30 April 1919.

The machinists also exemplify the process of radicalization occurring unevenly across the Toronto labour movement. As the war neared an end, debate raged at all levels of the union; noon-hour educational classes were even held at larger factories such as Willys-Overland,³⁸ and the tactic of a general strike was raised concretely as early as July 1918.³⁹ By January 1919, the machinists formed a solid left bloc on the labour council⁴⁰ and, as we have seen, prepared to launch a general strike against “government by order-in-council.”⁴¹ Moreover, a major portion of the IAM was already prepared to call a general strike for the six-hour day.⁴² Most revealing of the growing sentiment of Toronto machinists, though, was their response to the One Big Union. Lodge 371, composed largely of machinists on the Canadian Pacific Railway, voted 162 to 11 in favour of the OBU⁴³ and the issue was certainly seen as a legitimate debate as other lodges invited OBU speakers to address them.⁴⁴ Lodge 438 heard a full report on the Calgary Conference and, according to the *Ontario Labor News*, voted unanimously to endorse the OBU. By May, long-time socialist Fred Peel was telling the Toronto *World* of the “fascination” that existed for the OBU, adding that

[it] is my opinion that what opposition has been expressed to the One Big Union idea or to the principle of industrial trade unionism does not express the sentiment of the rank and file of the labor movement by any means, altho [*sic*] self-interest and fossilized ideas may obtain amongst a few men identified with the labor movement.⁴⁵

If this was true for any section of Toronto workers, it was the machinists. R.J. Johns certainly felt that the machinists would join the OBU. By this time, however, the metal trades strike was under way, the machinists were receiving strike pay from the International, and there was little to be gained by changing horses in midstream.⁴⁶ By the time the strike had ended and the issue could reemerge, the political situation had decisively altered.

Following the lead of the metal trades, the federation of craft unions leading, perhaps, to an industrial form of organization, became a common theme in the spring of 1919 and on into 1920. As the war drew to an end, Toronto shipyards

38. TDLC Minutes, 18 July 1918.

39. In that instance, in response to the Mooney case in the United States, see *ibid.*

40. See *ibid.*, 5 Dec. 1918; *IB*, 27 Dec. 1918.

41. *Star*, 31 Dec. 1918.

42. See the report from the Employers' detective agency, of an IAM meeting held 25 January 1919 in Queen's University Archives, Andrew Glen Papers, box 1, file 3; see also PAC, RG 27, Department of Labour, vol. 160, file 611.21, J.A. Young to Robertson, 25 Jan. 1919.

43. University of British Columbia, Special Collections (hereafter UBC), VF 213, One Big Union, Referendum Results.

44. *Globe*, 3 May 1919; *IB*, 14 Nov. 1919; *OLN*, 1 May 1919; *Labor Leader* (hereafter *LL*) 11 July 1919.

45. *World*, 20 May 1919.

46. PAM, OBU Papers, Johns to Midgley, 7 May 1919.

became another focus of conflict. A dispute at the Polson shipbuilding company had prompted *Saturday Night* to demand the arrest of all the strikers. Empowered by the emergence of strong new locals of painters and of steamfitters, and a large contingent of machinists, a strong Marine Trades Federation emerged which was to cover twenty shipbuilding yards from the Lakehead to the Atlantic. Significantly, the new federation went beyond the Metal Trades Federation in demanding a common wage for all trades of eighty cents an hour, with lower rates for helpers and labourers.⁴⁷

The building trades travelled even further along a similar route. The industry recovered quickly from a long building slump during the war and other conditions provided an impetus to rapid growth. The Building Trades Department of the American Federation of Labor experienced a rare streak of success in avoiding jurisdictional disputes, due largely to opportunities that existed for organizing the unorganized.⁴⁸ Moreover, the affiliation of the two major holdouts — the bricklayers and the building labourers — to the AFL and to the local Building Trades League, meant that the league was soon to include all nineteen trades in the building industry.⁴⁹ As early as June 1916, the unions saw an about-face by the Builders' Exchange, and were able to get signed agreements with the employers. For some unions, such as the plumbers, this was the first such agreement in eight years.⁵⁰

In March 1919, a move was started by the Toronto District Carpenters' Council to centralize significantly union organization in the building trades, and to shift decision-making power away from the internationals to the Building Trades League. A large meeting of Toronto carpenters decided to initiate the creation of a twenty-five thousand dollar strike fund — raised by a local assessment on building trades workers — that would be under the control of the League. As the *Industrial Banner* explained, "the object of this move is to place the Building Trades League in a position to take immediate action in small labour disputes, where it might not be advisable to wait for international support or sanction of a strike."⁵¹ It is evident that there was a substantial feeling that it was going to be necessary to circumvent the control that international officials had over access to strike funds, a prerequisite to sympathetic strike action. The mood of these unions was revealed in the authorization they gave to the Building Trades League to call out all seventy-four hundred workers in the industry in Toronto in support of the striking painters' union.⁵² The building trades also became the major source of support for the

