

# 'Cowering Women, Combative Men?': Femininity, Masculinity, and Ethnicity on Strike in Two Southern Ontario Towns, 1964-1966

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Volume 39, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt39art05>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ventresca, R. A. (1997). 'Cowering Women, Combative Men?': Femininity, Masculinity, and Ethnicity on Strike in Two Southern Ontario Towns, 1964-1966. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 39, 125-158.

Article abstract

In August 1964, the southern Ontario local 523 of the United Electrical and Radio Machine Workers led some 450 female auto-parts workers onto the picket-line. A year later, the same union local led over 1,200 male steelworkers in a strike against the Steel Company of Canada. In both cases, Italian immigrants joined with their non-Italian co-workers in a show of class solidarity. Italian men framed their decision to strike in terms of a manly duty as the family's decision maker and breadwinner; Italian women assumed the role of aggressive labour militant with relative equanimity, while the more outwardly militant Italian men expressed considerable personal uncertainty and fear even while they engaged in a public display of cross-ethnic class solidarity. The paper explores how gender, class and ethnicity interact to influence the dynamics of labour militancy in the two strikes, though it also gives due consideration to the structural factors that helped to determine the outcome of both strikes.

# 'Cowering Women, Combative Men?': Femininity, Masculinity, and Ethnicity on Strike in Two Southern Ontario Towns, 1964-1966

Robert A. Ventresca

ON THE AFTERNOON of 31 August, 1964, 450 women employed at the Lanark Manufacturing Company, an auto parts plant in the southern Ontario town of Dunnville, walked off the job; the bargaining committee for local 523 of the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers (UE) announced that negotiations with Lanark management had yet again broken down. Filomena Carbone, an Italian immigrant from the Abruzzi region of southern Italy, who had been working at the factory for only a few months, went home instead of joining her co-workers on the picket lines. Though the strike lasted five months, Carbone stayed away only until mid-October when, at the prodding of her husband, she crossed the picket line to resume work at the Lanark along with about a hundred other workers. Far from expressing solidarity with her striking co-workers, Carbone declared the strike to be, in her own words, "stupid." "Why people got to stay out when people need the job?" she asked. "It was five, six months with no pay, and for what?"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Personal interview. I have used pseudonyms throughout to protect the privacy of oral informants (though most did not ask me to), except in instances where the persons in question are, or were, public figures. Interviews — 30 of them — were conducted in the summer of 1994. Of the formal interviews, fifteen were with immigrant workers, six were with former union officials. The remainder consisted of informal interviews with immigrants and their Canadian-born children. Initial contacts with the immigrant informants were established by relatives of mine, immigrants themselves. So many thanks to Nina DeFelice, Rita Sciarra-Ventresca, and Ruben Sciarra for their invaluable help in this regard. The interview format was generally formal in nature — with interviews tape-recorded and respondents answering

Robert A. Ventresca, "'Cowering Women, Combative Men?': Femininity, Masculinity, and Ethnicity on Strike in Two Southern Ontario Towns, 1964-1966," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring 1997), 125-58.

In February 1966, 1200 male workers employed at the Page-Hersey and Camrose Tubes pipe-manufacturing factories in nearby Welland, Ontario, walked off the job when their union — also local 523 of the UE — rejected the last-minute offer from the owners, the Steel Company of Canada (Stelco). Prior to the strike, Angelo Rocco, an Italian immigrant from the Catanzaro province of Calabria, had no experience with labour militancy, and had been employed in factory work for only a few years. Yet Rocco joined the strike with little hesitation or deliberation. Confident of his rights as a worker, and in his status as a Canadian, mindful of his role as family breadwinner, and indignant at management's attempts to do away with certain privileges, Rocco joined forces with other immigrant and Canadian-born workers to defend class interests. "I knew my rights .... I knew I could be there [on the picket lines] like anybody else and fight for my own rights," he declared. "It doesn't matter if I was Italian or German or French, ... we all were there for the same reason."<sup>2</sup>

The contrasting stories of Carbone and Rocco harken back to assumptions about culturally-ascribed gender roles among southern Italians which defined the scholarly literature on the subject since the late 1960s. Filomena Carbone, for her part, seems to fit neatly the early orthodoxy of commentators which emphasized the subordination of the southern Italian woman.<sup>3</sup> The simplistic description of the submissive Italian woman in the earlier works of anthropologists, sociologists, and some historians, in turn, helped contribute to an equally simplistic thesis among

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to a standard set of questions. Naturally, the process was in reality much more fluid. Some of the most revealing comments came when the tape-recorder was shut off. Readers will note that I have used the designation "Personal interviews" in most cases, except when the informants in question were public figures. In most instances, the arguments I present are an amalgam of various observations expressed in taped and informal conversations. Hence the general designations. Readers should note that the term "many" indicates that more than a quarter but less than a half of respondents made a given claim, while the term "most" denotes at least three-quarters of respondents.

<sup>2</sup>Personal interviews.

<sup>3</sup>Claire LaVigna, "Women in the Canadian and Italian Trade Union Movement at the Turn of the Century: A Comparison," in *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto 1978), 32-42; see also Jan Brogger, *Montavarese: A Study of Peasant Society and Culture in Southern Italy* (Oslo 1971); John Davis, *Land and Family in Pisticci* (New York 1973). For one example of the persistence of these assumptions in popular imaginations, see the recent collections of essays by Gianna Patriarca, *Italian Women and Other Tragedies* (Guernica 1994). It is important to remember, however, that the old orthodoxy is now under seige. For scholarly critiques see Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montréal 1992), 79-80, "Writing Women into Immigration History: The Italian Canadian Case," *Altreatalie*, 9 (1993), and for the American context, see Miriam Cohen, *Workshop to Office: Two Generations of Italian Women in New York City, 1900-1950* (Ithaca 1992), and Donna Gabaccia, "Immigrant Women: Nowhere at Home?," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 10 (Summer 1991).

North American labour historians (when they bothered to broach the subject of labour militancy among Italian immigrant women at all) which placed undue emphasis on Italian women's docility, if not their outright hostility to unions. Endowed with a world view that dictated obedience and submissiveness, the argument went, Italian immigrant women made for poor union-material, proving difficult to organize, and sometimes even acting as strikebreakers, often with the encouragement, if not at the insistence of their families.<sup>4</sup>

Angelo Rocco, too, seems to provide an anchor to the so-called model of male dominance-female submission.<sup>5</sup> Rocco's active participation in the 1966 strike may very well have been expected from someone born and raised in a society in which male privilege was exercised largely within the public sphere. Freed from the constraints of a patriarchal order that dictated the strict supervision of women's public activities, but obligated men to take a public role as the family's "representative," chief decision-maker and principal breadwinner, Rocco saw participation in the 1966 strike as a duty to be done in order to fulfil familial obligations and defend his own masculine self-identity. To this extent, Rocco, like so many other Italian immigrant men, drew upon Old World values and resources which, it would seem, accorded well with the patriarchal assumptions of his adopted homeland.<sup>6</sup>

It is true, of course, that gender identities and gender relations within the southern Italian immigrant family were largely determined by the patriarchal organization and concomitant cultural mores of both the sending and receiving societies. There is no inconsistency in adding, however, that the model of male-dominance-female submission is, as Franca Iacovetta has observed, too simplistic to account for the tangled web of gender relations within the southern Italian immigrant family. Not only does it ignore the fact that Italian women regularly worked outside the home in the Old and in the New world, often doing so-called men's work, it erroneously takes the female's relegation to the private sphere to mean, *ipso facto*, female submissiveness and docility. The model thus ignores the possibility that the home was an arena in which women could wield enormous influence, if not control.<sup>7</sup> When adopted implicitly by labour historians, the

<sup>4</sup>Columba Furio, "The Cultural Background of the Italian Immigrant Woman and its Impact on her Unionization in the New York Garment Industry, 1880-1919," in George E. Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro: The Italian American Working Class* (Toronto 1980), 81-98, here at 91; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and Their Union," in Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker* (Westport 1977), 144-65. Readers will note the absence of comparable studies for the Canadian context.

<sup>5</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the male dominance-female submission model, and its principal weaknesses, see Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 80.

<sup>6</sup>Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 79-80; Mark Rosenfeld, "'It was a hard life': Class and Gender in the Work and Family Rhythms of a Railway Town, 1920-1950," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers*, (1988), 237-79.

