Labour/Le Travailleur

Munitions and Labour Militancy
The 1916 Hamilton Machinists' Strike

Myer Siemiatycki

Volume 3, 1978

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt3art04

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)
1911-4842 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Siemiatycki, M. (1978). Munitions and Labour Militancy: The 1916 Hamilton Machinists' Strike. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, *3*, 131–151.

MUNITIONS AND LABOUR MILITANCY: The 1916 Hamilton Machinists' Strike *

Myer Siemiatycki
York University

"It is the most critical — the most cruel labour situation that ever faced the Dominion of Canada."[1] So commented E. N. Compton, an official in the Department of Labour, on the first day of the 1916 Hamilton machinists' strike. Compton's sense of urgency was shared by many contemporaries who looked on with dread and disbelief as the industrial bastion of Hamilton was hit by the largest and most prolonged strike to disrupt munitions production during the First World War. In retrospect, however, the strike's significance goes far beyond the grave alarmism which it generated. For its causes, course and aftermath reveal a great deal about the attitudes and interactions of the major protagonists in Canada's industrial relations system during the war.

I

Munitions production in Canada during the First World War laid the basis not only for economic recovery, but for the rejuvenation of the country's trade union movement as well. In 1914 the major features of Canada's labour scene were unemployment, wage reductions and unions in disarray: indeed, many observers believed that the depression which began in 1913 was imposing unprecedented suffering on the Canadian working class.[2]

Hard times also left their toll on the country's trade unions. Between 1913 and 1915 the Canadian labour movement lost 20 per cent of its members

* I am grateful to Irving Abella and Craig Heron for their critical evaluation of an earlier draft of this paper. Neither is responsible for the shortcomings which have remained.

[1] *Hamilton Spectator*, (henceforth *H.S.*), 12 June 1916.

[2] See, for example, the *Industrial Banner*, (henceforth *I.B.*), 23 January 1914; *B. C. Federationist*, 3 July 1914; Alberta Federation of Labor, *Report of the Second Convention, 1914*, report of vice-president English.

and saw a total of 134 local union branches pass out of existence entirely.[3] While economic stagnation preceded the onset of war in 1914, many union leaders initially held the view that industrial recovery was dependent on a swift end to the hostilities in Europe. Thus in 1915 John Bruce, Canadian general organizer for the United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters of America, complained: "Trade conditions are still serious in eastern Canada and everyone is hoping to hear of an early termination of the war with the hope it will bring a return to normal conditions."[4] Similarly, John McClelland, Canadian vice-president of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), noted the difficulties his union was having in retaining its membership by the end of 1914 and added, "but things will be different after the war, so they say. I hope so."[5]

Contrary to these expectations, however, it was precisely the requirements of war production which revitalized the Canadian economy and in the process revived sagging trade union fortunes by turning the flooded labour market of 1914 into a dire manpower shortage by 1916. Yet this transition began only after an initial period of dislocation in which the onset of war disrupted trade and investment, thereby intensifying already depressed conditions. Despite the fact that the war was only three weeks old before British authorities cabled Canada's Minister of Militia inquiring about this country's capabilities in providing munitions,[6] it took some time for production to begin in earnest. Writing in 1916, Robert Borden's valuable political confidante W. F. O'Connor explained some of the impediments to the rapid development of a munitions industry in Canada:

> Capital was panicky, equipment non-existent, satisfactory raw materials rare, skilled labour not to be had. There was uncertainty as to the duration of the war. There could be no certainty that any investment in plant, or in materials beyond that amount actually necessary to produce any particular order would not be entirely lost.[7]

But as the prospect of a quick end to the war faded and as Canadian industry gradually demonstrated its ability to produce the required goods, war-related manufacturing began to increase rapidly from the spring of 1915 onward. Annual figures for the production of shells in Canada clearly underline the trend: 3000 in 1914; 5,377,000 in 1915; 19,942,000 in 1916.[8] At the start

[3] *Third Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada*, 1913, p. 9; 1915, p. 7. In actual numbers, trade union membership in Canada fell from 175,799 in 1913 to 143,343 in 1915.

[4] *Plumbers, Gas & Steam Fitter's Journal*, September 1915, p. 18.

[5] *Machinist's Journal*, (henceforth *M.J.*), December 1914, p. 1170.

[6] David Carnegie; *The History of Munitions Supply in Canada* (London 1925), pp. xx.

[7] PAC, Borden Papers, Memoir Notes, vol. 339, W. F. O'Connor, *Canada's Effort — The Dominion in the Great War*, p. 1777, unpub. mss. in Borden Papers, PAC.

[8] Peter Rider, "The Imperial Munitions Board and its Relation to Government,

of 1915, $50 million worth of war orders had been placed in Canada; twelve months later the total had soared to $600 million; by the end of 1916 the value of all war production in the country was estimated at close to $1.1 billion.[9]

For employers these contracts meant massive profits, while to workers they brought jobs at last. By the end of 1915 there were 175,000 workers employed in war industries — over 100,000 of these in munitions work. During 1916 the figures jumped to 304,000 and 185,000 respectively.[10] The impact of this growing war industry on the country was extremely uneven as the location of munitions production was overwhelmingly concentrated in central Canada. Figures for the entire war period reveal that 60 per cent of this work was done in Ontario, 35 per cent in Quebec, with only 4 per cent in the Maritimes and 1 per cent in the West.[11] Consequently within a matter of months, from the middle of 1915 until early 1916, a flooded labour market in the cities of central Canada evaporated amidst the surge of arms production.

As a result it was unions in the metal trades in Ontario and Quebec, especially the International Association of Machinists (IAM) which first registered the benefits of economic recovery. The IAM traced its American origin back to the late 1880s, and by the following decade had established numerous locals throughout Canada. Holding broad jurisdictional rights over workers labouring on machine tools, the union was especially well represented in metal fabrication plants and railway shops, precisely the workplaces which were transformed into armament suppliers during the war.[12]

The gloomy stream of reports describing unemployment and declining membership within the machinist's union came to an abrupt halt in the spring of 1915. Instead, IAM officials in Ontario and Quebec began to note substantial new hirings of machinists in munitions plants. Within months this was followed by accounts of rising union recruitment.[13] While the membership of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada (TLC) declined substantially from 1914 to 1916, the IAM in Canada recorded a rise in members from 4654 in 1914 to 5690 in 1915 and 7108 in 1916.[14] The machinists thus became the first of many unions to take advantage of the economic recovery wrought by war.

From the very inception of munitions production in Canada, workers and union officers were rankled by the wages and conditions prevailing in the new

---

Business, and Labour, 1914-1920", unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1974, p. 130.