47. *IB*, 7 June 1918 and 17 and 31 Jan. and 7 March 1919; *Saturday Night* (hereafter *SN*) 5 Oct. 1918. This egalitarianism may, in fact, have undermined their position. The strong Boilermakers' and Iron Shipbuilders' Local 128 was to have nothing to do with the Marine Trades Federation or the general strike in May and June.

48. TDLC Minutes, 3 Jan. 1918; *Carpenter* (Indianapolis), July 1919.

49. *IB*, 14 March and 14 and 28 Nov. 1919.

50. *IB*, 23 and 30 June 1916.

51. *IB*, 14 March 1919.

52. *Globe*, 29 April 1919; *Star*, 17 May 1919.

striking metal trades after 1 May. The painters, for instance, won their demands but were willing to join the general strike in sympathy with the metal workers. On 17 May they marched in a demonstration in support of the Metal Trades Federation behind a banner that read: "What we have we want for others."⁵³

Unlike the metal trades, the solidarity of the building trades was not tested in 1919. Consequently, the road to greater craft unity was not immediately blocked. The federation decided to encourage individual affiliates to contribute one day's pay to the defence fund and, in 1920, to go further. In March 1920, the Building Trades League demanded "One Big Agreement" covering all building trades workers. It was understood that "any section [of the agreement] interfering with the right of a union to enter upon a sympathetic strike"⁵⁴ would be eliminated. Two other moves were of equal significance. A serious effort would be made to organize all unskilled workers on building sites and a "job steward system" was implemented. Rather than operating separately, each craft would select a member of a stewards' committee which would jointly select a captain for the job. Each of these captains would report to the Building Trades League at least once a week. At the same time per-capita dues for the league-controlled defence fund were raised. There was little to distinguish the Building Trades League from an industrial union. By late 1920, the new system was reported to be functioning well.⁵⁵

The transformation of a number of existing unions into powerful and self-confident federations paralleled the emergence of a number of dynamic new unions. In most cases these served unskilled workers, such as the teamsters employed by the railway forwarding companies who had engaged in strikes in the past but always without the aid of a union. In 1919, they were able to form a union of seven hundred members and win recognition from the employers.⁵⁶ Telephone operators, whose 1907 strike failed in the face of disinterest on the part of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and intransigence by the employer, were successfully organized into a union of over seven hundred members and obtained important improvements in conditions.⁵⁷ A union of bank workers started with three hundred members and claimed to have organized over 50 per cent of the city's bank clerks by the end of 1919.⁵⁸ Unions of waitresses and of domestic servants attracted women workers previously viewed as unorganizable.⁵⁹

53. *Globe*, 19 May 1919.

54. *IB*, 5 March 1920.

55. *IB*, 16 July and 13 Aug. 1920.

56. *LL*, 11 July 1919; PAC, RG 27, Strike and Lockouts, file 19(262).

57. *IB*, 16 Aug. and 11 Oct. 1918, 31 Jan., 7 March and 3 Oct. 1919; on the 1907 defeat, see Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Women Workers," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3(1978).

58. *IB*, 9 Jan. 1920; TDLC Minutes, 22 Jan. 1920.

59. *IB*, 18 Oct. and 15 Nov. 1918, and 7 Nov. 1919; *Labour Organization in Canada*, 1919, 106.

The greatest number of new unionists came from the mass-production industries with large, heterogeneous workforces. For instance, probably over a thousand rubber workers were organized in April and May of 1919.⁶⁰ The most dramatic breakthrough occurred, however, in the city's meat-packing plants. Given a new lease on life by the achievement of the eight-hour day in Chicago, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of America had grown tenfold during the last two years of the war. In Toronto, the union was organized in May 1918 with twenty-two members and grew slowly. In a six-week period in the spring of 1919, however, membership exploded. When they went on strike to force recognition by the "big five" meat packers, they were able to claim over three thousand members; nine hundred more joined in the course of the conflict. Overnight they became the largest local union in Toronto.⁶¹ Moreover, the butcher workers' union exemplified the changes taking place in the union movement. A large number of its members were women and immigrants; they had even performed the "impossible" task of organizing Chinese immigrants. Also, under the leadership of socialist Louis Braithwaite, the butcher workers substantially augmented the radical forces in the Toronto labour movement. The arrival of thirty-five butcher workers' delegates in April 1919 was seen as an integral part of a left-wing "coup" in the Toronto Labor Council. A month later, they were eligible for seventy-nine delegates.⁶²

