

A Battle Royal: Service Work Activism and the 1961-1962 Royal York Strike

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Article abstract

Although service work occupies an increasingly central position in the Canadian labour market, its legacy of activism has largely been forgotten by scholars. This paper begins a reclamation of that legacy by analysing the bitter 1961-1962 strike at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto, Canada's most luxurious lodgings. The unsuccessful battle of mostly immigrant workers against a powerful corporation anticipates the multinational consolidation of and asymmetrical struggle in the industry over the next four decades. The paper evaluates strategies used by service workers, explores the different historical dynamics of service-work trade unionism, analyses the cultural contests which sprang up around such a powerful symbolic action, and seeks to explain what lessons have been learned by current Toronto hotel activists. It represents one starting point in the important work of understanding service work activism, and the economic, political, and cultural battles around class, gender, ethnicity, and consumption in Canada.

ARTICLES

A Battle Royal: Service Work Activism and the 1961-1962 Royal York Strike

Jeremy Milloy

IN AN ADDRESS TO BUSINESS LEADERS, a prominent Canadian tells his audience that, to be competitive in an expanding global economy, Canada's corporations must stringently manage "costs of labour over ... which we have some measure of control." This is the logic of conventional Liberal and Conservative politics in our own times, a sentiment heard routinely in the past decade from politicians, CEOs, and the media, to a point almost approaching gospel. In fact, this particular statement was not made in 2001 or 1991, but on 8 March 1961 by Canadian Pacific Railways [CPR] head Norris R. "Buck" Crump. He put forward this view to explain why his company, among Canada's wealthiest, had taken such a hard line over the course of an eleven-month labour dispute with its Toronto Royal York Hotel workers, among the nation's lowest paid, and organized in Local 299 of the Hotel & Club Employees Union. While neo-liberalism has become the dominant ideology in the last 25 years, its attitudes towards labour — wage suppression, casualization, and union-busting — have beset hotel and restaurant workers in Canada for the past century.

As more of Canada's domestic product has shifted from manufacturing and resource extraction to the service sector, the Canadian working class is increasingly comprised of those working not on an assembly line or at a sewing machine but behind a cash register or in a hotel room. This analysis of the strike at the Royal York, among Canada's most luxurious hotels, rejects the argument that service labour is merely female reproductive labour moved into the marketplace. Such an analysis

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ignores the fact that the provision of shelter and comfort for others at a price is an ancient and widespread phenomenon. Moreover, such a perspective obscures the true nature of service labour, specifically the value added by workers in the many jobs in a hotel (elevator operator, concierge, etc.) that do not translate to the domestic sector. It also fails to take into account how service workers generate employers' profits.

Hotel and restaurant employees must therefore be analysed in the context of the history of their industry, the nature of their work, and discourses of gender, ethnicity, class, and service. Whether they are preparing gourmet meals for an upscale hotel or flipping burgers at McDonald's, these workers are united not only by the outcomes of their labour but by the challenges they face as one of the most disenfranchised sectors of the modern working class. Nowhere are the cruel inequalities and rampant overconsumption of North American capitalism more sharply observed than in the growth and condition of hotel work. It has expanded in North America because of the increasing wealth concentrated in the hands of the few at the top of the social structure, and the ceaseless expansion of consumption in an age where spending is construed as an act of patriotism. In the age of free trade and globalization, hotel work has been trumpeted as a new source of employment for the working class, for, unlike manufacturing jobs, employment in the service industry (by its very nature) cannot be "outsourced" to China or Honduras. Service workers, in the truest sense, those who serve others, have jobs that are low paid, insecure, stressful, and non-unionized in almost all cases; monotonous and unfulfilling in many cases; and degrading and dangerous in some cases, as Canadians have been reminded recently by the tragic murder of Brigitte Serre.¹ They do the jobs that are still here.

Along with these developments has come some outstanding research on service and leisure work by contemporary writers. Ester Reiter in Canada and Eric Schlosser in the United States have both provided illuminating studies of the nature of labour in the fast-food industry in their respective books *Making Fast Food* and *Fast Food Nation*. In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein incisively outlines the unending expansionism of multinational corporations and the consequences for workers, especially labour in the leisure sector.²

This paper, however, suggests strategies for today's service workers through an examination of the struggles of the past, specifically the Royal York Hotel

¹On 25 January 2006, Brigitte Serre, a 17-year-old gas station attendant in Montreal, was murdered by four men while working an overnight shift alone.

²The books discussed here are: Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Beating Up on the Brand Bullies* (Toronto 2000); Ester Reiter, *Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the Fryer* (Montreal 1996); and Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York 2001).

strike.³ In doing this, it also outlines the historical nature of the leisure workplace as one shaped by class, gender, and ethnicity and diagrams the ways in which work and leisure have intersected. Unfortunately, the history of this work has been largely undiscussed in Canada. Reiter presents a brief synthesis of restaurant work in Canada in *Making Fast Food*, but the two most valuable discussions of leisure work history are American. Studies of gender and waitressing and strategies of early syndicalism among New York City hotel and restaurant workers by Dorothy Sue Cobble and Howard Kimeldorf are rare contributions to the subject. In terms of analysis of more recent strategies of labour struggle among hotel workers, Steven Tufts' outline of union strategies in the Toronto hotel industry has been revealing, and this paper draws on American studies to add historical substance to recent Canadian concerns with hotel work.⁴

The Royal York Hotel was, and is, part of a franchised, multinational system, unlike the single outlet, independent proprietor restaurants studied by Cobble. In the post-war era, these types of restaurants (and hotels, and many retail categories) have lost their dominant position in the industry due to the rise of multinational chains. Acknowledging that many single-outlet hotels and restaurants thrive today, Cobble's *Dishing It Out* is nevertheless in many ways an analysis of unionism in a dead industry. This investigation of the Royal York strike is thus located on the crest of a phenomenon historically emergent in the 1960s, the struggle of service workers against a corporation with vastly greater resources to endure a work stoppage, but well established today. The approaches of both sides in the Royal York strike can be seen as harbingers for the service industry.

This paper also builds on the work of past historians in this area by detailing the class dynamics of how service strikes were received. Cobble reveals the extent to which union patronage and community activism were critically important to restaurant workers. Yet the hotel or restaurant is more than a site of class struggle; it is also a *producer* of discourse about class. In 1961-1962, the Royal York's identity as the social centre for upper-crust Ontarians and Canadians was destabilized by the challenge of exploited workers whose union, again shaped by the culture of the Hotel, conducted a dignified campaign based on the self-definition of "higher-class" workers. My analysis of the strike will illuminate a factor not often studied: the personal and professional reactions of the post-war Canadian élite to a dispute which

³ Although some later HERE records exist, they do not contain information on Local 299 or the Royal York strike. Few records in the Department of Labour or Canadian Labour Congress [CLC] collections deal with this strike. It is possible that the International union's archives at Cornell University contain some information, but there are no surviving Local 299 records. Perhaps they were lost during the period of "questionable leadership" referred to by Tufts below.

⁴ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in 20th Century America* (Chicago 1991); Howard Kimeldorf, *Battling for American Labor: Wobblies, Craft Unions, and the Making of the Labor Movement* (Berkeley 1999). Tufts' research is discussed at the end of this article.

literally hit home. These factors move the analysis from a simple strike narrative towards an exploration of how issues like dignity, fair treatment, the right to strike, and respect for organized labour were contested by the CPR, Local 299, and the élites who patronized the Royal York.

The histories of leisure work in Canada have not gone unwritten due to a lack of workplace activism on the part of hotel and restaurant workers. The Royal York strike is notable for many reasons, but not as an aberration. An inspection of the Department of Labour's Strikes and Lockouts files, which attempt to keep a record of every labour dispute in Canada, reveals a strong legacy of workplace organization. Indeed, in the 50 years before the Royal York strike (1911-1961), the Department of Labour reported almost 150 actions pursued by hotel and restaurant labourers. These occurred in almost every part of the nation, save Atlantic Canada and the Far North. The timing and specifics of job actions suggest connections with wider organized labour and the crystallization of class consciousness; for instance, service sector job actions were most numerous in the labour strongholds of Ontario and British Columbia, and clustered at times of heightened working-class mobilization. Concentrations of strikes took place during World War I and after, especially during the late 1930s, with 34 disputes being reported from 1935 to 1937 alone.⁵

Hotel and restaurant workers in Canada organized around many of the same issues that Cobble and Kimeldorf found in studying their American counterparts. As working hours were perhaps the longest in any industry, they were a central issue in many conflicts. The Restaurant Employees Union of Hamilton went on strike at various work sites around the city in 1936. Led by its business agent Sam Lawrence (at that time Ontario's lone Co-operative Commonwealth Federation [CCF] Member of the Provincial Parliament [MPP]), the union demanded a nine-hour day and a 60-hour week. Hamilton police settled the dispute by informing owners that the 60-hour week was, in fact, provincial law. That employees were forced to picket to have *minimum* provincial standards observed says much about the conditions of the industry at the time. Wages have also consistently trailed other occupations. The Toronto cabaret Café Royal was hit by a strike in 1915 after its employees, working 80-hour weeks, were asked to accept a cut in their pay from \$25 to \$20 a month. Employers would often recoup this bare-bones pay through a fine system that penalized workers for petty transgressions. Waitresses at the Trocadero Café in Vancouver struck for a wage increase in 1936, claiming that they could not live on their earnings after fines and deductions were levied by the boss. Indeed, Reiter has estimated that restaurant workers during the Depression were earning just two-fifths of a livable wage. The grievances of the Trocadero workers also included discontent