<sup>7</sup>Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 80-3.

dominance-submission model lays an inordinate emphasis on cultural determinants, ignoring the structural factors working to thwart whatever potential such women had for labour militancy: high rates of labour turnover, familial or domestic responsibilities, little job security, and outright hostility from unsympathetic, English-speaking male unionists.<sup>8</sup>

What follows, then, is intended to reevaluate existing understandings of the issues of gender identities and gender relations within the working-class Italian immigrant family as this immigrant group made the transition from a peasant/rural to an industrial/urban society in the two decades immediately following the end of World War II.<sup>9</sup> The study focuses on two events: the five month-long strike (August 1964 to January 1965) of women workers at the Lanark auto parts plant in Dunnville, and the six week-long strike (February-April 1966) of male steelworkers at two Stelco plants in Welland. Only about 40 kilometres separate the town of Dunnville, a largely rural community with a growing industrial base in the mid-1960s, and the city of Welland, an ethnically heterogeneous and blue-collar town in which most industrial workers, male and female, were unionized. Most of the women who worked at the Lanark plant in Dunnville were from Welland; a smaller number came from the nearby lakeside community of Port Colborne. The success or failure of each strike depended to a large extent upon the degree of solidarity and collaboration among workers of diverse ethno-national origins. Both strikes involved UE local 523, based in the city of Welland, which had deep roots in the community and whose leadership displayed considerable sensitivity and efficacy in dealing with ethnic and gender differences among workers. Both took place in

<sup>8</sup>Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 80-3; Furio, "Cultural Background," 91. Of course, these barriers have existed for all working women, as recent feminist scholarship has demonstrated. For an example, see Ruth Frager, "No Proper Deal: Women Workers and the Canadian Labour Movement, 1870-1940," in L. Brisikin and L. Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement* (Toronto 1983), 44-64.

<sup>9</sup>See Furio, "Cultural Background," 91; and Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Urbana 1987). The historical understanding of southern Italian immigrant men has also suffered because of the tendency to regard the immigrant family as a nongendered unit, ignoring the fact that men, like women, live their lives, and see their world, in gendered ways. To date there has been little attention paid to the topic of gender identity among immigrant men in Canada, or to the ways in which Old World definitions of masculinity were challenged and changed, or confirmed and bolstered by New World assumptions about proper gender roles. See the introduction to Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto 1992). Work on immigrant masculinity has been quite limited. Some notable exceptions included Robert Harney's, "Men without Women: Italian Migrants in Canada, 1885-1930," in Betty Caroli, et al., eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America*. A more recent consideration of the subject, and one that is informed by the insights of the "new" gender history is Iacovetta's, *Such Hardworking People*. Incidentally, both deal exclusively with working-class Italians.

the mid-1960s, a turbulent era for Canadian labour, given the sudden upsurge in grassroots labour militancy, post-war technological change, the persistence of strident anti-Communist tensions within the labour movement itself, and the truly revolutionary changes in the place of women in the paid labour force.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Setting*

The real locus of the story is the city of Welland, home to most of the women and men who struck the Lanark plant in Dunnville and the Page-Camrose plants in Welland, and home also to UE local 523. Welland is located about 135 kilometres south-east of Toronto, in the heart of the Niagara Peninsula.<sup>11</sup> Industrial and demographic expansion of the region began in earnest in the first years of the 20th century, spurred by the availability of cheap hydro-electric power from Niagara Falls and the transportation facilities offered by the Welland canal and five different railway lines.<sup>12</sup> The need for unskilled and semiskilled labour led some of the new mass industries to "import" foreign-born workers, either directly from Europe or indirectly from other industrial centres in North America, or to recruit French-Canadian agriculturalists from Québec.<sup>13</sup> This influx furnished the basis for an ethnically-diverse industrial proletariat. By 1960, Welland-Crowland was also home to people of 35 different national origins. Four to five thousand new immigrants after 1946 consolidated the ethnic heterogeneity of Welland-Crowland,

<sup>10</sup>On the upsurge in labour militancy in the mid-1960s see John Crispo and H.W. Arthurs, "Industrial Unrest in Canada: A Diagnosis of Recent Experience," in *Relations Industrielles*, (April 1968), 23, 2, 237-62, and the notes of then Minister of Labour H.L. Rowntree, contained in the Collective Bargaining File, Provincial Archives of Ontario (PAO), RG-7-12-3220.

<sup>11</sup>Prior to the 1970s, the city itself was nestled inside the township of Crowland, bound on one side by the township of Thorold, on two sides by the predominantly rural section of Crowland, and on one side by the urban part of Crowland township, (popularly referred to as the "factory section"), which was annexed by Welland in 1960. The addition of urban Crowland, whose population was made up overwhelmingly of European immigrants and their children, brought the city's population of 15,000 to just over 36,000. See Canada, *Census of Canada*, 1951, 1961.

<sup>12</sup>Incentives included fixed assessments for 20 years, and the extension of municipal services to the company's properties in the area. See Carmela Patrias, *Relief Strike: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario, 1930-1935* (Toronto 1990); See, in addition, James Nelson, "Crowland Township, a Study in Land Utilization," MA thesis, McMaster University, 1985. See, also, Fern Sayles, *Welland Workers Make History* (Welland 1963), 44-65.

<sup>13</sup>As elsewhere, industry played a critical role in shaping the ethnic and class structure of Welland-Crowland. See Norman Young, "Economic and Social Development of Welland, 1905-1939," MA thesis, University of Guelph, 1976, 60-5; Paula Esposito, "The Italian Community in Welland; an Oral Sources Study," unpublished paper, McMaster University, c.1975; Sayles, *Welland Workers*, 54; *Welland Evening Tribune*, 7, 19 April 1910; 8 December 1911; 11 January 1912.

ensuring that the community continued to resemble, what one woman called, a "Little Europe."<sup>14</sup> By 1961, immigrants represented almost one-quarter of Welland-Crowland's population.<sup>15</sup> Between 1945 and 1951, there were no more than 700 to 1000 Italian-born residents living in Welland-Crowland, approximately 4 per cent of the population.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, most of the post-war Italian immigrants arrived between 1951 and 1961: the census of 1961 reported over 2100 Italian-born in Welland-Crowland, the largest immigrant group in the city, representing almost 6 per cent of the population.

*Women, Work, and the Lanark Manufacturing Company*

Italian immigrant women in Niagara found work mainly in area-industries; women and children could find seasonal employment on local farms, picking fruits and vegetables, where they were sometimes joined by male family members on weekends. Italian women also found weekend work with local catering services, many of which were owned by Italians or operated out of local Italian social clubs.<sup>17</sup> For a good many of these women, working outside the home also meant working outside the Welland-Crowland area. So it was for the Italians who commuted daily to the Lanark plant in Dunnville. In 1964, the town of Dunnville was home to just under 6000 people. The expanding industrial base meant that Dunnville experienced a labour shortage in the early 1960s. The need for industrial workers prompted local industry to recruit workers from nearby towns and cities. When the Lanark Manufacturing Company, a subsidiary of the American-owned auto-parts maker Essex Wire, first opened in 1961, less than 15 per cent of its workforce came from Dunnville. About one-half came from Welland-Crowland, while about one-quarter came from the town of Port Colborne, with workers commuting daily either in car-pools or in buses paid for by the company. Lanark's was, to put it another way, a commuter workforce, with only a small fraction of workers actually residing in Dunnville, and with many more whose ties to the community were shallow and tenuous at best.<sup>18</sup>

The Lanark Company in Dunnville employed mostly women, including a large number of immigrant women. Oral testimonies suggest that by 1964, there were about two dozen Italian immigrant women working at Lanark. These Italian women, many of whom were married mothers, were part of the larger movement

<sup>14</sup>Personal interviews. In urban Crowland, approximately 80 per cent of the population was non-Anglo-Saxon in origin; in Welland, the corresponding figure was half, but still substantial at about 40 per cent of the population. See Canada. *Census of Canada*, 1951, vol. IV, part 1; Sayles, 197.

<sup>15</sup>Canada. *Census of Canada*, 1961, vol. IV, table 38.

<sup>16</sup>Canada. *Census of Canada*, 1951, vol. I, tables 35 and 47.

<sup>17</sup>Personal interviews.