Of course, these unions were not the only beneficiaries of the thousands of new unionists in the city. In May, over a thousand unskilled workers attended an organizing meeting of the Federal Labor Union, established in the interests of workers who fell outside the jurisdictional boundaries of existing unions. Its secretary was the well-known Social Democrat Isaac Bainbridge.⁶³ The TDLC was integral to the rapid expansion of the city's unions and in April responded to the challenge by increasing the size of its organization committee from five to twenty-one members, mostly radicals. At the afternoon May Day rally, *Industrial Banner* editor Jimmie Simpson told the audience that between four and five thousand Toronto workers had joined unions in the past week. Herbert Lewis was to claim that ten thousand joined in the two months preceding the general strike call in late May.⁶⁴ While these figures contained, perhaps, an element of hyperbole — it is impossible to know — they did represent a substantial shift in the relationship of forces in the local labour movement. Well before the end of the war, H.J. Daly, a

60. *IB*, 9 May 1919; *Star*, 22 and 30 May and 11 June 1919.

61. See David Brody, *The Butcher Workmen: A Study in Unionization* (Cambridge, 1964); J.T. Montague, "Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1950, 31–2; G.S. Bains, "The United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers," MA diss., University of Manitoba, 1964, 61–2; Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, *Evidence*, 2871; *IB*, 9 May 1919; *World*, 9 May 1919; *Telegraph* (Toronto), 5 May 1919; *Star*, 5 May 1919.

62. PAM, MG 10, A14/1, R.B. Russell Papers, Cassidy to Russell, 13 April 1919; *Globe*, 5, 6 and 7 May 1919; *Star*, 5 and 19 May 1919.

63. *World*, 20 May 1919.

64. *Star*, 2 and 22 May 1919.

leader of the Toronto branch of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association and chairman of the Labour Appeal Board, sounded a warning: "The older unions were will [*sic*] controlled; it is the newer organizations that are the disturbing element."⁶⁵ Combined with the changes evident in some of the "older unions," employers had much to find disturbing.

Buoyed by all of these developments and an overwhelming mandate from the unions involved,⁶⁶ the metal trades strike began on May Day with a sense of optimism. They immediately encountered a brick wall. The unions had sent out their demands a month earlier to all of the firms involved; on 17 April, they received a single reply from James G. Merrick, secretary of the Employers' Association, refusing all of their demands.⁶⁷ Unlike 1916, there would be no breach in the employers' front. Responding to red-baiting, the metal trades unions had strong grounds for their contention that it was in fact they who were fighting the One Big Union — of employers!⁶⁸

As Metal Trades Council president R.C. Brown told the TDLC, the Employers' Association was testing the city's labour movement; a united response was clearly necessary.⁶⁹ Yet every step in that direction revealed the disunity of Toronto labour. On 13 May, the Metal Trades Council came to the TDLC with a motion calling for a city-wide general strike. Left-wing leader John MacDonald, underestimating the sentiment of the meeting, proposed limited mass strikes, perhaps of one or two days' duration each week. Machinists', butcher workers', and carpenters' delegates demanded a full general strike. A Russian immigrant among the delegates appealed to the ethnocentrism of the audience: "I'm asking you as a foreigner, aren't you going to be ashamed to work nine or ten hours a day when the foreigner which you don't like is only working eight hours?" The meeting, noted the *Toronto Star*, "shouted its laughing approbation."⁷⁰

Yet, a number of delegates, led by the large Street Railway Employees' Union, strongly opposed "precipitate action." W.D. Robbins, the union's financial secretary, and Conservative member of Toronto's board of control, led the opposition. He pointed to the consequences of striking without the sanction of the internationals, most notably the possibility of losing their union pensions. John

65. PAC, MG 28, 1230, Canadian Manufacturers' Association, "Minutes, Labour Committee Appointed by the Toronto Branch Executive," 12 Aug. 1918. The conservative *Labor Leader* made the same observation a year later; see *LL*, 18 July 1919.

66. See all Toronto daily newspapers, 30 April 1919. The moulders who, prior to the war, had resisted dissolving craft distinction, also agreed to bargain through the Metal Trades Federation; see Roberts, "Toronto Metal Workers," 71.

67. *Telegram*, 28 April 1919; *Globe*, 29 April 1919; see the *Star*, 27 May 1919 for a chronology of these events.

68. *Star*, 5 June 1919.

69. *Star*, 2 May 1919.

70. *Star*, 14 May 1919.