⁵This is based on a review of all strikes involving hotel and restaurant workers found in the National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC], Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts Files, RG27.

with Taylorist systems: "Speed-Up, for which the Trocadero has become notorious," as the *B.C. Lumber Worker* claimed, was at the root of the strike.⁶

Probably the most fervently contested demand was for union recognition. Owners would often negotiate with their workers but were unbending in their desire to keep unions out. For example, the bartenders of Fort William struck in 1914; employers acceded to all their demands except union recognition. The bartenders won the strike with a well-coordinated walkout at thirteen bars; one hotel that had recognized the union remained staffed. Even as late as 1958, workers at five Oshawa hotels went on strike in an attempt to obtain recognition at one hotel, and closed shop and union security measures at others. With the aid of large picket lines and the threat of boycotts by the Oshawa Trades and Labour Council, the strikers won their demands. These tactics would be used in varying degrees by the Royal York strikers, with less successful results.⁷

Workers who had won a union presence at their establishments also had to contend with their employers' frequent efforts to undercut the union or remove it altogether. As in so many other sectors of the Canadian labour force, these disputes were often racialized. A 1915 strike at the Queen's Cafeteria in Winnipeg resulted from the "dismissal of nine white men and the hiring of Chinese in their place." The proprietor was able to obtain an injunction against picketing by Cooks and Waiters Local 502. In an ingenious stratagem, the union resorted to displaying cards which, while "not referring directly to the dispute, serve the purpose of having certain enquiries being made of the wearers." The strike was settled after the Chinese workers were paid union wages, "keeping the restaurant a union shop with union patronage."⁸ This last comment, from a telegram sent to the Department of Labour, matches Cobble's account of restaurant workers making connections with unionized workers as restaurant customers to attempt to swing the balance of power in the workplace. A further example is seen in the *Alberta Labour News's* acerbic comment on the 1928 lockout of union workers at the King Edward Café in Edmonton: "It [the King Edward] apparently believes the support of organized labour is not necessary to the success of such an establishment."⁹

The success of hotel and restaurant job actions often hinged on the workers' ability to forge these coalitions. Because of the workers' limited power in the workplace, their most effective tactics related to their ability to make links, either with fellow workers or the public, as demonstrated by the victory of the Oshawa hotel

⁶NAC, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts Files, RG27, volume 304, strike 32 (Café Royal); volume 378, strike 115 (Trocadero). Quotation from "Strike of Cafe Employees Ends," *B.C. Lumber Worker*, 16 September 1938.

⁷NAC, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts Files, volume 303, strike 32 (Fort William); volume 529, strike 126 (Oshawa).

⁸Quotations in this instance are taken from correspondence in the Department of Labour file discussing the dispute — Strikes and Lockouts, volume 303, strike 10.

⁹"Non-Union Cafes" (editorial), *Alberta Labour News*, 27 October 1928.

employees. Because the location of workers in the industry was much more diffuse, restaurant or hotel workers were more likely to achieve their objectives if they could coordinate action across a variety of locations, in the manner of the Fort William bartenders. Timing was also a crucial factor, both in terms of the time chosen to walk out and also the length of the job action. Workers needed to maximize their bargaining power by timing job actions for when their labour was needed most. The dinner-hour walkout of waiters at the Café Royal, signalled by a prearranged whistle, sent management scrambling to find help, eventually “pressing coloured gentlemen”¹⁰ from the cabaret’s orchestra into service, along with women from a downstairs cafeteria. The waiters received their wage and hour demands after a three-week strike. A well-timed disruption of service could thus aid workers in conflict with management, as could recognition of the gendered and racialized hierarchies so often present in the hotel and restaurant workplace.

Timing was also crucial to hotel and restaurant job actions, in the sense of duration. Although workers possessed leverage while service was needed, they, especially waiters and waitresses, could easily be fired or replaced by scabs; high turnover was an industry constant in good and bad times. Often workers were most successful with a quick strike to address specific grievances. The longer strikes went on, the less pressure workers could apply, particularly if their place of work was owned by one of Canada’s richest corporations; this was the situation faced by the workers at the CPR-controlled Royal York Hotel. With so many of today’s service workers labouring at deep-pocketed multinational chains such as Wal-Mart and McDonald’s, studying the strike at the Royal York will provide a case study perhaps more relevant to the current situation than examples of conflict at single-outlet hotels or restaurants, especially as these larger chains have led the race to the bottom in the areas of wages, benefits, and conditions.¹¹

The Royal York strike reveals much about the history of service work, and how the leisure/consumption workplace is shaped by class. It is also useful in exposing strategies — successful and unsuccessful — used by workers. Over the course of their almost twelve-month strike, the Royal York workers certainly displayed determination and resistance. However, the strategies pursued by the union leadership were based initially on a myopic perception of the workers as belonging to a higher class of irreplaceable service workers, and then on a mostly failed appeal to public opinion. These approaches proved not nearly aggressive enough when pitted against a CPR determined to casualize its work force and “stamp out unionism at its fringes,”¹² a telling description of the corporate agenda provided by one union leader.

¹⁰“Waiter’s Strike at Café Royal,” *Toronto World*, 2 October 1915.

¹¹On hotel and restaurant workers and timing, see Kimeldorf, *Battling for American Labor*, 97-105.

¹²Union leader Archie Johnstone in “Labour Council Tells Musicians Quit Royal York,” *Toronto Telegram*, 5 May 1961.

The period of the Royal York strike, the late 1950s and 1960s, is often eulogized as an era of union stability and significant gains, but the “Fordist Accord” of the post-World War II period was certainly not widely beneficial to all workers. Pamela Sugiman’s study of female autoworkers illustrates the struggles women faced to win an equal share of the benefits accruing to their brothers on the shop floor. Furthermore, for those outside the industries and workplaces profiting from this era of accommodation, things were much the same as they had always been. Joan Sangster, examining the Tilco strike of the same decade, points out that fordism was a “limited bargain,” available only to white, male workers in certain industries. There was a “second tier ... whose jobs were unorganized and insecure, whose wages were low, whose conditions were poor, and whose ‘rights’ were limited.”¹³ These were the Royal York workers.

In retrospect, the CPR was preparing for a strike from the outset. In negotiations with Hotel & Club Employees Union Local 299 (a local of the international American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organizations [AFL-CIO] Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders Union, now known as HERE),¹⁴ the two sides could not agree on two main points. On wages, the union was asking for a raise of fifteen cents over three years, while management offered two and one-half cents spread over eighteen months. The second major issue concerned the guaranteed provision of short-term work. Under the previous agreement, if, due to slow business, employees were not needed for a particular shift, the hotel was required to give the affected employees a seven-day notice. This meant that workers could know in advance how much work they would have, and budget accordingly. Management’s desire to cut this practice, called a layoff notice, from seven days to 48 hours, created bitterness among employees. An ad run by the union after the strike began protested that, under this system, “even employees of 20 and 30 years service could be ordered ... like you order milk from the door.”¹⁵

With both sides unable to come to an agreement, the union and management met with Ontario’s chief conciliation officer, Louis Fine, in late April 1961. Management dropped some demands related to union security, but held firm on the layoff and wage issues. The next day, the union lowered its wage demands to ten cents over 33 months, yet hotel management did not budge. After two days of negotiations, Fine believed a settlement was imminent, thinking the hotel had agreed to offer three and one-half cents an hour and dropping the layoff clause. The union

¹³Joan Sangster, “‘We No Longer Respect the Law’: The Tilco Strike, Labour Injunctions and the State,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 53 (Spring 2004), 47-87.

¹⁴The union has merged with another service industry union, UNITE, and is now UNITE-HERE.

¹⁵“The Strike Money Couldn’t Settle,” *Toronto Star*, 16 January 1962. Quotation from ad placed by the union in *Toronto Star*, 31 May 1961.

proposed to meet the next day, but the CPR requested a weekend adjournment to discuss the issues.¹⁶

Over the weekend, the CPR in actuality readied itself for a strike. It prepared newspaper ads seeking strikebreakers and placed them in the Monday editions of several Toronto newspapers. The union would also allege that the company organized an airlift of top chefs and other key personnel from CPR hotels across the country; and indeed the *Ottawa Citizen* reported two days after the strike that 60 non-union employees were flown to Toronto to act as strikebreakers. On Monday 20 April, both sides rejected Fine's proposal, the company claiming it could not afford it, and the union protesting they had already given up enough. After a day of discussion with both sides, Fine was again convinced he was close to a settlement, believing the union would accept a five-cent-an-hour raise, and management could be convinced to drop the contentious layoff clause.¹⁷

Union and hotel management seemed close to a settlement, a mere "one dollar a week for each employee" apart according to Fine. But it was soon apparent that there would be no immediate end to the impasse. Royal York manager Angus MacKinnon, the public face of CPR and hotel management throughout the strike, requested a meeting with all employees, prompting an angry union response. The hotel brass was accused of "brainwashing" and "intimidation." Local 299 later agreed to the meeting, provided that union leadership would also be able to present its case. When management refused, the union announced a strike, which had been previously endorsed by 93 per cent of the union's membership of just over 1,200 workers. All union employees walked off the job just after 4 p.m. on 24 April 1961, leaving management scrambling to keep the hotel running, as they had warned the union during negotiations they would.¹⁸

Who were the 1,200 members of Local 299? Without union records, making conclusive statements as to the composition of the membership is difficult. Unionists were split almost evenly in terms of gender in May 1961: of 1,183 workers on strike, 583 were female. Discerning the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the workers is much more difficult. Certainly, the hotel and restaurant industries, especially in major cities like Toronto, employed a high number of recent European immigrants. A scan of named strikers in press accounts seems to bear this out, as names

¹⁶"The Strike Money Couldn't Settle," *Toronto Star*, 16 January 1962.