[9] *Canadian Annual Review*, (henceforth *C.A.R.*), 1915, p. 240; 1916, p. 296.

[10] *C.A.R.*, 1915, p. 235; 1916, p. 296; Rider: op cit., p. 36, p. 371.

[11] PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 18, Memo 9, November 1918.

[12] On the IAM's origins and jurisdiction, see Harold Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada*, (Toronto 1948), pp. 52-3, 123-4.

[13] *M.J.*, April, May, July, August, September, 1915.

[14] *Fourth Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada, 1914*, p. 192; 1915, p. 185; 1916, p. 168.

industry. W. G. Powlesland, Canadian vice-president of the Blacksmith's union, vented labour's outrage over the matter early in 1915 when he charged:

> . . . the conditions of the workers who are employed on war material is scandalous in spite of the fact that the employers are getting a good price for their output, while the men who actually produce the goods are getting only a bare pittance.[15]

From the start, then, Canadian manufacturers took advantage of the flooded labour market to employ workers in munitions industries at wages and conditions which were inferior to existing union standards. Battle-lines were thus quickly drawn for a major confrontation between organized labour and the combined force of business and government over the terms of employment in munitions industries.[16]

Unions initially sought to redress their grievances by pressing for the inclusion of fair wage clauses in war production contracts. If this were done, manufacturers would be obliged to respect union standards of employment or forego contract awards. The TLC quickly took up this issue as a major legislative demand on the Borden government.[17]

Early in 1916 the Congress elaborated its stand on the fair wage issue in an important submission to the Cabinet. The memo by TLC President James Watters and Secretary Paddy Draper called for the creation of a permanent Fair Wage Board with powers to set wage rates and working conditions in war-supply industries, as the only means to "almost entirely eliminate any cause for friction" and to establish "a more satisfactory relationship between employees and employers". Specifically, the Congress advocated a Board composed of equal representation from international unions and war manufacturers, plus an impartial chairman. In concluding their brief, Watters and Draper stressed that conditions inside the war plants were becoming intolerable and only the moderating influence of union officials prevented grave repercussions: "Conditions in some of the Canadian industries have been far from satisfactory and it has only been through the efforts of International Officers that strikes have been prevented."[18]

While the trade union leadership in Canada never issued a public no-

[15] *Blacksmith's Journal*, April 1915, p. 16.

[16] For early complaints by labour on this score, see PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 6, eg. Hughes to Crothers, 18 November 1914; also PAC, Borden Papers, RLB Series, file 1419.

[17] PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 6, Watters and Somerville to Borden, 27 January 1915. Good discussions of the lengthy conflict over the fair wage issue are provided in Rider, The Imperial Munitions Board, ch. 9, and by David Bercuson, "Organized Labour and the Imperial Munitions Board", *Industrial Relations*, 28 (July 1973), pp. 602-616. Neither author, however, sufficiently explores the conservatizing influence of trade union officialdom in the campaign to improve conditions in the munitions plants.

[18] PAC, Toronto and District Trades and Labour Council Minutes, (henceforth T&DTLC), Draper and Watters to Borden, 6 January 1916.

strike pledge during World War I, it is clear that once the TLC endorsed the war effort at its 1914 convention, many union leaders believed that their organizations could ill afford to strike in such perilous times. This commitment to curtail strikes was most strongly felt by union leaders in the munitions sector. From 1916 onward their reluctance to countenance work disruptions came into increasing tension with the growing rebelliousness of their members.

In 1917 when John McClelland of the machinists and Tom Moore of the carpenter's union presented the TLC's case for the fair wage clause to the Hon. J.H. Thomas, Labour M.P. and General Secretary of Britain's National Union of Railwaymen, they explained the dilemma which had confronted Canada's union leaders since the start of the war:

> The number of men involved in this war work has caused us, since the inception of the war in 1914, to exercise almost unlimited patience and accept uncalled for reductions of standard trade conditions. We felt the responsibility of allowing a stoppage of the work of this number of men from the essential industries mentioned and should such unfortunate circumstances occur that it would materially affect the success of the war. The men themselves feeling keenly the injustice done them had a natural desire to take the matters in their hands on many occasions, but up to the present, with very few exceptions, we have succeeded in preventing them from doing so, always holding out the hope of a more reasonable attitude being assumed by the Imperial Munitions Board toward us.[18]

While oppressive working conditions and the rising cost of living prompted munitions workers to the "natural desire" for strong remedial action their union leadership was constrained by its conception of responsible union behaviour in the midst of war. Indeed, McClelland bluntly asserted in June 1916: "The only reason we have had no strikes in Canada is that I gave the prime minister a promise that if the government would give us some assistance, we would do our best to avert trouble."[20] Nor was the moderation of the country's labour leaders lost on the members of the Borden government. Addressing the 1915 TLC convention, Labour Minister Thomas Crothers praised the union movement's leaders as:

> ... reasonable men who take in the broader view that the good of all should be considered. Some people think that the labor leaders wish to foment strikes, but that has not been my experience. They are keenly anxious to maintain peace.[21]

The TLC campaign for the fair wage clause embodied all the meekness of the Congress' traditional cap-in-hand approach to government. In 1916 James Watters re-asserted the view that the Congress must adopt tactful and quiet methods in attempting to influence government, shunning the tempta-

[18] PAC, Borden Papers, RLB Series, file 1419, McClelland and Moore to Thomas, 17 May 1917.
[20] *H.S.*, 10 June 1916.
[21] *Report of the Proceedings of the 14th Trades and Labor Congress Convention*, (henceforth TLC *Proceedings*), 1915, p. 5.

tion of launching any mass agitation for reforms.[22] Accordingly, the Congress executive continued to rely on private meetings with the Borden government and Chairman Joseph Flavelle of the Imperial Munitions Board; on these occasions union leaders pledged their commitment to industrial stability but appealed for concessions before matters went beyond their control.[23]

Not surprisingly, neither Prime Minister Borden nor Flavelle was convinced of the need to capitulate to TLC lobbying. Their respective motives were instructive. Flavelle feared above all that the introduction of the fair wage clause would result in a strike by munitions *employers*, since it "would result in many manufacturers being unwilling to produce munitions, as it would set up new conditions for the labor in their works, and that rather than submit to interference between themselves and their workpeople they would refuse to produce munitions."[24] Furthermore, the success of union officials in preventing strike action in war industries only strengthened Flavelle's view that no serious discontent existed.[25] Meanwhile, Borden rejected the TLC's call for a Fair Wages Board as unfeasible; a permanent Board, he feared, would be discredited as soon as it rendered a decision which either side objected to.[26]

By clinging to the limited tactic of closed door lobbying, the TLC undermined its ability to influence men like Flavelle and Borden who invariably rationed their concessions in proportion to the force behind the call for change. The chief concern of both men was the efficient production of commodities for war. Unless they could be shown that concessions to labour were the only means of maintaining productivity, neither felt moved to submit to the Congress' humble appeals.