Doggett, a leader of the carpenters' union, "replied that if pensions caused workers to starve it was time the international unions did away with the pensions."⁷¹ While the left dismissed Robbins' comments as "the usual 18th century drivel which one generally hears from what is termed by the press, 'a sane labor man',"⁷² it reflected an outlook which, events would reveal, retained credence in sections of the labour movement. In the meantime, both currents in the TDLC were able to agree to the next step: a convention of all unions in Toronto was called for 20 May to consider the question of a general strike.⁷³ Around the city, hastily called meetings of local unions discussed the question and chose delegates to the convention. Newspapers published regular tallies of who supported the strike and who did not. Carpenters, rubber workers, painters, teamsters, butcher workers, cigarmakers, and civic workers supported the general strike; plumbers, boilermakers, and boot and shoe workers opposed it. The street railway workers decided to send delegates to the convention without instructions.⁷⁴ W.J. Hevey, the conservative secretary of the TDLC, tried to defuse the situation by suggesting that it would take weeks to organize a general strike and, with R.J. Stevenson of the typographers, hoped to have the convention delayed in order to make it more "representative."⁷⁵

In the meantime, it appeared that a general strike was developing of its own accord. On 4 May, over three thousand butcher workers had walked out demanding recognition from the big five packers. Three days later, the *Toronto Telegram* calculated that 8,525 workers, at 250 firms, were on strike in the city and that almost eight thousand others were in the process of negotiating. The *Star* put the latter figure at fourteen thousand.⁷⁶ On 17 May, five thousand workers rallied in the rain at Queen's Park in a show of force before the convention. While the demonstrators obeyed the new city bylaw banning red flags and non-English signs, such conditions stood as reminders of the campaign against "autocratic government" that had provoked the movement a few months earlier. As one banner carried by veterans read: "We fought for democracy, not capitalists." Other signs appealed to humanity over profits, while the metal trades banner demanded "A Better World for the Workers. . . Immediate Demand for Forty-Four Hours per Week."⁷⁷ The marchers wore "figure eights" in their hats to signify the demand for the eight-hour day. When, the following week, 570 students at Humberside Collegiate went on strike for a shorter school day, and rumours spread that other high schools would stike in sympathy, few could dispute the view that the general

71. *Globe*, 14 May 1919; *Star*, 14 May 1919.

72. *OLN*, 15 May 1919.

73. For a comment on the situation in Toronto at this moment by an AFL organizer, see Duke University, Frank Morrison Letterbooks, vol. 509, 628-32, William Varley to Frank Morrison, 14 May 1919.

74. *World*, 16 and 22 May 1919; *Globe*, 19 May 1919; *Star*, 16 May 1919; *Telegram*, 19 May 1919.

75. *Star*, 15 May 1919; *World*, 16 May 1919.

76. *Telegram*, 6 May 1919; *Star*, 7 May 1919.

77. *World*, 16 May 1919; *Mail and Empire* (Toronto), 17 and 19 May 1919.

strike was in the air. Newspapers predicted a large vote in favour of the strike.⁷⁸ In R.C. Brown's words, "It is going to be Winnipeg all over again. There doesn't seem to be any way out of it."⁷⁹

Not all were resigned to that view. Conservative labour leaders and the various levels of government were all keen to avoid such a confrontation. On the eve of the General Strike convention, Tommy Church, the populist Tory mayor of Toronto decided to act and met — separately — with representatives from the TDLC and from various employers' organizations. Merrick was adamant; he had only responded to the mayor's invitation as a courtesy and rejected any negotiations with the Metal Trades Council. For a few days the mayor held out the promise of indirect negotiations, but it was soon apparent that it was only an attempt to buy time. Still, when the convention met on 20 May, the outcome of the mayor's efforts was not yet determined, and it was decided to adjourn until 26 May. The delay gave employers time to mull over the fact that two hundred delegates representing twenty-eight thousand workers in one hundred and five unions had responded to the convention call. There may have been opposition in the labour movement to the general strike, and certainly not all those attending would have voted in favour, but its proponents had demonstrated a strong show of force.⁸⁰ When the delegates reconvened on 26 May, however, little had changed. They rejected a last-minute employers' "offer" of a forty-eight-hour week and no recognition of the Metal Trades Council, elected a strike committee of fifteen, and prepared for battle in two days' time. Those who knew the actual vote had a little extra food for thought. The motion to call a general strike had passed by 9,985 to 5,150. Delegates representing 15,550 workers had abstained! Despite strong support for the strike, the vote did not reflect a united and confident labour movement. A large number of workers clearly would not commit themselves to the strike knowing that a number of key unions, and leaders, were still opposed to it. Those who clearly opposed the strike were a minority, but many more were hesitant to enter such a battle with divided forces. The Committee of Fifteen, as it came to be known, put on a brave face, and attempted to keep these figures to themselves. On the first day of the strike they would be released to the press by a leader of the conservative brewery workers' union.⁸¹