¹⁷In fact, the CPR may have made strike preparations even earlier. NAC, CLC Papers, MG28, I 103, reel H-118, file 3, Letter from Marcel Roy to Claude Jodoin. A letter to Jodoin from a former cellist at the hotel says musicians saw cards made in the print shop "advising guests of temporary inconveniences," and that more temporary (non-union) help was hired in the weeks before the strike. Starr Cote, "Royal York is Bearing Up Despite Walkout of Staff," *Ottawa Citizen*, 25 April 1961; "The Strike Money Couldn't Settle," *Toronto Star*, 16 January 1962.

¹⁸Quotation from "The Strike Money Couldn't Settle," *Toronto Star*, 16 January 1962; vote information from "Staff Vote For Strike," *Globe and Mail*, 14 April 1961.

like Pasquale, Pukarch, Ahr, and Kalix appear. Local president Onofrio Zambri was of Italian descent. Many other workers came from immigrant backgrounds. What is evident is that due to their wages and the fluid nature of their work, employees of the Royal York were extremely vulnerable to the financial pressures of a long strike.¹⁹

Fortunately for management, the kitchen staff had already prepared that evening's dinner prior to the decision to strike. Management enlisted accounting staff to serve the meals, drinks and ice were self-serve, and other supervisory staff filled such positions as elevator attendant and bellhop. Other amenities, including room service and much of the cleaning, were temporarily suspended. The next morning, the dining room, three lounges, and the hotel coffee shop were fully closed. Newly arriving guests had to carry in their own bags as airline transport drivers (members of the Teamsters Union) refused to cross the picket line. Some guests carried their bags out, notably actors Laurence Olivier and Cecil Hardwicke (who left due to the lack of room service) and Saskatchewan premier Tommy Douglas. A photograph of Douglas carrying his bags out in protest and in support of the strikers was featured in several newspapers. Douglas predicted a quick victory for the strikers. Despite these high profile exits, the Royal York remained at 98 per cent occupancy during the first week, in part because other downtown hotels were already full.²⁰

The hotel's status as a nexus for Canada's social and political elite created further fallout in the early days of the strike. Toronto city council immediately opted to cancel all city functions at the Royal York. While this decision was initially endorsed by Mayor Nathan Phillips, he would soon take a different view, often hectoring council to end the ban, and himself frequently crossing the picket line. Despite his protests, the boycott stayed in effect for the duration of the dispute. The strike also made ripples provincially. Several cabinet ministers, and Ontario premier Leslie Frost, had rooms at the Royal York while the Legislature was in session. To preserve a veneer of impartiality (and presumably to avoid offending either big business or the labour constituency), Frost continued to pay for his room, but refused to use it while he was premier.²¹ Most of the cabinet ministers chose to remain

¹⁹The gender breakdown is from NAC, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts Files. In her book *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal 1992), Franca Iacovetta identifies a large concentration of Italian immigrants among the cleaning staff at the Royal York in 1961 (61); however, no information is provided on where she obtained the data, except for a personal interview.

²⁰"Guest Are Own Waiters," *Toronto Star*, 25 April 1961; "Won't Cross Picket Lines, Premier Douglas Checks Out," *Toronto Star*, 25 April 1961; "Guests Do Own Chores," *Ottawa Journal*, 25 April 1961; "Airlift Emergency Staff for DIY Inn," *Toronto Star*, 25 April 1961; "The Strike Money Couldn't Settle," *Toronto Star*, 16 January 1962.

²¹"We're Well Stocked, Says Royal York," *Toronto Telegram*, 26 April 1961; "Mayor, Summerville at it Again as Ban Ends on Hotel Functions," *Globe and Mail*, 7 April 1962; "Strike Won't Close the Royal York," *Toronto Telegram*, 25 April 1961; "Curtain Up on the Last Crisis," *Toronto Telegram*, 13 January 1962.

at the hotel and cross the picket line. Commerce and Development Minister Will Nickle claimed good feelings between himself and the picketers, saying that “there is no ill will of any kind,” because of “friendships that have been established through many years of rubbing shoulders.”²² However, it was the close relationship between CPR hotel management and the Ontario establishment which came under scrutiny as the strike wore on.

The most contested physical space of the strike’s early days was not in or around the hotel, but below the Royal York. To keep the hotel running without union workers, management used a tunnel connecting the hotel with Union Station as a means of funnelling in scabs and supplies. The hotel also set up an employment office in Union Station to better facilitate the replacement of its workforce. While the hotel initially denied the use of the tunnel, an investigation of subterranean pedestrians by the *Toronto Star* estimated that one-half to three-quarters of them were scabs bound for the Royal York. The hotel was able to draw on a large pool of unemployed people to break the strike. Scabs explained their decision in terms of economic desperation: “It’s either work or steal,”²³ said Frank Lally, a 46-year-old chef with seventeen years experience. The union attempted to block the flow by picketing the tunnel, but was quickly chased off by CPR police. The CPR asserted that the tunnel was private property. Union lawyer David Lewis maintained the tunnel was a public route, but to no avail. In one of the only violent incidents reported during the strike, a scab maid named Helen Eliot was taken to hospital for observation with a black eye and a bruised chest. She accused three strikers of beating her; she was later escorted back to work by Metro detectives.²⁴

In its headquarters at the Prince George Hotel, union leadership professed to be unconcerned at the speed with which the CPR had replaced the strikers, hiring several hundred new employees in the first few days alone. During the initial period of do-it-yourself service, union business agent Onofrio Zambri predicted that the “carnival spirit” would soon wear off and “guests would be leaving by the hundreds.”²⁵ When it became apparent that the hotel was well prepared for the strike and was normalizing operations rapidly (restoring room service in one week), the union’s rhetoric changed tack, reflecting its belief in the strikers as a higher class of worker, and echoing the claim of one striker that scab labour was not “Royal York service.”²⁶ Union leader Archie Johnstone claimed that “Service is not half as good as it used to be.” His next comment revealed the restrained tactics used by the union in a strike it hoped to win through public opinion: “I didn’t expect to cut their food

²²“Frost Won’t Cross Picket Line at Hotel,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 1962.

²³“We’re Well Stocked, Says Royal York,” *Toronto Telegram*, 26 April 1961.

²⁴“Union May Go to Court Over Royal York Tunnel,” *Toronto Star*, 27 April 1961; “Hotel Employees Win, Lose,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 May 1961; “Boycott Baseball: Strikers,” *Toronto Star*, 2 May 1961.

²⁵“Royal York Keeps Going Despite Walkout,” *Montreal Gazette*, 26 April 1961.

²⁶“Executives Are Running Elevators at Royal York,” *Canadian Press*, 27 April 1961.

off—I want the customers to find out about the shoemakers they’ve got working as cooks.”²⁷ In fact, by the end of May, most cooks (among the highest paid of the strikers pre-strike at \$65-\$95 weekly) had returned. This is perhaps unsurprising. Due to their high pay and status, cooks often tended to be the last to walk off and the first to go back in labour disputes, as Kimeldorf has illustrated. Most other workers maintained discipline and kept up morale at this time, even if some early dissatisfaction with the union’s cautious stance can perhaps be evidenced from the false fire alarms reportedly called in to the Royal York switchboard by strikers.²⁸

In the face of what was obviously shaping up to be a long and difficult struggle, Johnstone maintained that morale was high, especially considering that “good hotel employees are often poor strikers, because they say yes even when the customer is wrong.”²⁹ The union claimed it had a \$250,000 war chest to fight the strike, with the same amount available from the International. Still, it quickly became apparent to both strikers and the media that with the hotel operating almost at full capacity so quickly, wage demands were likely already lost. By 10 May, the *Globe and Mail* reported that “the walkout has become as much a fight for union survival and job security as a fight over wages.”³⁰ This assertion reflected the views of the strikers themselves, such as waiter and strike captain Roy Pooley, who claimed, “We couldn’t care less about the money,” adding that workers were mainly fighting the layoff clause: “If they altered that, I think everyone would go back to work.”³¹

The union also began to seek support from Toronto organized labour, although it often refused what was offered. Ontario Federation of Labour president David Archer set about attempting to raise \$500,000 for the union, saying, “if ever there was a justified strike in Ontario labour history, this is it.”³² The Labour Council also pressured union musicians performing at the hotel, threatening to blackball them from the annual Labour Day parade if they continued to work at the Royal York. The musicians agreed to cease work at the hotel once their contracts ran out on 30 June, and they were then replaced by recorded music. While the Hotel & Club Employees Union welcomed financial support, they were less receptive to offers to shore up their picket line. Just two days before Archer’s pledge, Johnstone rejected a proposal which would have seen other unionists (including 300 from the ranks of the unemployed) form a mass picket around the hotel. Instead, a handful of representatives from six unions came out to express solidarity on 5 May 1961. Strike pay was handed out for the first time, with benefits of \$20 per week for married strikers

²⁷“Hotel Drops 100 Strikebreakers,” *Toronto Star*, 3 May 1961.