<sup>18</sup>Ester Reiter, "First Class Workers Don't Want Second Class Wages: The Lanark Strike in Dunnville," in Joy Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women: Ontario 1945-80* (Toronto 1995).

of immigrant women into the paid labour force.<sup>19</sup> They were, like their female counterparts, a unique group in the overwhelmingly male-dominated auto industry. In 1961, fewer than 7 per cent of all auto-workers in Canada were women, and even then about three-quarters of them were employed as clerical workers.<sup>20</sup> Those not employed in clerical work were mainly employed in the auto parts and accessories sector, where production was contracted out by the major automakers to smaller, independent factories that paid lower wages. The Lanark plant manufactured wire harnesses (which made up the electrical system found beneath the automobile dashboard) for the Ford Motor Company, and shipped the better part of 90 per cent of its output to the Eastern United States.<sup>21</sup>

The sexual division of labour in the plant ensured that women workers received much less than men did, and that women were consigned to lower-skilled work. At Lanark, the comparatively few male workers were employed as foremen or machinists, exercising considerable authority over female workers, and enjoying greater mobility within the plant. With very few exceptions, most female workers remained at a single work station during a shift, performing tedious, repetitive, and sometimes dangerous tasks. Oral informants spoke of the physical dangers of work at the Lanark plant, and of lax enforcement of already meagre industrial safety guidelines. Some women lost the tips of their fingers, were burned, or fainted due to the exhaustion from the frantic pace of production and the heat in the plant. The most common complaints among former Lanark workers were about the pressured nature of work at the plant, of the incessant clamouring of foremen to quicken the pace of production in order to meet quotas, the verbal abuse women faced when the pace of work was too slow for the foreman's liking, or when time-consuming mistakes were made. For Giuseppina DiMarcantonio, a 35-year-old Italian immigrant from the Abruzzo region, it was the monitored washroom visits which caused the greatest offense, though as a former peasant accustomed to working in fields her family did not own, under the watchful and critical eye of a local landowner, the Lanark situation represented continuity as much as change.<sup>22</sup>

Many immigrant women, including the Italians interviewed for this study, had at least a few years experience working in factories, both in Europe and in North America. For many of these women, the Lanark plant seemed a veritable paradise when compared with other industries in the area. After all, the Lanark plant was new and, by several accounts, cleaner, more brightly lit, and less hazardous than,

<sup>19</sup>See Monica Boyd, "At a Disadvantage: The Occupational Attainment of Foreign-Born Women in Canada," *International Migration Review*, 18 (1984), and "The Status of Immigrant Women in Canada," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 12, 4 (1975); Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 92-3.

<sup>20</sup>Canada. *Census of Canada*, 1961, vol. III, part 2.

<sup>21</sup>*UE News (Local 523)*, 2 September 1964; Reiter, "First Class Workers," 15; personal interviews.

<sup>22</sup>Personal interviews.



say, local textile mills or canning factories where workers were paid piece-rate, and injuries were both more common and more serious. In addition, auto-parts and accessories manufacturing did not suffer seasonal fluctuations as much as other local employers did. Angelina Sardella, a Molisan immigrant who began working at the Lanark early in 1964, saw particular benefit in steady employment and an hourly wage-rate, a marked change from her previous experiences at canning factories in Niagara Falls, Ontario. "I enjoyed working there, because it wasn't piece-work, and everybody got along. Where there's piece-work, that's where people don't get along."<sup>23</sup> Other women spoke warmly of some plant foremen who looked the other way when mistakes were made. At the end of her first shift, Carmela Maddalena, who spoke little English and was barely literate in Italian, panicked when told to complete a report detailing her output for the day. One plant foreman, noting how distraught Maddalena had become, offered to complete the form for her, providing that she list numerically the day's output. He did this for Maddalena, and other immigrant women, ostensibly as a favour to them, for several years. Maddalena credits acts such as this with helping to ease the difficult transition from peasant to industrial worker.<sup>24</sup>

For many of the younger women, working outside the home meant greater freedom from parental constraints. For those who were married with children, paid labour outside the home could offer a temporary escape from the burdens of the domestic sphere. Though most women worked out of financial necessity, they seem to have enjoyed participating in a female occupational culture — with women working side by side, sharing jokes, often about foremen or their husbands, exchanging gossip, recipes, and advice about marriage, child-rearing, women's health, and sex. The bases of female solidarity on the Lanark shopfloor were further strengthened by the absence of intense occupational, generational, or ethnic conflicts. Older, more experienced workers did not regard younger women as threats, but sought to provide guidance and a helping hand to newcomers who were sometimes terrified or exhausted by the rigours of factory labour. Some of the older women even dispensed advice on matters — often sexual or marital — not directly related to the workplace.<sup>25</sup>

To this extent, the situation at the Lanark plant conforms with scholarly assumptions about the nature of male and female bonding, with female-female bonding alleged to be characterized by cooperation and interdependence, and male-male bonding typified by competitive individualism.<sup>26</sup> Yet such a bald dichotomy is easily wrecked on the shoals of over-generalization. For though the

<sup>23</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenfeld, "It was a hard life," 241-3; see, too, the collection of essays in Michael Kaufman, ed., *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change* (Toronto 1987).

general pattern at the Lanark plant was one of cooperation among women workers, there were ways in which the bases of feminine solidarity were sundered; ways in which the femininity of certain workers came under the scrutiny of female co-workers. Foremost among these was the tendency of some workers, especially the older, married women, to cast aspersions on the sexual purity of younger women who bragged about their sexual exploits, or were seen cavorting with the few men who worked at the plant. This practice of singling out perceived "bad girls" possessed both a generational and an ethnic element to it. The perception of many Italian immigrant women, for instance, was that it was the French-Canadian "girls" who were sexually "loose," as well as lazy drunkards and poor parents. Conversely, immigrant women perceived themselves to be sexually pure, harder workers, and better mothers and wives, a perception that permeated the immigrant communities of Welland-Crowland, and formed part of the common identity among European immigrant families. Though rarely acknowledged by immigration historians, immigrants, too, were often active agents in the hurtful game of name-calling and stereotyping.<sup>27</sup>

An equally important point, and one that has only recently received the attention it deserves, is that for some Italian women, married or single, working for wages outside the home represented an "empowering experience." As one woman put it, when asked vaguely what paid employment meant for her, "I like having money of my own .... I don't have to go to my husband every time I want to buy something." Other women spoke of the satisfaction they received in being able to do their part to help the family realize its financial goals, and the added sense of self-worth and confidence this brought.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, for some women talk of paid labour as empowering was, and is, almost laughable. The historical literature on southern Italians and Italian immigrants has paid so much attention to the Italian family in its traditional form — with a male head of household — that a family in which a woman was the sole or chief breadwinner seems hardly conceivable. Many immigrant women in North America occupied just such a position, though precise figures are not yet available. Several of the Italians employed at the Lanark plant in the 1960s were either widows, single, or married to husbands who, because of work-related injuries, could either not work at all, or worked only sporadically. These women were the practical heads of the household — but it was not necessarily a liberating experience, or at least was not always perceived as such. For Angelina Sardella, widowed in 1953 and left to raise two children without the benefit of extended family members, working outside the home was both necessary and stifling, and added to an already heavy burden of familial responsibilities. Clearly, Sardella's case was far from exceptional. Italian peasant women had long performed so-called men's work in the absence of male

<sup>27</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interviews; see also Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 94-5; Roxanna Ng and Judith Ramirez, *Immigrant Housewives: A Report* (Toronto 1981).

family members, and it was often they who entered the world of paid labour while male family members worked the family's farm.<sup>29</sup>

Italian immigrants to Canada after World War II met a public value-system which associated feminine respectability with a woman's domestic role.<sup>30</sup> For many of them, however, feminine respectability was bound up in the paid and unpaid labour they performed, and the part that contribution made to the well-being and financial success of the family, a sentiment confirmed by oral informants.<sup>31</sup> Whether they were single, married, or widowed, these women saw nothing pathological or abnormal about their working outside of the home — they very suggestion paid labour might have been viewed as pathological met with quizzical looks by the women interviewed for this study — though most admit that, having had to perform the duties of wife, mother, and factory worker all at the same time, they would not have minded one bit to eschew the latter.<sup>32</sup>

#### *The UE Comes to Lanark*

When the Essex Wire Company opened the Lanark plant in 1961, it showed no reticence in accepting its first employees union representation, signing a 5 year contract with the International Association of Machinists (IAM), though at the time the plant employed about 30 workers, less than 6 per cent of the factory's workforce at full capacity.<sup>33</sup> Starting wages for male workers under the terms of the first contract were between \$1.38 and \$1.98 per hour, while female workers, who were the overwhelming majority, received under \$1.00 per hour. Essex Wire's relationship with the IAM, indeed the very establishment of the Lanark plant itself, was part of a familiar company strategy aimed at suppressing wages, and containing union activities in its subsidiaries. The strategy entailed the setting up of factories producing similar products in close geographic proximity to one another, and arranging for different unions to represent the plants, thereby inhibiting the possi-

<sup>29</sup>This was increasingly the case in the 1920s and 1930s when women in far greater numbers than men left rural enterprise for work in industry during this period, in defiance of Fascist propaganda which espoused rurality and the maternal, domestic role of the Italian woman. See Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley 1992), 166-8. On peasant-worker families, see Paul Corner and Anna Cento-Bull, *From Peasant to Entrepreneur* (Cambridge 1994).