Instead, the Borden government acted to resolve the matter in March 1916 with the aid of a trusted piece of labour legislation. By this time there

[22] This was so, Watters argued, since the Congress had no authority to dictate action, whether in the form of strikes, boycotts or voting behaviour, to its affiliates. He explained the limitations confronting the Congress in its dealings with the government in the following convoluted formulation: "... *the coercive method without the power of compulsion places the party being coerced*, [i.e. the government, original emphasis], *in the position of being compelled to resist coercion*." In short, Watters realized that the transparent threats of a weak Congress with scant sway over its affiliates would achieve little. TLC *Proceedings*, 1916, p. 38.

[23] For example, on 27 March 1916 IAM organizer H. Harper wrote to Flavelle protesting against wage cuts ordered at the Fisher Motor Co. Ltd., pleading that "no Officer can keep men in control when there [sic] very existence is at issue..." PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2.

[24] PAC, Borden Papers, RLB Series, file 1419, Flavelle to Borden, 7 June 1917. While Flavelle expressed his fear of employers' reaction to outside intervention in their plants most strongly in this statement of 1917, he made similar assertions to Borden well before, eg., PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Memo 3 March 1916.

[25] *Ibid.*, vol. 6, Flavelle to Elliot, 8 December 1915.

[26] PAC, T&DTLC Minutes, J. C. Watters 'Interim Parliamentary Report', 5 April 1916.

were, as we shall see, audible rumblings of labour unrest in the munitions sector and the government hoped to stabilize the situation by extending the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act to cover all war production industries. Rather than placating labour, however, this move triggered an uproar of criticism. The *Industrial Banner*, for example, reacted with common bitterness:

> Deputation after deputation has waited upon the authorities at Ottawa, only to be put off with specious excuses, and now, when the workers have served notice that they do not propose to be any longer exploited by soulless contractors, lo! and behold! the Government takes action, not to protect the workers and remedy the evils they complain of, but to force them to remain at work even if, as many are doing, they are refused fair wages and working conditions.[27]

Nor did the TLC's leadership escape the debacle over the extension of the Lemieux Act untarnished, as the Toronto and District Trades and Labor Council pointedly criticized the Congress executive for not exercising "the proper vigilance and care . . . when a measure of the character referred to has been allowed to become law. . . ."[28] In defense of the executive, Paddy Draper recounted the frequent meetings held between President Watters and members of the Borden government, and concluded: "It may not be amiss for me to point out to the Toronto Labor Council that the Executive Council of the Congress have no power to force the Government to comply with their requests."[29]

Here, briefly stated, was precisely the significance of the Congress' losing battle for the fair wage clause. Conditions in the munitions plants could not be ameliorated simply through legislative lobbying. Moreover the government's resort to the Lemieux Act, with its restrictions on the freedom to strike, only intensified the resolve of munitions workers to adopt more militant tactics for the realization of their demands. Beset with discontent, it was Hamilton's machinists who launched the first prolonged munitions strike of the war in June 1916.

II

The city of Hamilton was a microcosm of the country's economic trends between 1914 and 1916. On the eve of the war Richard Riley, the IAM's business agent in the city, reported that "trade has fallen away to nothing". Indeed the majority of Hamilton's plants were either operating with reduced manpower or were completely shut down. Moreover, unemployment revealed itself as a phenomenon which could generate divisions within labour's ranks as readily as it might foster unity. "We have here working at the machinist trade," Riley noted,

> a mixture of old countrymen, Canadians and Americans. They are continually fight-

[27] *I.B.*, 7 April 1916.
[28] PAC, T&DTLC Minutes, 6 April 1916.
[29] *Ibid*.

ing among themselves as to who is responsible for their rotten working conditions. The Canadians and Americans blame the old countrymen, and vice versa.[30]

However, Hamilton's aggressive industrial community lost little time in asserting its claim to a share of the production that war would require. In November 1914, H. J. Waddie was sent on a preliminary lobbying mission to Ottawa on behalf of the Hamilton branch of the Canadian Manufacturer's Association (CMA) and the Board of Trade. Waddie informed the Hamilton CMA: "I put in a very strong plea for Hamilton goods in many lines, taking a stand that as our large industries, such as the steel plants and Implement Makers, were almost at a stand-still we should receive liberal consideration in the lines which we could make."[31] In its annual report in the spring of 1915 the Hamilton CMA was able to report on the successful conclusion of this campaign:

> For a considerable time after war broke out, Hamilton manufacturers were overlooked. However, a deputation went to Ottawa to interview the Government, and later Mr. Waddie was sent to Ottawa as special representative, for one week. The way was thus paved for the handsome orders which have since been received by the local manufacturers.[32]

But in Hamilton, as elsewhere, complaints of poor wages and working conditions rapidly arose as almost a natural byproduct of armaments production.[33] During summer 1915 the IAM dispatched organizers to Hamilton and also tried to attract union activists to the city. "What we need is men who will talk unionism inside the shop to the man who works beside him," *announced business agent Riley, "so if this should catch the eye of* any boomer who has a hobby for organizing, let him make Hamilton and we will guarantee him plenty of work of both kinds."[34] The city's machine shops, now busily engaged in munitions manufacturing, thus became a priority of the IAM in its attempt to establish collective bargaining and union conditions. This campaign was facilitated by the spectacular growth of the city's war industries. By the fall of 1915 unemployment among city machinists had become a thing of the past. "The demand for war munitions is making work for every available machinist and toolmaker and the demand exceeds the supply," wrote Richard Riley in November 1915.[35] At frequently held organizing meetings the IAM argued that trade unionism was the only means by which these newly-employed workers could get their fair share of munitions profits.[36]

[30] *M.J.*, July 1914, p. 700.
[31] PAC, Canadian Manufacturer's Association Papers, (henceforth CMA), Hamilton Branch Minutes, vol. 14, November 1914.
[32] *Ibid.*, Annual Report, 1914-1915.
[33] *M.J.*, March 1915, p. 263; May 1915, report by Richard Riley.
[34] *Ibid.*, September 1915, p. 840.
[35] *Ibid.*, November 1915, p. 1021.
[36] *Hamilton Herald*, (henceforth *H.H.*), 10 February 1916.