Mayor Church immediately swung back into action, organizing a round-table conference with almost anyone who would attend, including representatives of the provincial government. Old arguments were once again exchanged, but some hope was held out. The mayor read a telegram from Prime Minister Borden inviting representatives of the city, the Board of Trade, the Employers' Association, and the Metal Trades Council to come to Ottawa. W.D. MacPherson, the provincial

78. *World*, 20 May 1919.

79. *Star*, 7 May 1919; on the student strike, see *World*, 22 May 1919; *Star*, 20 and 21 May 1919.

80. *Star*, 21 May 1919.

81. *Star*, 27 and 30 May 1919.

secretary, argued that Borden must have something in mind and after some hesitancy on the part of the metal trades representatives (but not on the part of W.D. Robbins), it was decided to accept the offer. The general strike deadline was pushed back to 30 May, at 10 a.m., and a delegation of twenty-seven boarded the night train to Ottawa.⁸²

Meanwhile, Toronto prepared for the general strike amidst a growing red scare. The Toronto *Telegram*, always first in such matters, appeared to relish the coming conflict. "Collapse of the general strike insanity will be a victory for the British, Canadian or trades union forces in the labor movement, and defeat for the Red Flag European Socialist Forces in the labor movement."⁸³ The Toronto *Times* carefully explained to its readers that the Committee of Fifteen was a "soviet,"⁸⁴ and the *Financial Post* expressed the view that the

grave menace is that labor [is] deluded by the cleverly organized underground workers who have for the time being usurped the power of the rightful leaders and have thrown off intelligent control with the idea of organizing the Trotzky form of government for Canada, such is now being attempted in Winnipeg and Toronto.⁸⁵

The differences between Winnipeg and Toronto were not entirely lost on such commentators, but were not necessarily a source of comfort. The open split within the labour movement, in fact, worried the Toronto *World*.

It was pointed out that the strike in Toronto would probably assume a more dangerous form than that in Winnipeg for the reason that Winnipeg has been so thoroughly organized that the entire city is as one man under control of the general strike committee, whereas the situation in Toronto would be disturbed by that very lack of harmony. In other words, while Winnipeg is governed by a single force, Toronto in the event of a strike might witness a dual government with consequent clashes between two diametrically opposing bodies.⁸⁶

Newspapers turned to reporting the fantastic business being done in riot insurance.⁸⁷ The concurrent possibility that much of the province might be plunged into darkness by a threatened hydro strike at Niagara Falls provided a theatrical embellishment to such apprehensions.⁸⁸ Lord Baden-Powell, who happened to be visiting the city, added his bit to the growing tension by volunteering the Boy Scouts as strike-breakers.⁸⁹

82. *Star*, 28 May 1919; for the proceedings of the mayor's conference see PAC, R.L. Borden Papers, OC series, vol. 564.

83. *Telegram*, 30 May 1919.

84. *Times* (Toronto), 30 May 1919.

85. *Financial Post*, 31 May 1919.

86. *World*, 20 May 1919.

87. *Globe*, 30 May 1919.

88. *World*, 22 May 1919; *Journal* (Ottawa) 29 May 1919; *IB*, 23 May 1919.

89. *Globe*, 28 May 1919.

Less anxious observers noted other factors. The *Star* played down nativist sentiment by pointing out that all but one of the Committee of Fifteen were British- or Canadian-born.⁹⁰ The issue, which loomed so large in Winnipeg, of the role of the police, had to a great extent already been resolved. The police had struck for four days the previous December in an effort to defend their right to affiliate to the Trades and Labor Congress. Despite *Saturday Night's* alarmism, the event exhibited little evidence of a bolshevik "conspiracy";⁹¹ the city remained quiet and the police union willingly accepted a royal commission to investigate the question.⁹² Finally, the Committee of Fifteen issued a rather substantial list of exemptions from the general strike order. Public utilities were not to be shut down, and others not being called out ranged from motion picture operators to college professors.⁹³

In Ottawa, Borden asked labour not to act hastily, but offered them little worth waiting for. A legislated eight-hour day, the hope of conservative labour leaders, was dismissed as beyond federal jurisdiction. Metal trades leaders rejected pressure that the central question of hours be decided by arbitration.⁹⁴ The strike was on.