<sup>30</sup>DeGrazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 168.

<sup>31</sup>Franca Iacovetta, "Making 'New Canadians': Social Workers, Women, and the Reshaping of Immigrant Families," in *Gender Conflicts*, 261-303, here at 274.

<sup>32</sup>Personal interviews; Iacovetta, "From *Contadina* to Woman Worker: Southern Italian Working Women in Toronto 1946-62," in Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking Into My Sister's Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History* (Toronto 1986), here at 705.

<sup>33</sup>For a history of the IAM, see Mark Perlman, *The Machinists: A New Study in American Trade Unionism* (Cambridge 1961).

bility of unified collective bargaining, and lessening workers' sense of job security.<sup>34</sup>

It was against this backdrop that local 523 of the UE, based in Welland-Crowland, came to take an interest in the Lanark plant. Piquing its interest were two factors: the UE was seeking a response to the IAM's raiding of one its Toronto-based locals; and it was responding to the requests of several Lanark employees — many of whom were wives, sisters, or daughters of prominent UE members in the Welland area — for local 523 to raid the acquiescent local 2075 of the IAM. In the view of UE officials, the IAM was de facto a company union, accepting from the start the bare minimum for workers, and doing virtually nothing to agitate for increased wages or improved working conditions.<sup>35</sup>

The UE's drive to organize at the Lanark plant was a somewhat clandestine operation which began in October of 1963. It was spearheaded by the wife of a UE member, Yvette Ward, a French-Canadian mother of twelve who was sent to work at the Lanark plant by local 523 in the fall of 1963 for the sole purpose of organizing workers there. The distribution and signing of union cards took place furtively inside the plant, during work periods, lunch breaks, even during washroom visits. Union organizers capitalized on the fact that many of the Lanark women came into Dunnville from nearby towns and villages in car pools, using the car-ride to explain the nature of unions and the perceived benefits of the UE over the IAM.

Not surprisingly, many workers were reticent about joining the UE; some saw little purpose in changing representation when the existing contract had not yet expired.<sup>36</sup> Others had husbands and parents to contend with — many of these women came from immigrant or French-Canadian families which had little experience with unionization and whose financial situation made the paid labour of female family members vital. Union organizers dealt with these cases in a manner reminiscent of organizing drives of the early 20th century in sectors where immigrant women predominated.<sup>37</sup> Organizers like Yvette Ward understood well

<sup>34</sup>Reiter, "First Class Workers," 16-8. Not long after signing with the IAM at the Lanark plant in Dunnville, for instance, Essex Wire demanded that women workers in its Windsor plant accept a 25 per cent cut in pay for one year, and a wage freeze in the remaining 4 years of the contract. The Windsor plant also manufactured wire harnesses and had been represented by the United Auto Workers of America since 1952. Despite desperate attempts by the union local to save workers' jobs, which included a strike by those workers not laid off, the Windsor plant eventually closed.

<sup>35</sup>*UE Canadian News*, 20 April 1964, 1-3; *Dunnville Chronicle*, 18 March 1964; personal interview with Millie and John Trufal.

<sup>36</sup>Personal interviews; Reiter, "First Class Workers," 25-9.

<sup>37</sup>Home visits were an especially effective way for union organizers to convince family members of Lanark workers, often a father or husband, that the causes of unionization in general and the UE in particular were in the best interests of female workers and their families. See Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable"; Furio, "Cultural Background."

the patriarchal assumptions under which most working-class families operated. Accordingly, they pitched the union's causes in terms that appealed to a husband's or a father's masculine self-identity, which often hinged upon his ability to defend and support weaker family members. In instances where male family members were themselves employed in unionized shops, Ward even ventured an argument in favour of gender equity. "You're enjoying good wages where you work," she would argue, "why don't you let your daughters or wives do the same?"<sup>38</sup>

For the Italian women working at the Lanark plant, the rumblings over union representation and talk of a new contract before the terms of the existing agreement expired were a distraction. Few took an active interest in what was going on during the winter of 1963-64. Most, however, were persuaded to join the UE by virtue of the fact that most of their co-workers, Italians and non-Italians, were doing the same. At least one woman who had begun to work at the plant in the midst of the inter-union struggle chose to join neither side. Oral testimonies do make one thing clear, however: most of the Italians working at the Lanark plant demonstrated only weak support for the principles of unionization, or the UE's certification drive.<sup>39</sup> For most of these women, economic insecurity, or the fear that labour militancy might result in the loss of badly needed employment, kept their support for unionism low, or, as was the case in other industries where immigrant women predominated, kept them out of the trade union movement altogether.<sup>40</sup>

Why did some Italian women feel so vulnerable? One explanation is that these women, like many immigrant men, seem to have equated capital (i.e. their employers) with the state, assuming that an offense against the one was necessarily an offense against the other. As recent arrivals to Canada, still uncertain of the full extent of their rights as Canadians and fearful of being arrested and possibly sent back to Italy, many immigrants dared not "rock the boat" by protesting too vociferously against the practices of industrial capitalism for fear of bringing shame to themselves and, it necessarily followed, to their families. The discouragement of husbands opposed to them going on strike forcefully reinforced this feeling. Oral informants who participated in the Lanark strike recalled the fear they felt at the mere sight of armed police officers guarding plant entrances shortly after the strike began, and of apparent police preparedness to use physical force to keep striking workers from blocking entry into the plant, or accosting those who attempted to cross the picket line. Others said that they were careful to avoid being photographed while on the picket line, and tried hard to avoid being seen by foremen and plant managers as they entered the plant, thereby hoping, it seems, to curry favour with

<sup>38</sup>See Furio, "Cultural Background"; Jean Scarpaci, "Angela Bambace and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union: The Search for an Elusive Activist," in Pozzetta, *Pane e Lavoro*, 99-118.

<sup>39</sup>Personal interview with Yvette Ward.

<sup>40</sup>Personal interviews.

these men, or at the very least avoid a charge of guilt by association that could come back to haunt them once they returned to work.<sup>41</sup>

The burden of personal and thus familial honour, then, weighed heavily upon the decision of Italian women to strike or not to strike. From them was expected a more "pure" code of behaviour, a view that did not accord well with labour militancy, or anything more than a limited public role. In this, Italian immigrant women shared with others of their gender. For, as recent feminist scholarship has pointed out, a public role for women often carried with it "moral overtones." For much of Canadian history, womanly "respectability" — which presumably meant female docility, genteelness, nurturance — has been, as Joy Parr has written, the "touchstone of womanly authority."<sup>42</sup> And yet, as Parr has observed, devices associated with labour militancy, in particular the picket line, included the so-called unwomanly practices of verbal intimidation and physical force. What happens, then, when women workers vote to strike, asks Parr, when they join the picket line and adopt, as Parr puts it, "the rhetoric of the bar-room and postures of the brawler"?<sup>43</sup> The Lanark strike provides some useful insights.

In anticipation of the strike, Lanark management busily prepared to sustain its operations, actively recruiting strikebreakers, many of them Native Canadians from a nearby reserve in Cayuga. The company hired security guards and installed a wire fence and surveillance cameras in advance of the strike deadline. Dunnville's town council got in on the act, too, passing a resolution three days before the strike began which authorized the mayor to request reinforcement from the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) should "law and order" be threatened by the actions of striking workers. There was little sympathy for the causes of the Lanark workers in this rural community facing an acute labour shortage on area-farms, small businesses, and industries. The suggestion by Lanark management that a prolonged disruption in production could very well force Essex Wire to move the plant out of Dunnville was taken by most in town as a credible threat.<sup>44</sup>

Despite this chilly response to their cause, most strikers were unwilling, initially, to desist in their attempt to win from Essex Wire seemingly modest concessions. They received serious attention from the male leaders of local 523, who gave the Lanark strike the same importance they would the strike of 1200 male workers a year later in Welland-Crowland.<sup>45</sup> In fact, union leaders recalled with

<sup>41</sup>Personal interviews. See also Iacovetta's "From *Contadina* to Woman Worker."

<sup>42</sup>Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990), 104-5; Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago 1993), 91-2.

<sup>43</sup>Parr, *Gender of Breadwinners*, 110.

<sup>44</sup>*Dunnville Chronicle*, 18 March 1964.