When machinists in Toronto succeeded in gaining concessions from their employers at the end of 1915, their Hamilton counterparts suddenly had a parity issue to add to a festering sense of exploitation. The labour shortage among machinists in Toronto allowed the IAM to win new terms from most of the city's munitions producers without any resort to strike action. The agreement provided for a 50 hour week, (nine hours a day, five hours on Saturday), with hourly wages set at 42.5 cents for toolmakers, 37.5 cents for machinists and 27.5 cents for machinists' helpers.[37] With this win under its belt, the union sought to extend these conditions throughout the province of Ontario. The major battlegrounds of this struggle would be the few Toronto plants not already covered by the agreement and the industrial complex of Hamilton.

Round one in the battle was decisively won by the employers. Close to 400 munitions workers struck the Steel Company of Canada in mid-February 1916 for improved wages and hours. By month's end nearly all the men were back at work with the old terms of employment unchanged.[38] From this point onward Hamilton's munitions makers mounted a concerted anti-union offensive. In late February, machinist's business agent Riley complained to Flavelle that at least one company was refusing to hire IAM members. Shortly thereafter the firm in question informed the IMB Chairman that while they had recently fired two employees supposedly for improper work, there were other circumstances involved: "We had been previously warned by the authorized representative of the Munitions Board (his name we cannot now recall) that these two men in our employ were very strong active Union men, and were in our factory for the purpose of causing trouble among the men, and to keep a close watch on them."[39] Thus despite the IMB's guise of neutrality in labour relations, subordinates of Flavelle were feeding names of union activists to management for scrutiny. Elsewhere at this time, the Steel Company of Canada stepped up its practice of hiring secret agents to spy on union activities inside its plant.[40]

Hamilton's machinists, however, did not give up their claims. Early in April 1916, IAM local 414 of Hamilton sent a proposed schedule for terms of employment to all machine shops in the city. In it the union called for improved wages and hours along the lines already won in Toronto plus the closed shop. And typical of the surge of confidence felt by union officers amidst the growth of their organizations, Richard Riley predicted the speedy

[37] *I.B.*, 3 December 1915.

[38] PAC, Labour Department Records, (henceforth RG 27), vol. 304, file 16 (27); also PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Hobson to Flavelle, 17 February 1916; Magor to Flavelle, 1 March 1916.

[39] *Ibid.*, Bowes Jamieson Ltd. to Flavelle, 6 March 1916. Flavelle reacted by issuing a memo that the Board employee suspected of the "indiscretion" be informed as to what his duties were and were not. *Ibid.*, Flavelle to McAvity, 9 March 1916.

[40] *Ibid.*, Hobson to Flavelle, 8 July 1916.

compliance of employers with these demands: "We do not expect to experience much trouble in securing these conditions, as we have a strong organization in practically all of the shops and there are more jobs than there are men to fill them."[41]

The appearance of this schedule led to a special meeting of Hamilton's CMA branch at which a new committee was established to oversee labour relations.[42] From the start, then, the city's employers formed a united front in opposition to the union's demands. One Hamilton machinist described the "negotiations" over the IAM's proposal with his employer as follows:

> We went in and he asked us if we were in about that "thing" pointing to our schedule and when we replied that we were, he said that we must be in the pay of the Kaiser, and that the man who drew it up should be decorated with an iron cross.[43]

The antipathy of Hamilton's employers for trade unionism was further expressed in a letter sent in response to the IAM's demands by Paul Myler, vice-president of Canadian Westinghouse, to all company employees. The firm rejected the closed-shop proposition as the demise of individual liberty. From here it was an easy step to deny the union any right to exist inside the plant:

> Each employee has the right, which goes with his employment, to have any complaint which he chooses to present with respect to conditions of his work considered and passed upon by the management. No employee requires the aid of any outside organization to secure for him or to protect him in the rights and privileges to which he is entitled.

Finally, Myler added, the company's patriotic sense of duty would not permit any reduction in the basic working day from the customary ten hour day and 12½ hour night shifts.[44]

As the differences between Hamilton's employers and the IAM escalated it appeared that events in Toronto might provide the basis for a peaceful resolution of the impasse. When machinists struck the Canada Foundry Co. of Toronto for the same terms that had been conceded elsewhere in the city, plant manager Col. Frederick Nicholls responded by declaring a lock-out of all employees and proclaiming that he would never submit to the pressure of organized labour.[45] The union, however, acted quickly in response to Nicholls' defiance. Regarding the Canada Foundry lock-out as a threat to union standards throughout the city, IAM District Lodge 46 called a meeting of all Toronto machinist locals to discuss the matter. At this 19 March gathering a motion was unanimously passed calling for a general strike of the

[41] *M.J.*, May 1916, p. 492.
[42] PAC, CMA Papers, Hamilton Branch Minutes, vol. 14, 5 April 1916; *H.S.*, 26 April 1916.
[43] *The Labor News*, (henceforth *L.N.*), 5 May 1916.
[44] *H.S.*, 29 April 1916.
[45] PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Brown to Flavelle, 25 & 26 January 1916; Findlay to Flavelle, 4 April 1916.

trade in 30 days unless the company settled with its workers.[46] This general strike threat, together with the confession from the IAM leadership that the rank and file were passing out of their control, forced the government's hand.[47] On 11 April 1916 a Royal Commission was established to investigate the complaints of munitions workers in both Toronto and Hamilton. The lesson of this concession was not lost on the *Industrial Banner*:

> Whatever the results of this commission may be, the fact is clear that it was only because they were well organized and in a position to enforce their demands in Toronto that the machinists received any consideration whatever. . . . This should be an object lesson to all workers. Labor today can only secure consideration if it is in a position to enforce — by drastic measures if it sees fit — just recognition of its rights.[48]

Thus the war-induced epidemic of general strikes, which one prominent unionist subsequently dubbed "Winnipegitis", found its earliest germination in Toronto.[49]

The Royal Commission formed to report on conditions of employment in Toronto and Hamilton munitions plants was chaired by Judge Colin Snyder, with Toronto manufacturer William Inglis representing the employers and IAM vice-president McClelland representing labour. The Hamilton hearings of the Commission, held early in May 1916, fully revealed the depths of antagonism which separated organized labour and management in the industry. Employers spoke of trade unionism as an assault on their freedom to control the workplace and staunchly rejected any appeal for reduced hours of work as being both unpatriotic and untenable in view of the shortage of labour.[50] Meanwhile the chief complaints of munitions workers revolved around the failure of wages to keep pace with the rising cost of living, and most important, the grinding toll of the lengthy working day which they were forced to work. The *Hamilton Herald* summarized the testimony of machinists in the city:

> The evidence of the employees was to the effect that the men are dissatisfied mainly because the hours of work are ten to the day: that the machines are run at a higher speed than they were in times of peace, and that the consequent strain on their constitutions was too great to permit them to work ten hours a day.[51]

The speed-up of industrial production, brought on by technological advances and the feverish compulsion of employers to maximize output in the

[46] *Ibid.*, IAM District Lodge 46 Circular, 20 March 1916.
[47] IAM vice-president McClelland claimed: "I told the government that I had no power to retain the men — that something had to be done. The royal government commission was appointed." *H.S.*, 10 June 1916.
[48] *I.B.*, 28 April 1916. The Commission was created on 11 April 1916.
[49] The expression was coined by R. C. Brown, chairman of Toronto's Metal Trades Council. *Globe*, 19 May 1919.
[50] *H.H.*, 3-5 May 1916.
[51] *Ibid.*, 5 May 1916.

face of an abundance of munitions contracts, left Hamilton's workers exhausted after their lengthy working day. As McClelland of the IAM described the plight of these workers on an earlier occasion: "The men are physical wrecks and cannot stand it much longer. . . ."[52] In truth, therefore, trade unionism did seek to curtail management's ability to unilaterally run the munitions plants of Hamilton; the union's demand for reduced hours very clearly raised the spectre of undue workers' control in the eyes of employers.[53]

The indignation of Hamilton's machinists, for their part, was only intensified by the realization that most members of their trade in Toronto had won the nine hour day, while in Buffalo a movement for the eight hour day was well underway.[54] Moreover, many machinists informed the commissioners in Hamilton that integrally linked to the question of hours was the issue of wages. As matters presently stood, they complained, machinists were often working over ten and 12½ hour shifts without any overtime payment; one individual informed the hearings of being compelled to work as many as 36 hours at a stretch.[55] In pressing for a standard nine hour work day with overtime rates thereafter, Hamilton machinists were activated by the desire for both increased wages and relief from the rigours of an intensified work process. For the duration of the war they pledged themselves willing to work as many hours as necessary, so long as overtime was paid after nine hours; meanwhile they would be secure in the knowledge that when peace returned and the requirements of production slackened, the nine hour day would be established as the norm. Together the demand for increased wages and lower hours of work instilled in Hamilton's machinists a sense of bitterness and militancy yet unprecedented in the war-time labour movement.[56]

The recommendations of the Snyder Commission fully endorsed the demands of labour. The commissioners were unanimous in advocating a wage scale of 37½ cents for machinists and 42½ for toolmakers, time and a half for regular overtime and double pay on Sundays and holidays. On the contentious issue of hours, Judge Snyder and McClelland outvoted Inglis to endorse the nine hour day.[57] Regardless of this verdict, however, a peaceful settlement in Hamilton was not to be. The city's manufacturers had resolved not to accommodate themselves to organized labour. At the end of May a mass

[52] *Globe*, 7 April 1916.
[53] Craig Heron and Bryan Palmer correctly suggest the importance of the issue of workers' control in the Hamilton strike in their insightful article "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-1914", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII, (1977) p. 457.
[54] *H.H.*, 10 February 1916.
[55] *Ibid.*, 3 May 1916.
[56] *Ibid.*, 3-5 May 1916; PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Munitions Industry Inquiry — Report of the Commissioners, 6 May 1916.
[57] *Ibid*. The union had previously dropped the closed shop demand.

meeting of munitions workers in Hamilton called for strike action within a week unless the employers accepted the Royal Commission report; on the same day the city's war manufacturers met and agreed to reject the report, citing the nine hour day as the chief stumbling block.[58]

A frantic series of last-minute manoeuvres was carried out in an effort to avert the widely dreaded Hamilton strike. On 1 June Flavelle wrote to the manufacturers recommending that they accept the terms of the Royal Commission in the interest of industrial peace. This move was in line with the IMB's policy of issuing statements against work stoppages when so advised by the Department of Labour.[59] Two days later John McClelland cabled the union's business agent in Hamilton to delay the impending strike as negotiations with the IMB were still proceeding.[60] To the very end, McClelland strained all his efforts to prevent a disruption of work in Hamilton. As he later informed the union membership, he had spent the first half of June 1916 "making strenuous efforts to prevent the strike taking place. . . ."[61] Undoubtedly, McClelland's fear that strike action at such a critical time of war would discredit the union and possibly foster a backlash from government and employers, set him and other officials in the IAM apart from the increasingly rebellious mood of the rank and file. On 7 June a meeting of 600 Hamilton machinists erupted with applause at one worker's suggestion that the men declare an immediate work stoppage. At this point, as the *Hamilton Herald* explained, only the intervention of the union's leadership prevented such drastic action:

> amidst the furore Mr. McClelland rose to his feet and pleaded with the members for forbearance and asked them to be rational. He urged his hearers not to act on the impulse.[62]

So cautioned, the membership agreed to delay their call for a general strike of city machinists until 12 June.

Meanwhile on 8 June, Prime Minister Borden met with Flavelle, Crothers and President Hobson of the Steel Company of Canada to discuss the Hamilton dispute, and apparently believed that a strike might still be averted.[63] For its part, Hamilton's Board of Control held a marathon of meetings over the weekend prior to the strike deadline with both labour and management representatives, in an effort to mediate their differences.[64] But all these frantic efforts came to naught. Basil Magor, the vice-president of Hamilton's largest employer of machinists (the National Steel Car Com-

[58] *H.S.*, 1 June 1916; PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Hobson to Flavelle, 31 May 1916.
[59] *Ibid.*, Flavelle letter of 1 June 1916. For a general statement of Flavelle's position on the Board's role in labour relations see his memo of 3 March 1916, *Ibid.*
[60] *H.S.*, 8 June 1916.
[61] *M.J.*, September 1916, pp. 898-9.
[62] *H.H.*, 8 June 1916.
[63] PAC, Borden Diaries, 8, 11 June 1916.
[64] *H.H.*, 10, 12 June 1916.

pany), replied to Flavelle's letter with a scathing attack on both the Snyder Commission and the IAM:

In the minds of the manufacturers, this investigation was of the most crude character and was entirely engineered by the heads of the Labor Unions, for the purpose of exacting from the manufacturers extra compensation for their members. . . . The principle which this company objects to and resents, is the imposing of the will of a few Labor Agitators on the minds of a great majority of men who are perfectly satisfied. . . .