²⁸“Boycott Baseball: Strikers,” *Toronto Star*, 2 May 1961.

²⁹“Hotel Drops 100 Strikebreakers,” *Toronto Star*, 3 May 1961.

³⁰“Plan to Return Fails; Hotel Strikers Told Fight is for Survival,” *Globe and Mail*, 16 May 1961.

³¹“Hotel Drops 100 Strikebreakers,” *Toronto Star*, 3 May 1961.

³²“500,000 Asked to Aid Strike,” *Toronto Star*, 9 May 1961.

and \$18 per week for singles climbing to \$25 and \$20 respectively the following week.³³

The union's rejection of a mass picket was no doubt a reflection of their genteel strategy, but it may also have reflected the short-lived optimism of early May. This came about after the CPR settled a contract with the union representing its over 110,000 non-operating railroad workers. Believing the hotel's tough stance with them was merely a means to send a message to the "non-ops," hotel strikers hoped for a quick settlement, arguing that the hotel's stonewalling tactics no longer served its purpose. This was necessary, for the strategy of keeping guests out of the hotel by appealing to public opinion was meeting with mixed results. Among the early successes were decisions by the New York Philharmonic to switch hotels, and the moving of Toronto Hydro's 50th-anniversary dinner to the King Edward Hotel. The Royal York also lost a 1,200-person convention of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International. Toronto Hydro aside, however, the union was largely unsuccessful in preventing local events from being held at the hotel. By 12 May, Mayor Phillips reversed his earlier position, announcing his intention to cross the picket line to glad-hand VIPs. Ten days earlier, Toronto's minor-league baseball team held its annual dinner at the hotel; this prompted union calls for a labour boycott of the team, but it came to nothing.³⁴ Worse still for the strikers, Ontario Labour Minister Charles Daley also attended a dinner at the hotel. He rationalized his actions, claiming that they had "nothing to do with the strike." He later laughed off photographs of himself breaking the picket line as "pretty good publicity."³⁵

The seeming pro-CPR stance of Daley and other government figures provoked vociferous attacks from CCF MPP Kenneth Bryden (Woodbine). Referring to the reduced room rates available at the hotel to MPPs, he accused the CPR of "buying cheap protection."³⁶ Bryden also brought up the issue of the Royal York's exemptions from municipal business taxes. As a railroad hotel, the CPR had not had to pay business taxes in the manner of other city hotels. This issue had first flared up in 1948 when the Toronto tax department lobbied to end the exemption. In the 1961 debate, Tory MPP Will Murdoch defended the tax break, calling the Royal York

³³"Royal York Loses Two More Conventions," *Toronto Star*, 27 May 1961; "Union for Nate as Mediator," *Toronto Star*, 6 May 1961; "Sure to Win Now — Hotel Strikers," *Toronto Star*, 5 May 1961.

³⁴"Striking Hotel Union Delivers Three Blows," *Canadian Press*, 13 May 1961; "Nate Crosses All-Women Picket," *Toronto Telegram*, 18 May 1961; "Boycott Baseball: Strikers," *Toronto Star*, 2 May 1961. It is interesting that the union attempted to block Phillips with an "all-women" picket. It is perhaps one of the rare occasions that the union attempted to use the disenfranchised status of its workers as a public relations weapon — and also revealing of the gendered nature of the labour movement in the early 1960s.

³⁵First Daley quotation from "Frost Won't Cross Picket Line," *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 1961; second from "Hotel Strike Hits Leafs?," *Toronto Star*, 2 May 1961.

³⁶"Strikers File Writ over Royal York's Use of Tunnel," *Toronto Telegram*, 4 May 1961.

“Toronto’s community centre.” This assertion — portraying Toronto’s most exclusive hotel as a cornerstone of the local public sphere — was met with scorn by a Liberal member who pointed out that “many in Toronto have never seen the inside of the place. In fact, it has become the community centre of the Conservative Party.”³⁷ Despite this, the exemption continued, with the CPR instead paying a \$10,000 yearly “grant.” During the strike, Premier Frost consulted the city tax department, finding that if the exemption had been rescinded, the CPR would have paid \$36,871 in 1949, \$101,205.65 in 1958, and \$188,040.04 in 1961.³⁸ Despite the potential impact of this information, it was never really effectively exploited by the union or the Opposition. Unfortunately for the union, the Royal York, emboldened by early success, began to increase the pressure on the strikers in an attempt to, in Bryden’s words, “force its employees to their knees.”³⁹

As the standoff continued through the first week of May 1961, Royal York manager Angus MacKinnon amplified the antagonistic nature of his rhetoric. Late in April, the union complained that strikers were receiving phone calls from management threatening them with loss of seniority and pension rights if they did not return to their jobs immediately. MacKinnon denied the calls, but by 9 May was claiming that the higher productivity of the new workers was giving him “second thoughts” about rehiring the strikers. He went on to say that the “new employees were working harder because they were hungrier.”⁴⁰ Indeed, it was reported that new employees, mostly recruited from the unemployed, were in fact working 80-hour weeks at the understaffed hotel. The hotel’s attitude became fully evident in the statements and actions of MacKinnon in the days around the union’s first attempt to discuss a settlement with the Royal York on 17 May 1961. MacKinnon led off by saying that any new contract “would have to fit in with our new thinking in efficient hotel operation”⁴¹ and guarantee higher productivity. Management also wanted to scrap seniority rights and reserve the right not to rehire strikers before even discussing a settlement. The union refused what Johnstone called a “concentration-camp ultimatum,” and talks collapsed before they began. MacKinnon responded by calling workers “irresponsible” for striking while guests were present, and saying that scabs were being paid the two-and-one-half-cent increase offered the union: “The present workers are no longer considered temporary staff.”⁴² A

³⁷“Bid to Tax Royal York Defeated,” *Globe and Mail*, 29 March 1949.

³⁸Trent University Archives, Frost Collection. Letter from Toronto Assessment Commissioner A.J.B. Gray to city Chair F.G. Gardiner, forwarded to Leslie Frost in June 1961.

³⁹“Call Cabinet Ministers Hotel Strike Breakers,” *Sudbury Star*, 3 May 1961.

⁴⁰“Musicians Union Shuns New Contract for Royal York,” *Toronto Star*, 10 May 1961.

⁴¹“Union Ready to Discuss Royal York Settlement,” *Canadian Press*, 18 May 1961.

⁴²Both Johnstone and MacKinnon quotations from “Royal York ‘Arrogant’, Kills Peace Bid — Union,” *Toronto Star*, 19 May 1961.

headline in the *Globe and Mail* neatly summarized the CPR's attitude: "Royal York Demands Surrender When Union Offers Negotiation."⁴³

Union leadership responded to MacKinnon's tough line with threats to "take the gloves off" themselves.⁴⁴ Although the union admitted at least 70 strikers had returned to work (the hotel claimed 125), it maintained that several of the returnees were spies who would get the word out about poor service and health and labour violations at the Royal York. It also distributed 20,000 leaflets accusing the CPR of provoking the strike in an attempt to break the union, as well as taking out an ad in the *Toronto Star* making the same accusation. The ad refuted MacKinnon's claim that Royal York workers were the best paid in Toronto. In fact, those in several jobs, including waitresses, waiters, operators, and clerks, were the lowest paid. It was further pointed out that the tipping system merely made up the difference between a worker's wage and a living wage, and the system thus benefitted the hotel more than the workers. Pickets began to expand. Johnstone accepted a larger sympathy picket from the Metro Union of Unemployed Workers, and strikers began an information picket at Malton Airport in an attempt to convince visitors to move to other hotels. A further effort was made to inflame controversy over the Royal York's tax breaks. A march on city hall protesting the exemptions swelled to over 200 people (some dressed as chefs carrying giant money bags) and was dispersed by police.⁴⁵ Shortly before flying to Cincinnati to drum up more support from the International union, Johnstone explained this move towards militancy: "We have been credited with conducting one of the most dignified strikes in Toronto's history. Perhaps we have been too dignified."⁴⁶

Other trade unionists in Toronto certainly felt this to be the case and urged the union to adopt more aggressive tactics. At a Trades and Labour Council meeting in early June, United Auto Workers representative Fred Prentice opined: "My idea of a picket line is where no one gets across. We should put cars in the streets and surround the hotel."⁴⁷ These comments aside, the union was clearly unwilling to take this kind of action, rejecting an offer of a thousand-strong mass picket at the same meeting. A letter from Johnstone to Canadian Labour Congress [CLC] president Claude Jodoin explained the choice of union tactics. Johnstone intimated that CPR

⁴³This headline is from *Globe and Mail*, 18 May 1961.

⁴⁴"To 'Take Gloves Off' in Royal York Strike," *Toronto Star*, 25 May 1961.