<sup>45</sup>Despite their official claim that it was the Lanark women who persuaded local 523 to raid the IAM, it is possible that the opposite was true: that it was the local leadership that first broached the possibility of entering the Lanark, and planted Yvette Ward there for the expressed, sole purpose of organizing the UE in the plant.

pride their support of the striking Lanark women, believing that they were, in their own way, leading the way towards gender equity in the trade union movement, even if the gendered nature of the Lanark workers exploitation was never formally acknowledged. Indeed, the language they used, during the strike and 30 years later, betrays the patriarchal and even sexist assumptions with which they approached the Lanark situation. At one strike rally after another, male union leaders and hundreds of workers from various unions and industries across southern Ontario (including locals of the “rival” unions like the United Steelworkers of America, and the United Auto Workers of America), gathered in support of the Lanark women, arguing firstly for labour solidarity — with no reference to the special problems women workers faced — and secondly, pitching the paternalistic view that male unionists had a duty to end the exploitation of young, defenceless women by capital in cohort with the state. Even the most militant of the female strikers, Yvette Ward, pitched the cause of the Lanark strikers in patriarchal terms. In newspaper advertisements, union leaflets, home visits, and speeches, Ward’s message was essentially the same: “Don’t let this happen to your daughter.”<sup>46</sup>

Though the union leadership depicted the striking Lanark women as weak and defenceless, many strikers proved to be far from passive victims of the combined forces of capital and the state. Strikers, too, did their part to raise the intensity of the conflict to a highly physical, sometimes violent level, though few of them would ever admit to having instigated any trouble with the police. On this the record is clear. In the 1964 strike, some women used paint bombs, hurled eggs, tomatoes, and insults at cars and strikebreakers, spread nails or huddled in large groups at plant entrances to obstruct vehicles trying to enter the plant.<sup>47</sup> Male union leaders recognized, of course, that the use of physical force and intimidation by strikers did little more than hurt their cause, especially in a non-union town like Dunnville. Interestingly, a similar argument was used by local 523 leaders in the 1966 strike of male steelworkers in Welland. This suggests that it was not unwomanly behaviour per se, but unruly, disorderly conduct in general, which limited, or was perceived to limit, the strikers’ effectiveness, while at the same time calling attention to their cause. Speaking of strike leader Yvette Ward, one former union

<sup>46</sup>It is important to note that the leaders of local 523 were somewhat uncertain about what tactics to use when dealing with the Lanark women. “Prior to Lanark, all our members were men ... the backbone of the union, to whom you talked differently, with whom you acted somewhat differently,” recalled Mike Bosnich, then business agent for local 523. “Among women, the sensitivities are slightly different. The smartest thing we did [at Lanark] was to get three or four women who became the leaders in the situation.” Personal interviews with Yvette Ward, Mike Bosnich, and John and Millie Trufal; *UE Canadian News*, 2 November 1964, 1-4. See Julie Guard’s recently completed thesis “The ‘Woman Question’ in Canadian Unionism: Women in the UE, 1930s to 1960s,” PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1994.

<sup>47</sup>In the first two months of the strike, police charged close to 40 picketers with offenses that included assault, intimidation, wilful damage, and creating a disturbance. See Reiter, “First Class Workers,” 332-8.

official said: "She was aggressive .... I had my doubts because she was too forceful, too domineering." When asked if his worries were related to the fact that Ward was a woman, a wife, and mother, the official responded curtly, "No." The problem with Ward, in his view, was "her attitude." "Militancy is important," he explained, "but you have to direct it into proper channels. To get ... thrown in jail is very easy, but what does that achieve? To organize a strike ... in such a way that is effective, you have to bring the community along with you." This was especially crucial, though ultimately futile, in Dunnville, a community which considered the Lanark plant a "godsend."<sup>48</sup>

For the Italian women working at the plant in the summer of 1964, the strike was problematic, not because it called upon them to perform seemingly "unwomanly" public duties, but because an interruption in work threatened the financial security of their families. As we have already seen, some of these women were the sole or chief breadwinners of their families. For the self-supporting widow and mother Carmela Maddalena, for instance, the prospect of a prolonged strike was frightening since it seemed, in her mind, to threaten the very survival of her small family. Other women, who were in their mid- to late-30s, had searched long for regular paid employment and were grateful to Lanark personnel for having given them an opportunity to work when other employers in the area passed them over for younger female workers. In addition, they claimed that they liked working at the Lanark, and disagreed with the union's depiction of the plant as a sweatshop. For these women, company threats to terminate the employment of strikers were to be taken seriously. As one of the women put it, "I fight to go to work .... I fight to make a living; I can't find another job and that one [at the Lanark] was a steady job .... I fight to go to Lanark." Accordingly, she dared not do anything which might be seen to jeopardize her long-sought after position at the Lanark. At the insistence of her husband and son (the latter was a foreman at the plant), this woman refused to take sides in the dispute between the IAM and the UE, and refused to join the strike, crossing the picket line a few weeks after the strike began.<sup>49</sup>

Yet despite their reluctance to strike, most of the Italians working at the plant did not cross the picket line, at least not until the strike neared its end, surprising given their lack of enthusiasm for unionization and, in some cases, their contempt for the more militant strikers. This seeming contradiction is perhaps explained by their unfamiliarity with labour militancy. In oral interviews, several Italian women maintained that they had had no choice but to join the strike when told to do so by shop-stewards and union leaders. One woman explained what she believed were the feelings of all the Italian women at the plant when the strike began: "They wanted to work, but they had to go out .... You can't stay if its a strike because its everybody or nobody." Another woman suggested that they were coerced by the

<sup>48</sup>Parr, *Gender of Breadwinners*, 110; Personal interviews.

<sup>49</sup>Personal interviews.



union to strike. "The union forced us to strike," she maintained, apparently unaware of her right to vote against the strike, or to cross the picket line.<sup>50</sup>

That most of the Italians did not cross the picket line, then, may have had little to do with any nascent sense of class identity or solidarity with their working sisters. In fact, some of the Italians interviewed for this project recalled with contempt the eagerness with which many of their younger co-workers went on strike. One woman, when asked to comment on the particularly physical, sometimes violent nature of the picket line, argued that the most militant strikers were the young, divorced, single mothers who were, at the same time, lazy drunkards with excessively loose sexual mores.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, there was considerable sympathy, and empathy, among the Italian women for those strikebreakers who defended their own actions by saying that they could not afford, financially, to strike.

Still, we must be careful not to exaggerate the extent of the anti-strike, or anti-union sentiment among the striking Italian women, at the expense of equally forceful sentiments reflective of a strong sense of class solidarity, and a seemingly instinctive understanding of, and resentment towards, the exploitive relations of capitalism. For the most part, Italian women did join the picket line, marching, chanting, yelling, even joining in the human blockades of vehicles which tried to enter the plant under the cover of darkness. Oral informants recalled the sense of *allegria* (happiness) on the picket line, with women exchanging jokes and sharing food, or singing and dancing in order to pass the time, or as a way of keeping warm and staying awake during the night-time shift. Though they were cast in an unfamiliar role, most seem to have adopted many of the devices of labour militancy quickly and, perhaps most importantly, with relative equanimity. On this count, the Italian women who took part in the strike displayed a considerable degree of class and gender solidarity with fellow strikers.<sup>52</sup>

For some of these women, the Lanark strike was an occasion to vent longstanding grievances against the "owning classes," grievances born of their experience as peasants and, in some cases, industrial workers in the Italian south, and fuelled by their status as expendable, foreign-born working women in North America. Seen in this light, the militancy of the striking Italian women must be viewed as an act of defiance towards the joint forces of capital and the state, and an assertion of individual dignity by women who refused to submit to a system of social relations which demanded that the lower class show deference to their "social betters" — be they landowner or industrialist. Emilia Ruicci, for one, in speaking of her readiness to adopt the devices of labour militancy in the Lanark strike, recalled the anger and resentment she had felt when, as a young woman in inter-war southern Italy picking vegetables on lands her family did not own, she was chided by the landowner's wife for putting too many of the prime vegetables in the pile

<sup>50</sup>Personal interviews.

<sup>51</sup>Personal interviews.