The Toronto General Strike, noted the *Star*, was general "in name only."⁹⁵ The metal trades were joined by a significant number of supporters. Over two thousand carpenters and a similar number of members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union rallied to their support. The Committee of Fifteen claimed that twelve thousand workers were out for the first day of the general strike.⁹⁶ The leaders of the strike, however, faced a dilemma. Either the strike must be generalized, or it was doomed. The next two days, Saturday and Sunday, provided a final opportunity to transform the situation to their advantage.

The general strike convention, which reconvened Saturday night, opened with a fierce dispute over who had released the strike vote figures to the press the previous day. The left was convinced that they had the support of the rank-and-file of the city's unions and demanded a new strike vote. The right aimed their fire at the Committee of Fifteen for wanting to provoke a nation-wide general strike. Finally, at 1 a.m. Sunday morning, TDLC president O'Leary and secretary Hevey, who were presiding over the proceedings, resigned from the convention. Tom Black, a cigarmaker and long-time socialist, and E.R. Bales, a strong proponent of the OBU, were elected to replace them. The last facade of unity had fallen.⁹⁷

One final card remained to be played that night. The street railway workers were still in session at the Star Theatre; perhaps a direct appeal over the heads of

90. *Star*, 30 May 1919.

91. *SN*, 4 Jan. 1919.

92. See PAC, RG 27, vol. 2272, file 19(309) for a Labour department synopsis of the strike.

93. *Globe*, 30 May 1919.

94. *Star*, 30 May 1919.

95. *Star*, 31 May 1919.

96. *Ibid.*

97. *Star*, 2 June 1919.

their leadership could bring them out. That afternoon, John Cottam, of the carpenters' union, had requested an opportunity to speak to the membership but had been refused by their business agent, Joseph Gibbons. Later, as the general strike convention was dispersing, leaders of the Metal Trades Council rushed to the street railway workers' meeting to appeal for their support. Gibbons stopped them at the door while W.D. Robbins successfully appealed to the street car workers to remain on the job. They voted three to one not to join the general strike. Later that year, in their campaign for municipal office, Gibbons and Robbins invoked the events of that night when they "saved the Queen City from being the scene of turmoil, strike and disgraceful riots such as were witnessed in Winnipeg."⁹⁸

Without the support of such a large and visible bastion of labour as the street railway employees, the general strike lacked the momentum to continue. Monday morning, the numbers out on strike had grown as the marine trades joined the battle. Mayor Church estimated fifteen thousand were out; the Committee of Fifteen, seventeen thousand.⁹⁹ Yet even sympathetic unions had not found it possible to come to the aid of the metal trades. Most notable in this regard were the butcher workers. Their strike early in May had been settled with the promise of a board of conciliation under the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act. The board, however, faced a series of unexplained delays in making its report until the crisis in Toronto had passed. The union voted unanimously to take part in the general strike but faced an overwhelming problem: should they risk the de facto recognition they had achieved in order to join a general strike that was clearly in trouble? They stayed at their jobs.¹⁰⁰

Monday night, the Metal Trades Council assessed the situation and determined that no more support was forthcoming. At their request, the general strike was called off. Not surprisingly, when the TDLC met the following night, recriminations flew freely. After a few references to OBU influence in the machinists' union, the metal trades came under attack for by-passing the established leadership of the labour movement. "The metal trades have our sympathy," claimed Robbins, "and we'll stick to them so long as they handle their own business. But when they hand affairs over to a committee of 15, whom we don't know, then we've come to a parting of the ways." A conservative organizer of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees claimed "many organizations had been unable to see why 'another element' [referring to the defunct Committee of Fifteen] should have assumed control of the situation."¹⁰¹ To such individuals, the issue had become one of retaining preexisting forms of organization in the city's labour movement — as well as their own places within it. Like the OBU, the general strike convention, symbolized by the Committee of Fifteen, represented a challenge to the

98. *Ibid.*; *LL*, 26 Dec. 1919.

99. PAC, Borden Papers, OC series, vol. 564, Church to Borden, 2 June 1919; *Star*, 2 June 1919.

100. *Star*, 31 May 1919.