Our men have got no complaint with regard to wages, conditions or anything else, and I for one believe it not only the duty of every manufacturer to oppose this condition of affairs, but it should be the duty of the Government as well to support them.[65]

On the same day as he read these words, Flavelle may well have been confused by the report he received from Fair Wage Officer Compton of the Department of Labour:

I have never seen men so determined and anxious to quit work, and I have heard Riley (the Union Business Agent) and McClelland (the International Vice-President) abused in round terms. A number from the National Steel Car Company threatened to take a holiday but wiser counsel prevailed.[66]

Moreover, Compton later confessed that while there were indeed outside agitators influencing the situation in Hamilton, their intentions were purely pacific. His instructions from the federal labour department, Compton revealed, were "to keep the men in check". He added:

I was told to mingle with the men and persuade them from hasty action. A strike was called for last Thursday morning. It was only through the efforts of Mr. McClelland and myself that this was averted.[67]

Finally, just hours before the strike deadline, Labour Minister Crothers urged IMB Chairman Flavelle to play his trump card against the employers: that they either concede the nine hour day or have their production orders revoked. Flavelle regretfully replied that much as he might personally endorse the nine hour day, "I do not, however, consider that the Board should take sides in a matter upon which there is so serious a difference of opinion."[68] Crothers chose not to question this rationalization for inaction, which had been refuted by Flavelle himself only months before! In March 1916 Flavelle revoked the contract of the International Supply Company of Medicine Hat for its failure to grant satisfactory labour conditions. Within weeks, conditions were rectified and the contract restored.[69] But clearly, measures which could be taken against an isolated firm in Medicine Hat could not be entertained against concerns like the Steel Company of Canada, the

[65] PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Magor to Flavelle, 7 June 1916.
[66] *Ibid.*, Brown to Flavelle, 7 June 1916.
[67] *H.S.*, 12 June 1916.
[68] PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Flavelle to Crothers, 12 June 1916.
[69] *Ibid.*, Flavelle to Martin, 3 March 1916; Flavelle to International Supply Company, 23 March 1916.

National Steel Car Company, or Canadian Westinghouse in Hamilton.

III

With Hamilton's employers unwilling to meet the machinists' basic demands for reduced hours and overtime bonuses, the IAM finally authorized a walkout of its members. On Monday, 12 June 1916 between 1500 and 2000 workers struck at over thirty Hamilton plants engaged primarily in munitions work. It was the largest labour dispute in the city's history, affecting all the giants of local industry — the National Steel Car Company, the Steel Company of Canada, Dominion Steel Foundry, Canadian Westinghouse, Otis-Fensom Elevators and a host of other plants.[70]

A further indication of the scope of unrest was the variety of workers drawn into the strike. Participating in the walkout from the beginning were not only some 900 members of the IAM, but also 338 machinists from the rival, British-affiliated branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), plus up to 800 unorganized workers. Moreover, the strike brought together some 1200 skilled mechanics and an estimated 800 unskilled shell-makers. Hundreds of this latter group, previously unorganized, joined the IAM during the first days of the strike.[71] Nor was the strikers' cause without public sympathy as press editorials and statements by Labour Department officials roundly condemned the refusal of Hamilton employers to accept the Snyder Commission's Report.[72]

For their part, however, the manufacturers had made full preparations for the walkout. On the eve of the strike 38 of Hamilton's most prominent firms announced the formation of an Employers' Association. Its stated aim was to combat curtailment of production, general strikes and boycotts, and to foster an undefined form of employer-employee understanding. Just as the city-wide machinists' walkout was a foreboding of later general strikes to come, this Association may be regarded as a future Citizen's Committee in embryo. The new Employers' Association repudiated the Royal Commission report as an impediment to war production and undertook a massive publicity assault on the strike in the local press. The Association informed the community that the strike was being fomented by foreign labour agitators, and having provided this clue, concluded:

> WHO ARE THE AGITATORS?
> WHAT IS THEIR STATUS?
> WHAT IS THEIR COUNTRY?
> WHOSE CAUSE DO THEY ESPOUSE? . . .

[70] *H.S.*, June 8, 10, 12, 1916; *I.B.*, 16 June 1916; *Labor World*, 24 June 1916; PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Compton to Brown, 12 June 1916.
[71] *H.S.*, June 12, 13, 14, 1916; *H.H.*, 13 June 1916; *I.B.*, 16 June 1916.
[72] *H.H.* editorial, 9 June 1916; for E. N. Compton's criticism of the employers, see *H.S.*, 10, 12 June 1916.

BEWARE OF THOSE WHO ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO BE DISLOYAL.[73]

On the first day of the strike another advertisement by the Association charged: "THESE MEN HAD NO THOUGHT OF COMPLAINING OF PUTTING IN THE USUAL 10 HOURS A DAY UNTIL THEIR MINDS WERE UNSETTLED BY THE INSIDIOUS ARGUMENTS OF PAID LABOR AGITATORS."[74]

Paradoxically, then, in order to discredit the strike the employers launched a vehement attack on trade union officialdom — the very group which had done everything in its power to avoid a strike. Meanwhile the rank and file of workers, who were the real impetus behind the walkout, were characterized by the employers as a misguided herd. As the country struggled through the strain of war, this concerted propaganda campaign undoubtedly left its mark on strikers and the community alike. Moreover the very existence of the Employers' Association testified to the unity of purpose shared by Hamilton's munitions manufacturers in the face of organized labour's demands. The fact that the number of "scabs" in the ranks of capital (those who would capitulate to the union) was so minimal meant that Hamilton's employers would not be caught in the internecine practice of outbidding each other for labour power.

This unity of purpose was not so strongly shared in the strikers' ranks. Once the strike began the IAM leadership was hamstrung by its commitment to responsible union behaviour. At a mass meeting of strikers on the first day of the strike, McClelland urged: "I appeal to you men to act honorably . . . it is up to you to see that there is no trouble."[75] At the same time his response to the news that machinists at one of the three city firms to accept the union's terms had nonetheless come out on sympathy strike was a blunt warning: "That *sort of thing has got to stop.*"[76] By the second day of the strike another mass meeting further underlined the tension existing between the attitudes of strikers and union leaders. At the outset, Hamilton Mayor Walters asked the thousand strikers present whether they would return to work if the employers promised to enact the nine hour day after the war. The *Industrial Banner* described the response from the assembly as follows:

> From all parts of the theatre came a tremendous chorus of no's and in order to refute the false assertions of the manufacturers that trouble had been fomented by agitators, it was shown that great dissatisfaction had been caused at the action of Vice-President McClelland for holding the men back from striking, as they had been in favor of coming out before.[77]

[73] *H.S.*, 10 June 1916.
[74] *Ibid.*, 12 June 1916.
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] *Hamilton Times*, 12 June 1916.
[77] Reprinted in the *Labor World*, 24 June 1916.