<sup>52</sup>Personal interviews.

that was to go to Ruicci's family. Already scornful of the baroness' unwillingness to do any of the picking herself, and indignant at the suggestion that for all their all hard work, she and her family should receive a lower grade of the crop, Ruicci scoffed at the baroness' imperious order, staking her claim to share in the fruits of her labours. Ruicci's active participation in the Lanark strike, then, can be seen to have given voice to frustrations and hostilities toward the "the boss" that had been smouldering for much of her adult life, grievances that found legitimacy in collective expression.<sup>53</sup>

By the start of the new year, most of the Lanark women who had walked off the job five months previously were back at work, either at the plant or elsewhere. In early January, only about a hundred women remained on strike. The Italian women interviewed for this study had all returned to work before Christmas. By 11 January, the Lanark workers had voted to end their nineteen-week strike. The union conceded defeat, but blamed it on the ultimate success of the company's strike-breaking practices, and the alleged complicity of the provincial government. Until the end of the strike, union leaders paid scant attention to the gendered context of the episode, focusing instead on what they perceived to be the paramount issues of class struggle. The union's resolution at the end of the strike spoke only of the workers' outrage at the duplicity of the state — the government and the courts — which, the union maintained, had enabled Essex Wire to succeed yet again in beating back a workers' offensive.<sup>54</sup>

And yet, as Ester Reiter has noted in her study of this episode, the Lanark strike was a strike "by and for women"; an instance in which the particular problems of women workers — low pay, harassment, tedious, low-status jobs — were taken as serious and legitimate concerns for the working class as a whole.<sup>55</sup> The strike also

<sup>53</sup>Personal interviews. Of course, there was a long tradition of the Italian peasant woman's public protest. See, for example, DeGrazia's, *How Fascism Ruled Women*; see also Sydney Tarrow, *Peasant Communism in Southern Italy* (New Haven 1967); Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants* (Albany 1984); Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna: feminism in Italy* (Middletown CT 1986); Judith Adler Hellman, "The Italian Communists, the Woman's Question, and the Challenge of Feminism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 13 (1985); and *Journeys Among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities* (New York 1987).

<sup>54</sup>The union was particularly incensed by the use of an *ex parte* court injunction which limited the number of pickets to four per plant gate, and to the government's refusal to outlaw the use of strikebreakers. See *UE Canadian News*, 28 December 1964; 25 January 1965; 8 February 1965; *Tribune*, 11 January 1965.

<sup>55</sup>Not surprising for a union whose national membership was about one-quarter female. For all the inadequacies of its efforts to achieve gender equity in the workplace or the union structure itself, the UE displayed what Julie Guard has called "principled attention" to the importance of its female membership and to the legitimacy of the particular concerns of female workers, albeit in the context of unionists' (male and female) prioritizing of class concerns. Reiter, "First Class Workers," 48-9; See Guard, "The 'Woman Question.'" On

suggests that labour historians have, for the most part, neglected to delve more deeply into the complex web of structural and cultural constraints which have historically conditioned labour militancy. For though they proved unwilling participants in the strike who were only dimly aware of, or little concerned with, the broader principles of unionism, and though they were unaccustomed to playing a visible public role, most of the Italian women who were working at the Lanark plant in 1964, were participants nevertheless, whose sense of feminine and ethnic pride did not suffer, and perhaps was bolstered, by their encounter with labour militancy.

### *"The Men's Turn"*

The failure of the Lanark strike to extract from Essex Wire even a few of the modest concessions that the union was demanding, proved a bitter pill for union leaders to swallow. The fact, though, that local 523 had been an "outsider" in the strike — one should recall here that the UE was intruding, intentionally, on IAM territory when it began to organize Lanark workers — and that its representation of Lanark workers ended soon after the strike was over lessened any sense of defeat. Indeed, both factors contributed to the perception among former union officials that the episode was an anomaly in the local's long, and successful, history in the area. In the end, for its sincere commitment to the causes of Lanark's largely female workforce, local 523's links to that plant, and to the community in which it resided, were tenuous and short-lived. Of course, the same held for the vast majority of Lanark's workforce. Such was not the case, however, at the Page-Camrose pipe-manufacturing factories in Welland, subsidiaries of the Steel Company of Canada, and employers of well over 1200 workers. Page-Camrose was UE territory, and had been since 1943 when the union signed its first contracts at the then-independent Page-Hersey Tubes Works and the neighbouring Electrometallurgical Company.

Stelco's roots in the community were, by contrast, rather shallow. The company came to the area in 1956 to establish the Camrose Tubes Works, in joint ownership with the Page-Hersey Company. But if Stelco was something of an outsider in the community in the mid-1960s, pipe manufacturing was not. The original Page-Hersey plant first began production in 1909, manufacturing from the start pipes for uses as diverse as the transmission of oil, gas, and water to automotive parts, flagpoles, and lamp-stands. The arrival of the Camrose Tubes Works in the summer of 1956 for the production of pipes 36 to 40 inches in diameter (the largest in Canada at the time), coupled with the city's advantageous geographic position, and the presence of a stable force of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, made

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gender politics in other areas of the labour movement, see Nancy Gabin, *Feminism and the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers 1935-75* (Ithaca 1990); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The dynamics of job segregation by sex during World War II* (Chicago 1987); Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto 1994).

Welland-Crowland a major centre of pipe-manufacturing in North America. Not surprisingly, area politicians and merchants cherished the plant's presence, both for the considerable amount of property tax dollars it brought to city coffers, and for the relatively steady income it brought to over a thousand of the city's workers and their families (estimated to represent roughly 5000 of the city's residents).<sup>56</sup>

By the time Stelco was in complete control of the Page-Camrose, so too was the UE. As a result, when the "newcomer" company indicated in contract negotiations with local 523 in the winter of 1965 that it intended to delete a clause from the existing agreement which prevented the company from firing employees who were off the job for more than a year because of illness or injury, the union's business agent, Mike Bosnich, could confidently advise company officials that "they had a strike on their hands."<sup>57</sup> And so they did. On 22 February 1966, close to 1200 men working at the Page-Hersey and Camrose Tubes Works walked off the job, just 3 days after voting overwhelmingly to strike. Though there had been some inkling of labour-management problems at Page-Camrose before the strike in February of 1966, the six week-long strike turned on Stelco's unexpected plan to remove the provisions which protected seniority for injured workers. To be sure, the union's negotiating committee was demanding the usual increase in wages — an increase of 20¢ per hour for general labourers and 35¢ per hour for tradesmen; the company countered with an offer of 7¢ and 5¢ respectively — but on the question of wages, there was room for compromise. Indeed, as was noted in one strike report filed with the federal Department of Labour, the union "stood firm" on one item alone: that existing seniority provisions be left untouched.<sup>58</sup>

For union officials, the company's attempt to do away with the indefinite seniority protection was intended to "make an example" out of their seemingly pampered and well-organized Welland employees. Stelco had come to Welland, declared union leaders, "to wield the big stick," with the hopes of weakening the solid base of support local 523 enjoyed on the shopfloors of Page-Camrose and in the community at large.<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, the company dismissed that charge as absurd, reminding its workers and the general public that it had offered substantial wage increases in an attempt to avert the strike, and asserting its belief that Stelco

<sup>56</sup> *Welland Evening Tribune*, 21 October 1952, a special supplement commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Page-Hersey Tubes in Welland. See also Bosnich's, *One Man's War*; personal interviews.

<sup>57</sup> Personal interview with Mike Bosnich.

<sup>58</sup> National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG-27, Vol. 3116, strike 59, Department of Labour, *Report of Industrial Dispute Commencement*.

<sup>59</sup> *Welland Evening Tribune*, 19 February 1966; 22 March 1966; personal interview with Mike Bosnich. See also, Nelson Lamontagne, *Four Decades of Struggle* (Welland 1982). *Four Decades* was published by local 523.

had a reputation that was "second to none for good employee, union and community relations."<sup>60</sup>

Whatever the public protestations to the contrary, union officials and workers were convinced that the company was, in the words of one former worker, "out to get us."<sup>61</sup> That sentiment pervaded union meetings in the weeks preceding the strike, and perhaps best explains why Page-Camrose workers were so easily persuaded to reject the last-minute company offer, and displayed an intensity and eagerness to strike that surprised, even worried, seasoned union men like Mike Bosnich or John Trufal. Accordingly, they urged calm and restraint at strike meetings, a point they regularly reinforced through the local press. In addition, Bosnich saw to it that a discipline committee be established to monitor the actions of strikers on the picket lines, and to remind striking workers of the potential harm even minor incidence of violence could do to their cause. The leaders of local 523, it seems, had learned the lessons of the Lanark strike well.

But Page-Camrose was not Lanark, and Welland was not Dunnville. For one thing, the business and political elite of Welland, though mindful of Stelco's importance to the community, dared not demonstrate a blind devotion to the company. This was, after all, Welland-Crowland, a largely blue-collar community which enjoyed substantive representation in municipal government (the first mayor of Welland following the amalgamation of Crowland in 1960 was Mike Perenack, a former Page-Hersey worker and member of the UE). The Page-Camrose workers were, in contrast to the Lanark workforce, community-based, many of them living within walking distance of either plants.<sup>62</sup> From the start of the strike the city's elected officials maintained, officially at least, a neutral stance. Welland city council did, however, refuse to acquiesce to company demands for an increased police presence on the picket lines. From the perspective of the strike's leaders, the show of neutrality by elected officials, in addition to the public demonstrations by politicians of sympathy for the workers' cause (regular visits to the picket line to

<sup>60</sup>It is not clear whether Stelco's handling of its Page-Camrose contracts was reflective of a veiled attack on local 523 or the workers it represented, though it is interesting to note that in the summer of 1966, Stelco was faced with strikes by various locals of the United Steelworkers of America at six of its plants in Ontario, in addition to a strike by members of local 1 of the Ontario Bricklayers and Masons Union at the company's Hilton Works in Hamilton. Notably, precisely the sort of provision Stelco was demanding for Page-Camrose — protection of seniority and employment for injured workers extending no more than twelve months — was already present in the existing collective agreements up for renegotiation at Stelco's other subsidiaries in the summer of 1966. *Welland Evening Tribune*, 19 February 1966. See also a letter from the manager of the Page-Hersey, G.H. Layt, contained in PAO, RG 7-145-0-5, Assistant Deputy Minister of Labour, Correspondence. See also PAO, RG-7-31, Ontario Department of Labour, Conciliation Board Reports.