⁴⁵"Union Spies Infiltrate Royal York," *Toronto Telegram*, 23 May 1961; the ad appeared in *Toronto Star*, 31 May 1961; "Hotel Insults Us Unemployed Say," *Toronto Star*, 24 May 1961; "Hotel Strike Parade Brings Police Blast," *Canadian Press*, 26 May 1961; "International Boycott?," *Toronto Telegram*, 27 May 1961.

⁴⁶"To 'Take Gloves Off' in Royal York Strike," *Toronto Star*, 25 May 1961. The idea of "cars in the street" was reminiscent of the United Auto Workers' militant and effective tactics in the historic Ford strike of 1946. See David Moulton, "Ford Windsor 1945," in Irving Abella, ed., *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919-1949* (Toronto 1975).

⁴⁷"Royal York Strikers Refuse Offer of 1000 Man Mass Picket," *Toronto Telegram*, 2 June 1961.

vice-president Ian Sinclair had “wished that the strike was not so orderly ... he further remarked that if only the pickets would throw a brick through a window he would be able to have them removed. I have some fear that something of this nature could be arranged by management.”⁴⁸ However, the “dignified” approach clearly was not working. While the Royal York was losing the odd convention, usually from other unions such as retail and agricultural workers, it was operating almost at capacity. The CPR’s belief that it had already won the strike was apparent in the corporation’s next action. In late June 1961, the 1,000 remaining strikers received letters from the hotel informing them that if they did not return to work by 15 July they would be fired.⁴⁹ This brash move drew outrage from organized labour across Canada, and resulted in a Supreme Court battle.

It was unsurprising that the next set of terms offered by the hotel were harsh. At a meeting attended by Johnstone, Daley, MacKinnon, and Louis Fine, MacKinnon proposed to eliminate 96 job classifications (covering 250 workers), from any union agreement. He also demanded that the hotel become an open shop, with the CPR permitted to bring in non-union workers. His offer regarding the layoff clause was most telling; where originally he had offered 48 hours’ notice, he now proposed a mere four hours. Johnstone again outlined the situation with wartime rhetoric, claiming the new terms were “worse than what MacArthur gave the Japanese after dropping the atomic bomb.” The proposal was unanimously rejected at a meeting of over 500 strikers.⁵⁰

By the mid-July deadline, an estimated 250-300 strikers had returned to work. This was not so much due to MacKinnon’s ultimatum, however, as most had gone back in the opening few weeks of the conflict. The hotel fired the 700 remaining strikers, and union lawyer and New Democratic Party figure David Lewis began to prosecute the hotel for interference in a lawful strike. Lewis received permission from the Ontario Labour Relations Board to charge the CPR with a violation of the Labour Act. Johnstone professed to be so confident he was not worried about the trial’s Friday the thirteenth start date. At trial, CPR counsel W.R. Jackett argued that the right to strike was not inherently a lawful activity of a union, and therefore the CPR was within its rights to fire strikers for not performing their duties. As a precedent, Jackett submitted a 1912 ruling by the House of Lords. Lewis protested that, by this logic, the right to strike would be destroyed. Chief Magistrate Thomas Elmore (who had admitted he lacked experience in labour law) demurred, “It might make them think a little more seriously about striking.”⁵¹ In November Elmore dis-

⁴⁸NAC, CLC Papers, Letter to Claude Jodoin from Archie Johnstone, 26 October 1961.

⁴⁹“Royal York Loses Two More Conventions,” *Toronto Star*, 27 May 1961; “Royal York Sends Strikers New Letter,” *Toronto Star*, 4 July 1961.

⁵⁰“Proposal Would Exclude 250 from Union,” *Toronto Star*, 6 July 1961.

⁵¹“Royal York Strikers Firm as D-Day Passes,” *Toronto Star*, 16 July 1961; “Royal York Court Fight October 13,” *Toronto Star*, 6 October 1961; Elmore quoted in “Argue Royal York Strike Case 5 Hours,” *Toronto Star*, 14 October 1961.

missed the case against the Royal York. He had accepted Jackett's 50-year-old precedent and concluded that there was nothing in the Labour Relations Act that guaranteed the right to strike, and therefore the hotel was justified in dismissing workers from walking out. The ruling, seriously undermining collective bargaining procedures, puzzled observers and outraged labour. Daley called Elmore's decision "disconcerting," adding, "if the union goes through the proper procedure it has every right to strike." Hotel & Club Employees Union International president Ed Miller said that the decision meant that the strike was no longer just between the strikers and the Royal York. It was now "a conflict basic to the rights of working people throughout the world." Telegrams from Labour councils across Canada condemned the legal judgement, and the union appealed the decision to Ontario's highest court.⁵²

The legal action throughout the summer was not matched by picket line activism and union militancy. Talks broke down in August over security in layoff issues. Frost was able to get the two sides together again in September, but little progress was made.⁵³ Strikers doggedly kept the pickets going despite grinding financial hardship to themselves and their families. A 12 January 1962 *Globe and Mail* article related some of the problems faced by strikers. Some took temporary work to make ends meet (while maintaining the twelve hours of weekly picketing required for benefits), but, as striker Alex Zarafontis found, "as soon as they find out you are on strike you can't get a job." He was forced to borrow money from his brother to keep going. Bellman Norman Talbot, married with two children, said he was only able to get by through his wife's shrewd management: "She shops the sales," he said. Many of the strikers were recent immigrants, which intensified the pressures on them. Waiter James Senchyshyn arranged to bring his partner from Poland before the strike. The two married to prevent her deportation, but, because of the strike, they were unable to pay for her English lessons, hindering her own chances of finding work and increasing the strain faced by the young couple. While the *Globe and Mail* article featuring these stories asserted that "Perhaps, the best off were married women.... for whom the Royal York wage was a secondary source of income," a closer look at the stories told by these married women shows this statement to be more revealing of the male breadwinner discourse of the early 1960s than of the actual situation. To be sure, married women were better placed to withstand the long struggle than a worker (male or female) whose strike pay was a family's sole source of income. Just as clearly, though, the strike also caused tension for these women. When maid Sidoni Ahr found some casual work around Christmas,

⁵²Quotations and information from "The Issue Became Jobs Not Wages," *Toronto Star*, 18 January 1962. Lewis also saw the case as a crucial one. In his autobiography *The Good Fight* (Toronto 1981), he recalls his satisfaction at winning the appeal, made sweeter to him by the court's order that the CPR pay the union's costs in all three courts. (398-399)

⁵³"No Progress in Hotel Strike Talks," *Toronto Star*, 26 August 1961; "Frost Fails to Settle Hotel Strike," *Toronto Telegram*, 20 September 1961.

her baker husband put in her twelve hours of picket duty on his day off. Obviously, Ahr's Royal York pay (even strike pay) was not just a bonus for this family, but a crucial part of the domestic unit's income. With her husband earning just \$60 a week, Ahr's \$20 weekly strike pay was of considerable importance.

More significantly, the *Globe's* breadwinner discourse masked some significant issues in the gender dynamics of service sector strikes and trade union practices. For instance, gender inequality in the union's distribution of strike pay was never addressed. Married men received \$27 a week, married women just \$20, the same as single men. Apparently the wage of these women was judged, even within the union, not of the same necessity as that of a male breadwinner.⁵⁴

Facing desperate conditions, strikers attempted to find ways to keep going as long as possible in hope of a settlement. International union president Ed Miller flew in from Cincinnati, promising Local 299 members all the resources necessary to win the strike. Attempting to rally the troops, he told of a hotel strike in Miami that had lasted four years, with the union spending \$3 million before eventually winning. Strikers who tried to claim their vacation pay found it was cut in half by the Royal York. In keeping with management's ultimatum, this reduction was rationalized because the workers had supposedly "resigned." A bid to collect Unemployment Insurance [UI] failed in October as the Board ruled that the hotel was not yet operating at 85 per cent capacity. The union appealed the decision, but to no avail.⁵⁵

As the chill of November began to set in on the picket lines, events provided the estimated 600 remaining strikers with both hope and disappointment. At the beginning of the month, MPP Kenneth Bryden joined the pickets, attacking the CPR as the "pampered pet of the Conservative Party."⁵⁶ A new provincial government took office under John Robarts, and recently appointed Labour minister William Warrender (a former union lawyer) pledged to go "all out" to end the strike.⁵⁷ However, the rhetoric was just that, and did not initially extend to forcing the two sides to meet or suggesting a solution. Zambri revealed that the \$250,000 strike fund was almost exhausted, and the nearly \$300,000 provided by the International was also largely gone.

The hotel's reports to the UI tribunal in November demonstrate that the strike had some success in affecting Royal York's bottom line. Room rentals were down 17.3 per cent, beverage sales had declined by almost one-third, and meals served dropped by 27.7 per cent. But losses to the hotel were no doubt offset by the fact that

⁵⁴ All quotations in above paragraphs from "Wind, Pickets, Whistle Past Royal York," *Globe and Mail*, 12 January 1962.

⁵⁵ "Six Unions Pledge Aid to Hotel Strikers," *Toronto Star*, 28 July 1961; "Holiday Pay Dispute in Hotel Strike," *Toronto Star*, 2 August 1961; "Unemployment Pay Again Denied Hotel Strikers," *Toronto Star*, 10 November 1961.

⁵⁶ "MPP Joins Hotel Pickets," *Toronto Star*, 4 November 1961.