The *Hamilton Spectator*'s account of this meeting also reflected the strikers' restive mood. The paper reported statements made by strikers interviewed, such as: "Slavery was abolished at the conclusion of the American war"; "The manufacturers are trying to turn the crank so as to squeeze a little more out of the workingman"; and, "The patriotism of the manufacturer is represented by the single word 'profits'."[78]

Furthermore, machinists in Toronto quickly interested themselves in the Hamilton dispute. Perceiving Hamilton's inferior labour conditions as a threat to their own standards, a meeting of Toronto's machinists called for a general strike unless the fifty hour week was conceded in all Toronto and Hamilton shops.[79] For the second time in 1916, Toronto's machinists had threatened a general strike over conditions in the munitions plants. On the second day of the Hamilton strike, however, prominent Canadian IAM official James Somerville gave public assurance that the union's leadership would do all in its power to prevent the strike from spreading.[80] In the eyes of this leadership an overly militant strike — especially one which included the call for other union members to quit work in violation of their own agreements — would intensify employers' opposition to trade unionism. Since union officers attempted to portray their organizations as valuable allies of management in the pursuit of industrial productivity and stability, labour leaders found themselves increasingly compelled to control and moderate the radical impulses of their members.

To assure that the strike would remain localized, the Borden government intervened to impose press censorship on the Hamilton dispute. From early on in the war the Federal Labour Department collaborated with the Chief Press Censor to block any labour reporting deemed harmful to ongoing war production. In particular this meant that coverage of munitions trouble was regularly banned for fear that labour unrest might prove contagious.[81] In February 1916 the spectre of escalating unrest in munitions plants elicited some pointed advice from Deputy Labour Minister F. A. Acland to Chief Press Censor Chambers:

> Reports of such matters with startling head-lines and the frank commentary customary in such matters are, it is thought, calculated not only to alarm and agitate the public mind, but also greatly to increase the tendency to unrest, breeding other strikes in the same locality and affecting other cities . . . Entire silence in these matters would, it is felt, often serve the public interest best of all.[82]

When the Hamilton strike began, Chambers believed that coverage in the

[78] *H.S.*, 13 June 1916.
[79] *Ibid.*, 14 June 1916.
[80] *Ibid.*
[81] Generally newspaper editors complied with any requests for press blackouts issued by the Chief Press Censor. For correspondence between Chambers and newspaper editors regarding labour matters see PAC, Secretary of State Papers, file 17-H-1, vol. 39.
[82] *Ibid.*, Acland to Chambers, 29 February 1916.

local press would be conciliatory and therefore a useful factor in resolving the dispute.[83] However, it was soon apparent that references to the strike in Hamilton's newspapers were hardly serving a mediating function. Employers calling union leaders traitorous foreign agitators, and workers describing themselves as slaves to profit-hungry masters could hardly lay the basis for industrial harmony.

By the second day of the strike Prime Minister Borden, Labour Minister Crothers and IMB Chairman Flavelle were all urging the Chief Press Censor to order a total ban on newspaper coverage of the Hamilton strike. This was essential, Chambers was informed, if sympathy walkouts were to be averted.[84] In Flavelle's opinion, strike coverage had to be stopped because "the labour situation was most critical, being in fact like a heap of gunpowder which a spark would explode."[85] After 14 June, the third day of the strike, the *Industrial Banner* was the only newspaper in the country to defy Chambers' order and maintain regular reporting of the strike. The compliance of the country's daily papers with the censorship ruling undoubtedly weakened the strikers' position. In addition to the union leadership's resistance to sympathetic strike action, the press blackout made it virtually impossible for workers outside Hamilton to organize support. Nor did the ban prevent the city's manufacturers from advertising in other parts of Canada and the United States for strikebreakers. In the absence of any news about the Hamilton dispute, these advertisements became a useful weapon in the employers' arsenal of anti-strike measures.

Ironically, the severe labour shortage which prevailed further undermined the strike, as many machinists took on new jobs at better wages and hours. Most left to work in Toronto's munitions plants since it was widely known that 53 plants there had agreements with terms superior to those being struck for in Hamilton; that ten were working according to these terms; and only three had inferior conditions.[86] Within the first two weeks of the strike alone, the *Industrial Banner* reported that between 300 and 400 strikers had left Hamilton for new jobs.[87]

In the fifth week of the strike the common front of the IAM and ASE disintegrated. On 18 July a mass meeting of Society members voted to return to work, charging that the IAM had already permitted many of its members to desert the strike. In response, Richard Riley denied authorizing any IAM members to resume work and John McClelland denounced the Society for

[83] *Ibid.*, Chambers to Knowles, 12 June 1916.
[84] *Ibid.*, vol. 528, file 170-G-1, Chambers to Clarke, 13 June 1916. My thanks to Craig Heron for drawing the material in this file to my attention. In the same file see unsigned letter to Chambers, 14 June 1916, and for more on Crothers' attitude see PAC, Willison Papers, vol. 11, Crothers to Willison, 21 June 1916.
[85] PAC, Secretary of State Papers, vol. 528, file 170-G-1, Boag Memo, 13 June 1916.
[86] *H.S.*, 13 June 1916.
[87] *I.B.*, 7 July 1916.

betraying the strike.[88] Beyond this mutual campaign of vilification, the real catalyst behind the ASE's decision was an order from its parent organization in Britain to end the strike — in conformity with the no-strike pledge which the Society had given Lloyd George in March 1915[89] — or have its charter revoked! Accordingly, Hamilton's ASE organizer Fred Flatman announced that in compliance with Society policy, the Hamilton branch would henceforth stick to conciliation as the means of resolving its differences with employers.[90]

In little over a month, then, the strikers' ranks were largely dissipated. Over 300 ASE members were back on the job and probably double that number of strikers had left the city. Many of those unable to leave drifted back to their old jobs as they saw their numbers, but not the employers' hostility, diminish. On 22 July the *Hamilton Herald* reported only 100 machinists still on strike; by September the *Labour Gazette*'s correspondent in Hamilton was able to report: "All the machinists have either returned at old conditions or [are] working at other work . . ."[91] Hamilton's manufacturers had successfully repulsed the greatest strike movement in the city's history. Labour's defeat stemmed from a variety of factors: fierce and well-organized employer opposition, the government's press censorship policy, the moderating influence of leadership within both the IAM and ASE, and unexpectedly the dire shortage of labour which existed.