101. *Star*, 6 June 1919.

very structure of organization that they had helped build, and which sustained them in leadership. Toronto was the home, more than any other Canadian city, of a small but emerging layer of union leaders whose workplace was the Labour Temple and no longer the shop floor. By contrast, no member of the Metal Trades Council was a paid trade union official.¹⁰²

This is, however, only a partial explanation of the strike's failure. More can be understood by examining the uneven impact of the war years on the city's workers. The street railway workers' union found itself in quite a different situation than, for instance, the machinists or butcher workers. First of all, the war served to reinforce the street railway workers' union's collective bargaining relationship with the Toronto Railway Company. In 1917, in fact, the employer overtly recognized the union, a relatively unusual and privileged position for a group of workers who lacked control over any demonstrable skill. Secondly, the street railway workers were quite isolated from the transformations occurring in other unions. They led a successful battle against the hiring of immigrants, and especially women, throughout the war. They remained a remarkably homogeneous group of British- and Canadian-born men, the sort of men who responded to their country's call to arms. In June 1919, thirteen hundred of the twenty-two hundred members of the union were returned soldiers. Finally, they had found in Toryism a solution to many of their immediate needs. The union's two salaried officials, Gibbons and Robbins, sat on the city council and acted in defence of working-class interests as they perceived them. With the city taking over the franchise of the street railway in 1921, there seemed little reason to question this course. Robbins had been proposed as deputy minister of Labour and would very possibly have become Ontario's first minister of Labour if the Conservatives had won the 1919 provincial election. If less conservative unions, such as the butcher workers or the Amalgamated Clothing Workers were unwilling to risk the established bargaining relationship they had won, there was little reason to expect the street railway workers to do so. This did not, however, suggest passivity. The struggle to establish a degree of protection in the workplace through the mechanism of signed agreements had proven so laborious that, once established, the sanctity of the contract had become the guiding principle of their unionism. However, two weeks after the debacle of the general strike, their own agreement expired and they struck for twelve days to win the eight-

102. *Star*, 30 April 1919; see David Montgomery, "New Tendencies in Union Struggles and Strategies in Europe and the United States, 1916-1922," in *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925*, eds. J.E. Cronin and C. Sirianni (Philadelphia, 1983) for an analysis of the emergence of similar bodies of militants elsewhere; also, David Brody, "Career Leadership and American Trade Unionism," in *The Age of Industrialism in America*, ed. F.C. Jaher (New York, 1968).

hour day, and assembled a crowd of six thousand to prevent the use of strike breakers.¹⁰³

The Metal Trades Council strike continued until late July when William Johnston, president of the International Association of Machinists, spent a week in Toronto, and persuaded the machinists to accept a forty-eight-hour week, with no agreement on wages, and return to work.¹⁰⁴ The moulders, by contrast, were even less fortunate. Their international had spent \$132,000 on strike benefits in Toronto in a losing struggle for the eight-hour day. This was more than they spent on any other local in a continent-wide campaign for the eight-hour day that bankrupted the international.¹⁰⁵ The fate of many who had supported the metal trades was equally uncertain. Massey-Harris, for instance, expressed less willingness to rehire strikers who had struck in sympathy with “the revolutionary movement” than participants in an “ordinary strike.”¹⁰⁶

This was hardly fertile ground for the One Big Union. A few individuals, such as Isaac Bainbridge, argued that the failure of the metal trades strike demonstrated its necessity.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the OBU did gain some converts, most notably among members of the British-based Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners who were uncomfortable in their tenuous marriage to the American-based United Brotherhood.¹⁰⁸ At its height — and with some exaggeration — the OBU claimed eleven hundred members in Toronto in late 1919.¹⁰⁹ Joseph Knight, who had come from Edmonton to act as OBU organizer in eastern Canada, complained that many radicals who had expressed support for the OBU had had a change of heart.¹¹⁰ To the most astute radicals in Toronto, however, it was apparent that “One Big Union” was not possible in a city where the labour movement was so deeply divided. By

103. *Globe*, 25 June 1919; on hiring women, see *IB*, 17 and 24 May and 20 Sept. 1918 and PAC, MG 30, A16, J.W. Flavell Papers, vol. 38, Irish to E. FitzGerald, 28 June 1918. On Robbins, see *IB*, 11 Dec. 1914; *Star*, 6 May 1919; *LL*, 19 Sept. 1919. Robbins ran against the Toronto Labour Party candidate in Riverdale in the 1919 provincial election. On the 1919 strike, see PAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts, file 19(222); for description of the union by member of the De Leonite Socialist Labor Party, see *Industrial Union News* (Detroit), 19 June 1920; for an analysis which helps explain the role of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in this period, see Steve Fraser, “Dress Rehearsal for the New Deal: Shop-Floor Insurgents, Political Elites, and Industrial Democracy in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers,” *Working-Class America*, eds. M.H. Frisch and D.J. Walkowitz (Urbana, Ill., 1983).

104. *Star*, 28 July 1919; *World*, 28 July 1919.

105. International Moulders’ Union, *Proceedings*, 1923; PAC, MG 28 1256, International Moulders’ Union, Executive Board Minutes, 8–24 April 1921 (microfilm copies).