⁵⁷ "Hopes to End Royal York Strike," *Canadian Press*, 6 November 1961.

it was operating with just under four-fifths of the staff it had before the strike. By the beginning of December — the eighth month of the strike — Warrender claimed he had a “secret plan” to end the dispute, and the union’s court appeal of Elmore’s decision on the firing of 700 strikers was looming. Though the situation was still grim, there was at least movement on the horizon.⁵⁸

Thankfully for the union, the appeal was heard by a judge conversant with labour issues. Justice McRuer expressed concern early on that the Elmore ruling could easily be used as a weapon against unions, with employers proposing ridiculous terms which workers would have to accept. To strike, they would have to quit or lose pension rights. Responding to Jackett’s 50-year-old precedent, McRuer stated: “I hate to think we’re back in the days of 1912.” In overturning Elmore’s verdict McRuer concluded that the Labour Relations Act “forbids the employer to dismiss members ... because they engage in lawful union activities.” Although the CPR appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, in June 1962 the Court found unanimously in favour of the union. Referring to the CPR’s contention that employees had to quit to lawfully strike, Justice Judson opined that “such a requirement would make nonsense of the Act.” The company was ordered to pay a fine of \$500 and court costs.⁵⁹

After a settlement attempt before Christmas failed, a marathon session of talks with both sides yielded a proposal from Warrender, which would have seen 90 per cent of strikers regain their jobs within a year. All pension rights would have been restored, but seniority was to be negotiated. The mandatory union checkoff would have been eliminated, layoff times reduced to four hours, and the possibility of removing 70 job classes from the bargaining agreement submitted to the Labour Board. Zambri and Johnstone told Warrender that the proposal was unacceptable to them, but they would present it to the membership impartially.

Privately, Johnstone confided to a reporter that if the membership accepted the offer, “I’ll go back to Scotland.” A record of the meeting compiled for the Minister reveals the depth of worker antipathy to the Warrender plan. Strikers booed from the start as Zambri and Johnstone read the proposals, refraining from comment as promised, but also notably without any endorsement. In responding to questions from members, Johnstone and negotiator Chapelle denounced the plan, with Chapelle calling it an “insult.” While Warrender was upset at their editorializing,

⁵⁸“Unemployment Pay Again Denied Hotel Strikers,” *Toronto Star*, 10 November 1961; “Royal York Loses Revenue over Strike,” *Canadian Press*, 15 November 1961; “‘Secret Peace Plan’ at Hotel — Warrender,” *Toronto Star*, 6 December 1961.

⁵⁹“Legal Battle Won’t Settle Hotel Strike,” *Toronto Star*, 18 January 1962; “Supreme Court Victory,” *Canadian Labour* (editorial), July-August 1962, p. 4; *Dominion Law Reports*, vol. 34, 1962, 654-666.

failure to advise the membership and to speak freely to them about the plan would have been an abdication of leadership by Johnstone and Zambri.⁶⁰

For the strikers, the plan seemed to be basically identical to what management had been offering since June. They saw little reason to sacrifice months of effort simply because Warrender wished them back on the hotel payroll. Johnstone pointed out that “an unacceptable proposal is not any better because it emanates from a minister of the crown.” Demanding that all strikers should be rehired, strikers voted down the agreement 341 to 5. Warrender was furious and accused the union of double-crossing him. His rage likely stemmed from a humiliating reversal in what the *Toronto Star* called “his first real test under fire.” He vowed to begin crossing the picket line, and a month later predicted the hotel would win the strike because of the CPR’s superior resources. The latter comment led Bryden to dub Warrender an “agent” of the hotel. The rejection also made Local 299 the target of criticism from the normally sympathetic *Toronto Star*, who opined that “the union was offered a reasonable offer and turned it down.” Other observers better understood the striking workers’ overwhelming rejection of the plan. In a letter to the *Spectator*, Hamilton NDP youth member Sharon Pierson pointed out that the question of rehiring “should never [have] entered the situation because these people should never have been fired for taking part in a legal strike in the first place.”⁶¹

Despite the failure of Warrender’s efforts, momentum towards a settlement began to build through the first few months of 1962. It became clear that issues of union security and, most importantly, how many strikers were to be hired back (and how quickly) were the major issues. A March attempt at conciliation by Toronto Board of Control failed, with the Royal York now refusing to rehire more than half of the strikers. At the eleventh hour it seemed the picket might take a radical direction. The International Union of Operating Engineers, with nine members at the hotel, were approaching a strike position. They suggested a mass anti-Royal York campaign by labour, with 2,000 pickets and a total supply cutoff, but eventually settled. Another union in the hotel, the American Federation of Musicians, walked off the job 30 June, and was immediately replaced with non-union musicians by MacKinnon. MacKinnon also charged that six employees would never be hired back due to open containers of alcohol found in their lockers. Johnstone protested

⁶⁰“Partial Record of Royal York Strikers Meeting,” in Archives of Ontario [AO], Toronto, Files of the Labour Minister. The record was likely compiled by Warrender’s executive assistant, Bill Kinmond, who, according to the *Star*, attended the meeting at the minister’s request. AO, RG 7-31, Conciliation Case Files 0-928; “Why the Warrender Plan Failed,” *Toronto Star*, 6 February 1962.

⁶¹“‘Utter Nonsense’ Says Royal York Strike Leader,” *Toronto Star*, 31 January 1962; “Hotel Strike Will ‘Peter Out’ Says Minister,” *Hamilton Spectator*; letter to the editor (date obscured), *Hamilton Spectator*; “Can Hotel Union Get Better Deal?” *Toronto Star*, 8 February 1962. During the strike, the CCF became the New Democratic Party, and, in fact, Royal York strikers were present at the founding convention.

this blacklisting, and demanded an open hearing in all cases, plus a questioning of strikers who had returned to work, charging that management had wiped the slate clean⁶² for previous indiscretions. While the two adversaries continued to battle in public, secret negotiations instigated by Premier Robarts began in early March 1962.

A settlement was finally reached by both sides on 8 April, after four weeks of meetings involving the hotel, the union, Robarts, and Montreal labour lawyer H. Carl Goldenberg. For workers, it was unquestionably a defeat. However, in view of the CPR's attitude throughout the conflict, the advantages enjoyed by management of superior resources, and the union's inability (or unwillingness) to seriously disrupt hotel business, the perseverance of the strikers meant they won more than could perhaps have been expected. All but five of the 452 remaining strikers were to be rehired within six months. Employees of eight years' seniority retained the seven-day layoff notice, with all others reduced to 48 hours. Pension, vacation, and seniority rights were restored to pre-strike levels. Wages were set at the company's offer of a two-and-one-half-cent raise over eighteen months. The mandatory union checkoff was abolished. With the exception of the layoff clause, the strike was settled identically to the CPR's final offer in April 1961.⁶³ However, compared to the hotel's offers throughout the summer and fall, it was enough for the remaining, strike-weary workers to vote for it: 316 to 76. International union president Ed Miller urged members to stay on strike, pledging further financial support, but the embattled local voted according to the advice of local leaders Johnstone and Zambri, who recommended the plan.⁶⁴

The strike, which ended seventeen days short of a year, took a significant toll on the union, its workers, and (to a much lesser degree) the hotel. The 447 who returned to work faced the unpleasant prospect of rejoining around 530 of their former brothers and sisters who had broken the strike and gone back to the Royal York. These had all been suspended by the union, which now had the task of stitching the local back together and rebuilding after losing a strike on which over \$800,000 had been expended. Although the remaining strikers regained pension rights, many

⁶²Frank Drea, "Curtain Up on the Last Crisis," *Toronto Telegram*, 13 January 1962; "Orliffe Fails to End Hotel Strike," *Toronto Star*, 5 March 1962; "Second Strike Threat at Royal York Hotel," *Toronto Star*, 15 March 1962; "Strikers Hang On for the Sake of 48," *Toronto Telegram*, 6 February 1962.

⁶³Craig Heron, in his book *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto 2003), claims the "bitter strike ... proved unable to stop major rollbacks in wages, hours of work and to prevent layoff notices." (312) While he is correct about the layoff provision (excepting that it did provide some security to longer-tenured staff), wage rollbacks were not part of the 1962 contract settlement; rather, the union accepted management's initial proposal of a modest wage increase.

⁶⁴"Still Picket Royal York Vote on Terms Sunday," *Toronto Star*, 7 April 1962; "CPR to Find Other Jobs for Strike Replacements," *Globe and Mail*, 9 April 1962; "Hotel Workers Vote to Return to Work," *Canadian Press*, 10 April 1962.

workers were starting from zero. During the strike the hotel had returned pension contributions of up to \$1,500 to the “fired” strikers, and 116 had cashed them (against the union’s urging) in order to keep going. Now they had to repay these amounts in order to re-establish their benefits, a difficult task for workers just getting back to their poorly paid jobs after almost a year. The Royal York had also suffered during the strike, although the multi-million-dollar resources of its CPR parent provided it with far more security than that possessed by a bellhop or a chambermaid. It was estimated that business during the strike declined by 15 or 20 per cent, costing the hotel \$500,000. Still, the Royal York turned a profit in 1961. A more far-reaching consequence for the CPR was Toronto council’s decision to end the Royal York’s railway hotel tax exemption, with \$170,000 payable in the first year. The adverse publicity caused by the strike was a major factor. As for the over 900 unemployed hired to break the strike, 100 were kept on at the Royal York, and another 300 were offered jobs at other CPR hotels, thereby disseminating non-union workers throughout all CPR hotel operations in Canada.⁶⁵

Over 40 years have passed since the Royal York strike. Yet most hotel and restaurant workers today face many of the same problems. Low pay and insecure, undervalued work (in widely varying shifts), often done for a large, wealthy employer demanding the maximum amount of labour while providing a bare minimum of wages and benefits, characterize labour relations in the service sector. Unlike the Royal York strikers, many of today’s hotel workers are without the representation of a union. Still, a study of this strike can tell us much about the service workplace as a site where class, gender, and ethnicity intersect; how workers’ actions play out in a space of leisure; and, most importantly, an evaluation of the strategies used in the strike can be valuable in divining approaches for contemporary workers in the industry.