IV

The victory of Hamilton's manufacturers was somewhat marred, however, by the reduction of their labour supply. A month after the strike began Joseph Flavelle noted that the employers had paid a price for their stand against organized labour:

> Undoubtedly the Hamilton manufacturers suffered severely from the strike. A very large number of the young machinists and tool makers who had no family ties left Hamilton and while I presume the manufacturer has succeeded against the strikers, his labour market, already restricted, has suffered through increased shortage.[92]

[88] *H.H.*, 24 July 1916; *I.B.*, 28 July 1916.

[89] For excellent discussions of the relationship between the Society and the British government in this period, see James Hinton: *The First Shop Steward's Movement* (London 1973), ch. 1; and J. T. Murphy: *Preparing For Power* (London 1972), ch. 5.

[90] *H.H.*, 22 June & 24 June 1916.

[91] PAC, RG 27, vol. 304, Sweeney to Acland, 15 September 1916.

[92] PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 2, Flavelle to Acland, 11 July 1916. One corrective to this shortage of labour was the entry of significant numbers of women into Hamilton's munitions plants. The IMB initiated a campaign in the late summer of 1916 to attract women into war production. In due course IAM business agent Riley and the Ontario director of the Women's Department of the Trades and Labour Branch both commented on the influx of women into munitions work in Hamilton. PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 38, Flavelle to Irish, 13 August 1916; Irish to Tait, 20 September 1916; Wisconsin State Historical Society, (henceforth WSHS), American Federation of Labour Papers, Samuel Gompers Files, Series II File A, vol. 23, Riley to Holder, 4 July 1917; PAO, Ontario Department of Labour Papers, vol. 1, Strong to Plumptre, 27 June 1918.

Ironically, then, Hamilton's employers provoked a massive strike which resulted in a long-term reduction of their labour supply, all because they claimed that the introduction of the nine hour day would adversely restrict war production. Not even labour's pledge to work overtime whenever necessary could ease management's resistance. More likely, the intransigence of Hamilton's employers was fueled by their view of trade unionism as an intrusion on their freedom to control industry. This proposition assumes greater credibility in light of Richard Riley's statement at the beginning of 1918 that 50 per cent of the men who struck in 1916 were now working the nine hour day.[93] With the threat of trade unionism vanquished, Hamilton's employers were prepared to make some concessions in order to assure themselves a share of the scarce labour supply; but these were benefits carefully dispensed by a manufacturing class whose hegemony over labour was well consolidated.

Wages in the city remained below the rates paid in near-by industrial centres. In summer 1918 Riley reported that the average wage for machinists in Hamilton was only 40 cents per hour, compared to Brantford's average of 65-70 cents; several months later IAM organizer H. Harper described Hamilton as having "the poorest conditions in Ontario".[94] By the time the Mathers Commission arrived in Hamilton to gather information concerning local industrial conditions in May 1919, Riley testified that the real wages of the city's machinists were below what they had received in 1914.[95]

Furthermore, collective bargaining was in an equally sorry state. Riley's testimony in 1919 revealed that the attitude of Hamilton's employers to organized labour had not changed since the confrontation of 1916. "Yes," he confirmed, "they run what they call an open shop. I would call it a closed shop to union men":[96] Riley elaborated that while machinists in the centres around Hamilton were 98 per cent organized, in Hamilton the level stood at only 55-60 per cent. Typically, he concluded, the proposed agreement which the IAM had recently sent to 20 local employers was being completely ignored.[97] The 1916 Hamilton strike clearly entrenched the power of employers over labour. It is noteworthy that from 1917 to 1919, a time when metal-worker strikes affected virtually every important Canadian city, the Hamilton labour scene remained strangely quiescent despite its pre-eminent place in Canadian industry.[98] The defeat of 1916 had left its mark.

In other areas, the strike of 1916 extended its impact beyond purely local

[93] PAC, RG 27, vol. 304, file 16 (27A), Riley to Stewart, 4 January 1918.
[94] *M.J.*, August 1918, p. 761; October 1918, p. 925.
[95] Mathers Commission Testimony, micro reel #2, Richard Riley, 20 May 1919, pp. 2277-81.
[96] *Ibid.*, p. 2276.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 2265, p. 2261.
[98] The only significant dispute to arise was a strike by over 200 moulders which began in May 1919 and dragged on for well over a year. PAC, RG 27, vol. 312, file 19 (104).

affairs and conditions. The strike initiated the eclipse of Thomas Crothers as the Borden Government's Minister of Labour. Borden confided to his diary that in the Hamilton dispute Crothers "has had difficult role and has not played it successfully."[99] As labour troubles escalated from 1916 on, Crothers came in for increasing criticism, thus paving the way for Gideon Robertson's remarkably rapid rise to power inside the Borden government from 1917 to 1918. The disruption of munitions production in Hamilton also convinced Joseph Flavelle that the IMB must devote greater attention to labour relations. Consequently, a Department of Labour was established within the Board in August 1916 under the direction of Mark Irish whose credentials included a seat in the Ontario Legislature and a suitable personal awe and admiration of Chairman Flavelle. Henceforth the Board would be kept far better apprised of matters relating to labour in the production of war goods.[100] Finally, the Hamilton strike played a part in the series of events which led the Trades and Labour Congress to call for the repeal of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act at its 1916 convention. As AFL organizer John Flett explained to President Gompers, underpinning the Act was the belief that publicity would be a potent force in resolving industrial disputes. However, Flett noted that if publicity was to be denied, as in the case of the Hamilton strike, then the Act could be of little further value.[101]

The strike's legacies, however, in no way detract from its own importance and interest. It exhibited many of the features which were to become a fixed pattern in Canadian industrial relations through to 1919: fierce employer resistance to the demands of organized labour; opportunistic policy decisions by government and the Imperial Munitions Board which were geared not to secure social justice but to avert work disruptions; and embattled trade union leaders struggling to assert their own code of responsible union behaviour against a restive membership. Forged in the crucible of munitions production these characteristics, more often associated with the western Canadian labour movement, found their first war-time expression in the 1916 Hamilton machinists' strike.

[99] PAC, Borden Diaries, 20 June 1916.
[100] PAC, Flavelle Papers, vol. 38, Mark Irish Files 1915-17; 1917-18; 1918-19.
[101] WSHS, Gompers Letterbooks, vol. 222, Gompers to Flett, 31 July 1916.