106. See statement of the Massey-Harris Company, printed in *Star*, 4 June 1919.

107. *New Democracy* (Hamilton), 31 July and 21 Aug. 1919.

108. *One Big Union Bulletin* (Winnipeg), 1 Nov. 1919; *People’s Cause* (Toronto), 27 April 1926.

109. *One Big Union Bulletin*, 1 Nov. 1919.

110. UBC, VF 213, One Big Union, “Report of Proceedings, First Semi-Annual Convention of the OBU,” report of J.R. Knight.

1920, Knight was bemoaning the fact that the OBU in Toronto attracted only a "few fanatics, who know more about the political and economic conditions of Russia than Lenin and less about the situation in Toronto than a Zulu."¹¹¹

Even so, the left was not defeated within the Toronto union movement. At the semiannual TDLC elections in July, the left-wing slate won a clear majority. Their support was further enhanced by revelations that the Employers' Association had been approached in the midst of the metal trades strike to support financially a new, conservative labour paper, the *Labor Leader*. From June 1919, a small group of right-wing business agents had an effective organ to attack radicals in the labour movement. Their campaign to intern or deport socialists, along with their opposition to working-class candidates in provincial and municipal elections, as well as their suspect sources of financial support, relegated them to the margins of the movement. The TDLC refused to recognize the credentials of any delegates connected with the *Labor Leader*.¹¹²

In 1920, the TDLC sent a series of resolutions to the Trades and Labor Congress which, taken together, represented a coherent strategy for restructuring the Canadian labour movement. They included a call for a special convention of all labour organizations in Canada, including the OBU and national unions, support for industrial unionism, more open and concrete support for working-class political action, opposition to intervention against Russia, and an investigation into the actions of the congress leadership in their fight against radicalism.¹¹³ Of course, by that time, Toronto radicals were without significant allies in the congress, and the motions were easily defeated. In Toronto growing unemployment and wage cuts undermined the base the left had built. The large Federal Labor Union never did receive its charter from the Trades and Labor Congress. The butcher workers found themselves outside the international, and hence the TDLC, when they refused to bow to pressure to remove their radical leadership. They were decisively defeated in a strike in 1921.¹¹⁴ Despite the majority support the left enjoyed in the labour movement, the defeat of the general strike and deteriorating economic conditions severely limited their ability to act. As early as June 1919, when thirteen socialists

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111. UBC, Mine-Mill Papers, box 160, folder 8, report to General Executive Board, 20 April to 7 May 1920.
112. TDLC Minutes, 7 and 21 Aug. 1919; *IB*, 25 July and 15 August 1919; five of the seven directors of the *Labor Leader* were business agents, another had been an international officer, and a seventh made his living as an advertising agent for labour publications; see *LL*, 27 June 1919. As late as June 1925, the TDLC still refused to accept credentials from W.J. Hevey; see TDLC Minutes, 4 June 1925. The *Leader's* antiradicalism is apparent from every page, but note especially the editorial of 1 August 1919. Marx was dismissed as a "died-in-the-wool Hun" in *LL*, 21 Nov. 1919.
113. TDLC Minutes, 19 Aug. 1920; for a report of the TDLC discussion of these resolutions, see *IB*, 27 Aug. 1920.
114. *One Big Union Bulletin*, 1 Nov. 1919; *LL*, 1 Oct. and 5 Nov. 1920; *Industrial Union News*, 16 Oct. 1920; Montague, "Trade Unionism," 38; PAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts, 21(62).

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were sent to prison for periods of six months to three years for violations of the orders-in-council, no effective response was raised.¹¹⁵ The power workers had felt a few months earlier had already been lost.

Defeats tend to obscure historic possibilities, and the fact that events in Toronto lacked the dramatic climax that was seen in Winnipeg has distorted our understanding of the postwar crisis in Canadian class relations. While questions of working-class strategy and leadership were widely debated before 1914, the war posed these problems in sharp relief. The deep schisms which have come to be seen as regional in nature — between a radical West and a conservative East — were no less apparent within the Toronto labour movement. That Toronto did not reach the threshold that would draw the majority of organized and unorganized workers out in a united confrontation with capital was not due to the unwillingness of major sectors of the city's labour movement to adopt this course. Rather, the difference is explained by the existence of significant bases of opposition to radicalism. In Toronto, many workers and union leaders felt deeply threatened by challenges to the established structures and ideologies of the labour movement. They lost the leadership of the TDLC and a number of unions but, in blocking more substantial change, they emerged relatively unscathed. The price was a defeated, shrinking, and directionless trade union movement.

115. *Star*, 19 June and 22 Dec. 1919; *LL*, 29 Aug. 1919.