In examining the Royal York strike, the tenuous position of the workers, many of whom were women and recent immigrants to Canada, is starkly apparent. As most of their jobs were without a conventionally recognized commodified skill, they were quickly replaced. Many of them returned to work in fear or found other jobs out of necessity. While this provided some relief for individuals, it created deep fissures within the unionized ranks. For those who did stay out on strike, meagre strike pay was maximized by ingenious spouses, savings were emptied, family members were turned to for loans, and pensions were cashed and spent years before retirement. The Royal York strike demonstrated how difficult it is for service workers to withstand a long strike against a wealthy employer. Unfortunately, Hotel & Club Employees Union leaders lacked the insight to understand the predicament of their membership.

⁶⁵“CPR to Find Other Jobs for Strike Replacements,” *Globe and Mail*, 9 April 1962; “Chronology of Strike,” *Globe and Mail*, 11 April 1962; “New Convention Record Despite Hotel Strike,” *Financial Post*, 3 February 1962.

Because service workers can (and will) be quickly replaced by employers, they need to time job actions precisely in order to create a maximum impact. The failure in choosing the right time for action was a key cause for the eventual failure of the Royal York strike. That chefs had prepared dinner before the 24 April walkout may seem trivial, but it removed a significant hurdle for management on the first night of the strike, and this bought the hotel some precious time, allowing strikebreakers to be recruited. Service workers' power is greatest at moments when their labour is needed most. The inability of union leadership to plan the strike with this principle in mind hamstrung Local 299's efforts. This extended well beyond the ill-timed 4:00 p.m. walkout, because the Royal York conflict commenced when other hotels in Toronto were mostly full. Guests thus had little choice but to stay at the Royal York, and, in the crucial first few days of the strike, management had fewer cancelled reservations than might have been the case in a period with less pressure on Toronto's hotel capacity. Even more problematic for the union was the decision to strike during a period of high seasonal unemployment in Toronto. The CPR was able to recruit strikebreakers from a large pool of jobless, operating a virtual "employment office" in Union Station. Commenting in November 1961, Conservative MPP Allan Lawrence called the union's tactics "idiotic," commencing a strike "at a time of year when unemployment is always at its greatest."⁶⁶ He believed that if the union had waited till late August to strike, the results would have been different, and he was probably right. Though a Tory, Lawrence's opinions were not those of a union-basher, as he also condemned management's conduct and attitude.

When it became apparent that the walkout would not shut down the Royal York, union leadership chose to attempt to fight the strike as a battle of public opinion. This approach yielded both positive and negative results, and an analysis of this kind of public relations strategy is particularly instructive for workers in the service and leisure sector today. To battle for public opinion, a cause must first capture the public's attention. There is no doubt the strike was successful in this aspect. The strike at the Royal York attracted enormous media attention, and not just in Toronto. There were several reasons for this. Many stories filed during the first days of the strike focused on the class reversals brought on by the walkout of the workers. Headlines such as "Guests Do Own Chores" and the *Canadian Press*'s "Do-It-Yourself Hotel Open Despite Strike" related with amusement stories of "grinning guests" carrying their own bags and making their own beds, and of CPR management struggling in their new jobs as elevator operators and bellhops.⁶⁷

There were also many articles about the strike itself, concerned with the issues and the struggles of the workers. This was in no small way due to the adversaries of the union: the CPR, one of Canada's largest and richest companies, represented by the Royal York, "the \$30 million apple of the CPR's eye, the largest hotel in the

⁶⁶"Knock Heads, End Hotel Strike — MPP," *Toronto Star*, 27 November 1961.

⁶⁷"Guests Do Own Chores," *Ottawa Journal*, 25 April 1961; "Do-It-Yourself Hotel Open Despite Strike," *Canadian Press*, 25 April 1961.

Commonwealth,”⁶⁸ as the *Hamilton Spectator* put it. This disparity in wealth and prestige drew attention to workers’ grievances, and the David-and-Goliath nature of the battle generated some sympathy for the union. Press coverage of the strike invariably commented on the wealth and prestige of the CPR and Royal York and referred to the “bulldog tenacity”⁶⁹ of the union. Articles detailed the hardships endured by strikers and their will to carry on anyway. A representative journalistic statement quoted a “tight-lipped chambermaid” as vowing: “We’ll stay out here if we have to eat crusts.”⁷⁰ Today, in an age where more and more service jobs involve working for a high-profile branded multinational, labour actions by leisure workers can garner tremendous press attention. This aids workers in raising awareness of their grievances and in putting pressure on companies that, with so much invested in their image, are highly sensitive to bad publicity. A recent example can be seen in the efforts by youth in both British Columbia and Quebec to unionize McDonald’s franchises, which attracted enormous media coverage due both to the young age of the workers involved and the status of the omnipresent McDonald’s as a business and cultural icon. As Naomi Klein has noted, “there is clear value in the big-tree approach” of challenging high profile employers.⁷¹ The strike also drew attention because the Royal York was, in most people’s minds, not a space of work, but one of leisure. Because the strike brought workers’ grievances and action into a place of refined relaxation and pampered comfort, it had a wider journalistic reach in Toronto than a strike at a factory or mill would produce.

As the “Commonwealth’s largest hotel,” the Royal York was a symbol of civic prestige. If the Royal York was not “Toronto’s community centre,” it was a key site for the city’s most powerful citizens. As the *Toronto Telegram* observed, “the social phase of municipal government just cannot function when the hotel is off limits.”⁷² City council’s ban on functions during the strike led to Mayor Phillips’s continual agitating to lift the policy. Provincial politicians, including the premier and several cabinet ministers, were caught up in the strike due to their connections to the Royal York (Prime Minister Diefenbaker and his cabinet avoided the hotel). Several prominent civic events became bitter battlegrounds over whether or not to cross the picket line, including the Toronto Maple Leafs dinner and the workplace safety dinner at which both Labour Minister Daley and Mayor Phillips crossed the picket line. The most controversial of these events was the annual Easter Seals sports fundraiser. Several star athletes and entertainers from Canada and the United States, including comedians Wayne & Shuster, refused to cross the line. Combative Maple Leafs president Conn Smythe shouted at strikers, “when your kids are crip-

⁶⁸“Do-It-Yourself Plan Keeps Guests Busy During Strike,” *Hamilton Spectator*, 27 April 1961.

⁶⁹“Royal York Strike is Turning into a War of Attrition,” *Canadian Press*, 24 January 1961.

⁷⁰“Sure to Win Now — Hotel Strikers,” *Toronto Star*, 5 May 1961.

⁷¹Klein, *No Logo*, 423.

⁷²“Curtain up on the Last Crisis,” *Toronto Telegram*, 13 January 1962.

pled, we'll take care of them too." The disabled boy acting as "Timmy," the Easter Seals representative, was carried across the line to shouts of "here comes the excuse. We need a national health plan for these children — not a fancy ball."⁷³ While certainly not all Torontonians were faced with the dilemma of whether or not to cross a picket line to attend a gala dinner or other function, the strike affected the larger community as few service work disputes have, and therefore gained widespread media coverage and comment. The *Telegram* described it as a "community vendetta," in which thousands "never before involved in a labour dispute" have been forced to take sides: "No group has been exempt from the strike."⁷⁴

While an appeal to public opinion by the union was undoubtedly successful in attracting attention, its utility as the main weapon employed in fighting a strike to win leaves much to be desired. First, such a strategy in the leisure/consumption sector is weakened (perhaps doomed to fail) by the nature of the "public" that makes up the core of the constituency addressed. The Royal York's clientele was an obvious indication of this problem. The hotel, probably the most expensive and luxurious in Canada at the time, attracted a wealthy, establishment customer base, people distanced from the core of labour and union support, if not overtly hostile to the entire project of working-class organization. Even in the first few days of the strike, hardly any guests were reported as leaving. While some well-off Canadians may have been sympathetic to the strikers' concerns, or admired their low-key appeal to upper-class largesse from those who had served them for years, they were not about to let a strike disrupt their social customs. Despite the egalitarian rhetoric of post-war Canada, the strike revealed that workers and owners were living in two very different worlds, even granting greater contact between the two at the Royal York than in most other situations.