<sup>61</sup>NAC, RG-27, vol. 3116, strike 59, and PAO, RG 7-145-0-5, Industrial Relations Division, Assistant Deputy Minister of Labour.

<sup>62</sup>Personal interviews.

bring coffee) was, in effect, a *de facto* endorsement of the striking workers, and a welcomed change from what they had confronted in Dunnville a year earlier.<sup>63</sup>

The tacit support of Welland's elected officials provided the striking Page-Camrose workers with a powerful tool with which to wage their struggle against Stelco. Of considerable import, too, was the UE's legacy in the area, and the respect which local 523 and its leaders had earned through two decades of struggling (largely successfully) to improve the material lives of Welland workers and their families.<sup>64</sup> But more important than these, arguably, was the high degree of solidarity among workers at Page-Camrose. Tellingly, during the six week-long strike, not one worker crossed the picket line, a remarkable fact in itself made all the more notable by the ethnic heterogeneity of the Page-Camrose shopfloor. As one Italian man described the picket line, "We all mixed up, French, English, Italian, we all stick together ... we had fun." Indeed, like the community within which it was located, the two plants were points of daily interaction among peoples from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Most workers were of European descent — either immigrants themselves or the Canadian-born sons of immigrants — or Franco-Ontarians. Though precise figures are unavailable, it seems that between 300 to 400 Italians worked at Page-Camrose. Oral interviews make clear that though the number of Italians was substantial, intra-group solidarity was not exceptional; inter-ethnic interaction and collaboration was both inevitable and welcomed, and became increasingly feasible as linguistic and cultural barriers among immigrant workers declined through the 1960s.

In this way, the shopfloors of the Page-Camrose plants replicated the pattern of inter-ethnic and class cohesion which had developed in Welland-Crowland since before World War II.<sup>65</sup> Ethnic diversity did not preclude the emergence of a common identity among foreign-born residents and their Canadian-born children. In the decades before World War II there developed just such a collective, pan-European, pan-immigrant, and class identity, the product of various integrative forces — daily contact in the neighbourhood, workplace, inter-ethnic boarding-houses, social clubs, church, school, pool halls, and even grocery stores. A shared acceptance of practices that Anglo-Celtic residents of Welland-Crowland frowned

<sup>63</sup>Local politicians no doubt took note of the several "letters to the editor" of Welland's daily newspaper which pointed out that it was Stelco that was the "stranger" in town, and that workers had every right to enjoy decent wages and job security in times of sickness, accident or old age. See the *Welland Evening Tribune*, 16 March 1966.

<sup>64</sup>*Welland Evening Tribune* 1 March 1966; 28 February 1966; 2 March 1966. Personal interviews with Mike Bosnich and John Trufal. The area's MPP Ellis Morningstar worked quietly behind the scenes to resolve the strike, but was careful to avoid coming down on either side of the disagreement. See PAO, RG 7-145-0-5, Correspondence of the Asst. Deputy Minister of Labour for the province of Ontario.

<sup>65</sup>See Fern Sayles, *Welland Workers*; Average industrial wages in Welland in 1966 were at or above the national average. See Canada. Department of Labour, *Wages, Rates, Salaries and Hours of Labour* No. 49, 1966.

upon — the production and consumption of alcohol, sometimes illegally, and a lax view of Sabbath observance, for instance, served to promote inter-ethnic collaboration and solidarity.<sup>66</sup> The sense of “otherness” that has historically so powerfully and often violently divided peoples around the world was further lessened in Welland-Crowland by the fact that the community’s immigrant population was overwhelmingly white, European and Christian. In fact, religion played an important role in integrating members of this polyethnic community, as well as promoting inter-ethnic interaction and collaboration.<sup>67</sup>

That bases of inter-ethnic collaboration such as these were established before the wave of post-war immigrants began is of tremendous importance in accounting for the relative tolerance they met upon arriving in Welland-Crowland. Indeed, it may very well be that having been at work for several decades before the 1950s, the various integrative forces created a kind of community ideology which celebrated ethnic diversity, at least on an official level, and, perhaps, demanded inter-ethnic collaboration. In the 1950s and 1960s, of course, integrative forces continued to play a crucial if subtle role. The dispersal of immigrants and their children into new residential areas, which began in earnest in the 1960s, was among the more significant of these forces. Arguably the strongest of the integrative forces was the practice of marrying outside one’s ethnic group, or “exogamy,” a pattern that seems to have been most pronounced among the Canadian-born children of immigrants.<sup>68</sup>

By the start of the 1950s, the face of municipal government itself had begun to change, growing more reflective of the area’s ethnic and class composition. In the post-war era, Crowland’s town council came to be dominated by former factory workers like Ellis Morningstar (who would later serve as Member of Provincial

<sup>66</sup>Patrias, *Relief Strike*; Paula Esposito, “The Italian Community of Welland”; Welland Heritage Council Multicultural Collection (WHCMC), *The Croatians of Welland* (Welland 1979) and in the same collection, Clare P. Jones, *The Italians of Welland*, n.d. Welland Public Library.

<sup>67</sup>Personal interviews with Mike Bosnich, John Trufal, and Elena Turrone; see also Patrias’, *Relief Strike*. Welland-Crowland’s Roman Catholic parishes for instance, regularly conducted interethnic religious celebrations with processional marches from one “ethnic” church to another, or mass rosary recitals where parishioners were encouraged to respond in their mother tongue. Mass celebrations of religious devotion among members of a multi-ethnic community was seen to reenact New Testament accounts of the first Pentecost when, Christian tradition says, Jesus’ apostles were endowed with the ability to speak in a multitude of tongues, and instructed to preach the good news to “every nation under heaven.” See *The Canadian (Catholic) Register*, 25 June 1949, 12, and the same publication, 7 June 1952, 10.

<sup>68</sup>Personal interviews. To date, no precise records regarding exogamy in Welland-Crowland are available. This impression is based largely upon oral data. See the Assessment Rolls and City Directories for Welland, 1960–65, which are located at Brock University, Special Collections Room, St. Catharines, Ontario. I must thank John Burtiak of the Special Collections Department for his helpful advice on the use of these sources.

Parliament for the area), a Ukrainian bakery store owner, and a Yugoslavian factory worker. Crowland's Reeve from 1952 to 1958 was Peter Santone, the son of immigrants from the Molise province of southern Italy. Other civic politicians included John Trufal and Mike Bosnich, second-generation Canadians themselves, factory workers and prominent members of UE local 53.<sup>69</sup> This pattern of ethnic and class representation in municipal government continued after Crowland was annexed by Welland, giving the city's heterogeneous working-class considerable resources from which to draw when asserting or defending its collective, class interests. Out of thirteen members of Welland's new city council, seven were members of UE local 523.<sup>70</sup>

While it is true that there were limits to the extent of inter-ethnic interaction beyond the shopfloor, it is nevertheless significant that ethnic differences among workers at Page-Camrose remained just that: differences. Which begs the question, how were ethnic differences at Page-Camrose so effectively bridged?<sup>71</sup> As we have seen, much of the bridge-building took place subtly, beyond the shopfloor, in the community at large where differences were subverted by the sorts of integrative forces listed above, and by the recognition of shared class and community interests. But the process entailed more than this. For it was the shopfloor itself that proved the ultimate alchemy of solidarity. It was here where shared class concerns were laid bare as workers discussed a host of work-related issues such as wages, layoffs, overbearing management, and injuries. It was here where cultural differences were subverted, or bridged, by daily contact and a sense of camaraderie and fellow-feeling among the men. In fact, gender solidarities, like class, played a pivotal role in building bridges among the ethnically-diverse workforce. The men of Page-Camrose belonged to an occupational culture that was at the same time a male culture.<sup>72</sup> At Page-Camrose, this male culture possessed a distinct "ethnic" feel to it. Friendly, "ethnic" bantering among male workers served to bolster solidarity, not weaken it; the bantering, former shop steward John Trufal maintains, was "par for the course" and innocuous. Men were sometimes given nick names based on their ethnicity:

<sup>69</sup>Bosnich, *One Man's War*, 150-1.