Furthermore, a significant part of the Royal York's business came from hosting conventions. Many of these were booked years in advance, and their organizers were usually unwilling or unable to move them at the last moment, especially as the Royal York was one of the only hotels in Toronto with adequate convention facilities.⁷⁵ A notable exception was obviously labour conventions, which did refuse to cross picket lines and were perhaps the largest factor contributing to the \$500,000 the hotel lost during the strike. The fact that so many other individuals and organizations ignored worker interests was also damaging to the union because of the demoralizing effect it had on the strikers. As maid Jennin Michinowski said, "Nobody cares or pays attention to us. It just breaks your heart."⁷⁶ This inability to sustain meaningful picket lines no doubt induced many of the strikers to return to work or to find other jobs, weakening the union further.

⁷³"Clergy Join Labor Men on Picket Line," *Toronto Star*, 1 February 1962.

⁷⁴"Curtain Up on the Last Crisis," *Toronto Telegram*, 13 January 1962.

⁷⁵"Hotels Booming in Toronto but Not Because of Strike," *Globe and Mail*, 26 October 1962.

⁷⁶"Wind, Pickets, Whistle Past Royal York," *Globe and Mail*, 12 January 1962.

The easily crossed picket line was a potent symbol of larger problems. Ultimately, the decision to appeal to public opinion as the foundation of the union's campaign led to conservative tactics which proved to be ineffective. This decision illustrates the union leadership's failure to appreciate the particular problems of its membership and the approaches necessary to achieve an improvement in the workers' situation, difficulties exacerbated by a recalcitrant and powerful employer determined to "destroy unionism at its fringes." The Royal York workers were among the most vulnerable in the Canadian workforce, composed as they were of large numbers of women and recent immigrants in poorly paid, low-status jobs that were easily transferred to strikebreakers. These workers were ill-equipped to endure a long strike and would have been best served by aggressive action to force a quick settlement. Instead, union leadership viewed and constructed their membership as a higher class of workers who could not be replaced because only they provided "Royal York service." Even after it became clear how mistaken this was, Johnstone maintained that the "dignity of the Royal York employees will win the strike just as it made the hotel famous."⁷⁷

In a strike where the hotel was clearly prepared to go to any lengths to break the union, labour leaders refused to reciprocate in kind. The union's reserved and differential tactics may have prompted one commentator to assert that, in Toronto's history, "never before have strikers gained so much public sympathy,"⁷⁸ but sympathy alone (especially from something as nebulous as "the public") does not win strikes. Especially short-sighted was the refusal to create alliances with other unions to use the aggressive power of Toronto's strong labour movement to pressure the Royal York. Secondary boycotts (which could have shut down the hotel regardless of strikebreakers) were never seriously pursued. Offers from other unions to lend people to create mass pickets which would have stopped the flow of guests crossing and scabs entering were repeatedly turned down. Cobble has persuasively demonstrated how important such union alliances and strong collective actions were in achieving justice for service workers.⁷⁹ The union's reluctance to encourage and build such militant solidarity, and its failure to understand the predicament of its members and fight accordingly, were the largest factors contributing to the defeat of the Royal York strike.

Are these criticisms of the union unfair? Certainly some of them benefit from hindsight. Yet, by any measure, the union lost this strike. And certain key strategies, chief among them the decision for a dignified strike fought through public opinion, should never have been the sole approach after the debacle of the first few days. More importantly, there is evidence that organized labour in the Toronto hotel in-

⁷⁷"Strikers Ask RY Supply Cutoff," *Toronto Telegram*, 26 July 1961.

⁷⁸Don O'Hearn, "Good Pattern Set for Labor," *Cornwall Standard-Freeholder*, 11 September 1961.

⁷⁹Cobble, *Dishing It Out*, 92-97.

dustry has learned from setbacks such as these, and crafted more effective ways to achieve results.

In his article "Renewal From Different Directions: The Case of UNITE-HERE Local 75," geographer Steven Tufts outlines different methods in use by the contemporary Toronto union, which, he notes, "emerged from a period of questionable leadership followed by international trusteeship ... to become one of the more innovative unions in the city."⁸⁰ Local 75 applies a variety of integrated, reinforcing strategies in order to advance its members' interests, methods Tufts points out are necessary in the industry's global capitalist framework and because of the marginalized status of its largely immigrant workforce.

These strategies include long-term organizing, building up confidence and solidarity among workers. Local 75 also attempts to pre-empt the necessity of strike action by holding public rallies during bargaining, and timing job action or the threat of it to major tourist events such as Caribana or the 2002 World Youth Day. This attention to timing avoids the situation faced by Royal York workers in 1961.⁸¹

Perhaps the most valuable lesson Toronto hotel unionists may have learned since the 1961-1962 strike was to initiate multinational organizing and bargaining to counteract the multinational consolidation of the industry. Local 75 has worked not only to bring widespread organizing and pattern bargaining to workers in a given area, but to extend these across the continent and beyond in an effort to rectify the imbalance in power and resources faced by hotel workers and job actions. Tufts, drawing on his own research and that of Miriam Wells, also notes that union activism of hotel workers in Toronto and California gives the lie to the common perception of immigrant labourers as fearful and "unorganizable," a myth which unfairly generalizes as well as discounts the previous experiences of hotel workers with radicalism in their countries of origin. These examples of largely immigrant and marginalized workers opposing capital are of course reminiscent of the Royal York strike.⁸²

Indeed, Tufts' valuable work suggests many historical directions for the study of hotel and restaurant workers, in Toronto and beyond. In the local instance, four decades lie unexplored between this study and Tufts' research, decades of decline, corruption, trusteeship, and revitalization which could prove a valuable case study in the changing nature of the struggle between consolidating capital and labour during the backlash period. These histories have relevance not only to studies of service workers, but to anyone interested in the changing fortunes and composition of

⁸⁰Steven Tufts, "Renewal from Different Directions: The Case of UNITE-HERE Local 75," in Chris Schenk and Pradeep Kumar, eds., *Paths to Union Renewal: Canadian Experiences* (Toronto 2006), 201.

⁸¹Tufts, "Renewal," 208-209.

⁸²Tufts, "Renewal," 202-209. Another excellent analysis of organizing immigrant workers, this time in Southern California, can be found in Hector Delgado's *New Immigrants, Old Unions: Organizing Undocumented Workers in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia 1993).

the labour movement in the post-war era. How was work and struggle altered by mergers, branding, and multinational capital? How did the workforce change? How did changes in the ethnic and gender composition affect the union, the workplace, and the forms of activism pursued or abandoned by workers? These are questions that scholars and unions have still not fully confronted, and the hotel and restaurant workplace appears to have been on the leading edge of these developments, both in worker dynamics and capitalist restructuring. This reinforces the importance of studying these workers and their struggles.

At the time of writing, these struggles are about to be ramped up by one of the most ambitious campaigns led by a mainstream North American union. Aiming to end the wage and benefits differential between hotel workers in the unionized North and largely non-union South-Southwest, organized labour's campaign to match contract expirations is bearing fruit. In the summer of 2006, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and Honolulu workers' contracts expire, and, in San Francisco, workers have been without a contract since 2005. While this would matter little in a single-owner framework, consolidation in the industry means that multinationals such as Hilton, Starwood, and Hyatt are under considerable financial pressure. UNITE-HERE hopes to use this pressure to force the chains to stop blocking unionization in its unorganized hotels, thus organizing the entire hotel industry. As *Washington Post* columnist Harold Meyerson has noted, "alongside the living-wage ordinances and Wal-Mart mandates, UNITE-HERE is opening a whole new front."⁸³

The strike at the Royal York, while unsuccessful, must be recognized as belonging to this enduring and tenacious tradition of workplace activism by hotel and restaurant workers. With leisure workers today beset by the age-old problems, namely low pay, little control over production, job insecurity, employers implacably hostile to unions, and a workforce still largely drawn from the most vulnerable elements of society, they must use every available resource, especially unconventional and militant ones, to improve their situation. This heritage of activism is a resource that must be reclaimed with pride and recognized as an asset towards finding winning strategies in the current climate, which exhibits a return to the brash anti-unionism of the Royal York era. The Royal York strike demonstrates the need for service workers to form networks throughout the labour movement; for leadership that understands the position of workers, and is prepared to fight accordingly; and for action that is well-timed, united, imaginative, and militant.

Similarly, for labour historians, and the working class itself, further studies of service work history are essential, especially with the enormous growth of the leisure/consumption sector as a primary Canadian workplace. Just as service workers

⁸³Harold Meyerson, "Taking on the Hotels," *Washington Post*, 18 January 2006. This activism is in marked contrast to the message sent recently by the Canadian leadership who declined to have pro-organizing CLC leadership candidate Carole Wall speak to their membership.

need different tactics than their manufacturing predecessors, so scholars need to maintain a sensitivity to the particular dynamics of the service workplace. A union-based approach is inadequate, owing to the fluidity and instability of service work activism. Actions inside and outside traditional organization must also be examined. The structure of the hotel and restaurant workplace also needs to be analysed. More than most 20th-century industries, these workplaces were of mixed gender and racial composition, with attendant hierarchies of race, gender, and job description. “Class” postures were themselves often a masquerade performed by workers to satisfy wealthy patrons, at the same time as the realities of labour underneath this costume of élitism were stark evidence of fundamental inequality. Just as labour’s challenge is to better understand the dynamics of service work in order to devise effective strategies, scholars must appreciate the distinct cultures of service workplaces and workers to do their history justice.

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