<sup>70</sup>In addition, Canadian-born children of European immigrants served on Welland's city council. In the early 1960s, for instance, five city councillors were of Italian origin, while councillors of Ukrainian, Polish, and Hungarian descent, too, sat on council. See Mike Bosnich, *One Man's War*, 90.

<sup>71</sup>Bosnich, *One Man's War*, 149-50. For instances in which ethnic diversity inhibited labour solidarity see Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York 1976); Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto 1988); Bruno Ramirez, "Workers Without a Cause: Italian Immigrant labour in Montreal, 1880-1930," in Perin and Sturino, eds., *Arrangiarsi: The Italian Immigration Experience in Canada* (Montréal 1989); For an outstanding review of this and other themes, see Franca Iacovetta's "Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestics: Writing About Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship," in *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Winter 1995).

<sup>72</sup>Rosenfeld, "It was a hard life," 264.



an Italian worker might be referred to as “Spaghetti-man”; one Polish immigrant was affectionately referred to as “Mr. Kolbassa.” As one Italian immigrant who worked at Page-Camrose put it, “We have fun everyday .... Sometimes we start arguing as soon as we get there in the morning. But it’s more like jokes. We don’t try to offend one another, we just have fun.” He captured the essence of solidarity among Page-Camrose workers when he said, “when you work there for many years, you become a family .... I’ve been working there for 30 years and I see all those faces everyday in there. When someone retires, you feel it, ... you think you no see him no more.”<sup>73</sup>

Former union leaders maintain that ethnic heterogeneity or unfamiliarity with unionism posed few significant difficulties in terms of organization and solidarity. That they were sensitive to the problems of immigrant workers who spoke little English and who had little or no prior experience with the rigours of factory work may explain why. The fact that many of the more prominent union leaders were themselves “ethnics” also helps account for the ease with which immigrant workers were brought into the union fold. Mike Bosnich, for instance, former business agent for local 523 and the man who led the Page-Camrose workers in the 1966 strike, believes that his own ethnicity (he was born in Serbia and raised in Crowland township) went far toward establishing a relationship of trust between himself and immigrant workers, whatever language they spoke. What is more, having grown up in Welland-Crowland, Bosnich understood well the particular sensibilities of immigrant workers — their concerns, needs, goals — and was able to draw upon this understanding to pitch the cause of unionism with arguments immigrant workers could relate to their own interests.

Of course, union leaders realized the barriers, language principal among them, that limited the efficacy of their personal contact with immigrant workers. To get around this, they adopted the tactic of using older or more experienced workers from a given ethnic group to spread the union’s message among newly employed immigrant workers. “The secret,” says Bosnich, “was to find one of their leaders in the plant, then, through him or her, to start the process of union organizing.” In the 1950s and early 1960s, when Italian immigrants entered Page-Camrose in large numbers, Brunco Rocco, himself a prewar immigrant from Italy and one of the founding fathers of local 523, played a crucial role in spreading the principles of unionism among Italians, and encouraged a good number of his compatriots to assume positions of influence and leadership — especially shop steward — within the union. This tactic of “using one of their own” to spread the union’s message was similarly employed during the strike in 1966 when Bosnich called upon immigrant men fluent enough in English to act as translators at special meetings called for individual groups of “ethnic” workers.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup>Personal interviews.

<sup>74</sup>Bosnich, *One Man’s War*, 157-8; personal interviews.

The success of local 523 in organizing immigrant workers of the post-war generation is all the more remarkable in light of its association, or more appropriately the association of prominent local leaders like Bosnich, to the Communist Party of Canada, a relationship that was anathema to the so-called establishment of the Canadian labour movement as embodied in the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL). Within the context of Cold War anti-Communism, the CCL launched a concerted, sometimes vicious, and very public campaign to destroy the UE by "red-smearing," and actually suspended the union from the CCL in 1949. The UE would not be readmitted to the established house of labour (Canadian Labour Congress) until 1973.<sup>75</sup> Despite this campaign, however, the union lost few members in the post-war era. As Bryan Palmer has explained, the high level of membership retention was due in large part to the UE's success in maintaining a close association with the rank and file. In so doing, the issue of Communist domination was rendered irrelevant to a great many workers. As Palmer observes, "the CCF and the distant CCL, rather than locally rooted Communists appeared to be the interlopers, partisan and irresponsible agents of disruption."<sup>76</sup>

The success of Communist-affiliated union members like Bosnich lay in the fact that they had secured the respect and support of their members through popular contract settlements, the effective handling of complaints, and the avoidance of unnecessary or unpopular strikes.<sup>77</sup> Bosnich, for one, realized that most of the men and women he represented were not communists, not even left-leaning for that matter. Unionism, he maintains, is about winning for workers pay hikes, increased benefits, and job security. As Bosnich put it, "If [union leaders] were militant, and the workers saw that they were legitimately fighting for their interests, they trusted them, regardless of their nationality."<sup>78</sup> Or, apparently, regardless of their political leanings. In oral interviews, Italian men spoke with deep respect of Mike Bosnich and other leaders of local 523 like Bruno Rocco, John Trufal, or John McIntyre Sr. Bosnich's Communist leanings, it seems, bothered few of the Italian men working at Page-Camrose in the 1950s and 1960s. Bosnich is recalled as an honest, hard-working business agent, a real "friend" of the workers, a "good man," a "real fighter." His very public political inclinations were, from the perspective of most workers, overshadowed by his unquestioned commitment to the men and women he represented. "I tell you something," one man said, "if Mike Bosnich [would have] run for something, he would get my vote .... He deserved to be in government." Another man was impressed by the fact that men like Bosnich, as he saw

<sup>75</sup>Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (Toronto 1992), 294-5; see also James Turk, "Labour During the Cold War: Oral History in the Study of the Survival of the United Electrical Workers in Canada," *Canadian Oral Historical Association*, Montréal 1980; Julie Guard, "The 'Woman Question.'"

<sup>76</sup>Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 294.

<sup>77</sup>Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 294.

<sup>78</sup>Personal interview with Mike Bosnich.

it, "donated" of their time for one reason: "to help the working people, ... they were representing a bunch of working people like me."<sup>79</sup>

In unionism, workers found not only the means to protect and advance their material interests, but also a vehicle to express their working-class identities. Still, as we have seen, few of the Italian workers had any prior experience with unionism before coming to work at Page-Camrose, and, with very few exceptions, none had prior experience with the exigencies of labour militancy. Most were peasants from southern Italy, some were of an artisanal background, while many others came from so-called "peasant-worker" families — families with some members working in industry while other family members, often the men, remained employed in agricultural pursuits.<sup>80</sup> For most of the Italian men working at Page-Camrose, industrial labour was a New World experience. A few of them arrived in Canada as *bona fide* leftists, ready-made union material so to speak, eager to unionize and easily mobilized for militancy. Most had a seemingly instinctive understanding of the uneven relations between labour and capital, which paralleled similarly exploitive relations between landowner or other local elite and peasants in southern Italian society. Giuseppe Silvestri, an immigrant from Aquila, Abruzzo, who came from a peasant-worker family recalled with anger the social protocol in his southern Italian village which required local *contadini* (peasants) to deferentially shower the local "big shot," *il barone* as he was known, with wine, cured meats, and fruits and vegetables in return for hay to feed cattle, or for firewood in winter from his extensive landholdings. The hope among local peasants was that such treatment would ensure they received the best or largest amount of hay or firewood. *Il barone*, however, was rarely so generous, a fact which further fuelled Silvestri's resentment. "Why feel like I'm less than he is?" Silvestri asked, "because I said some day I'm going to have something, ... my own house, car, ... not like *il barone*, but *my own* ..." [emphasis added].<sup>81</sup>

The desire to have "something" of one's "own" was not, obviously, peculiar to Silvestri, or to immigrants from southern Italy. The sentiment expressed by Silvestri, and echoed by millions of immigrants to North America, reflects an ancient peasant desire for independence from large landowners and local elites, a desire that inspired the massive migrations of Europeans in the 19th and 20th centuries. For an earlier generation of scholars, this desire, and the migration it inspired, held the key to explaining the decidedly low levels of class consciousness among European immigrant workers. One thinks here of Gabriel Kolko's classic lament for the American working class, whose weaknesses and failures, he believed, were due to the ethnic and racial differences that have historically divided workers and hindered collective protest. Immigrant workers in particular, Kolko

<sup>79</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>80</sup> On peasant-worker families see Paul Corner and Anna Cento-Bull, *From Peasant to Entrepreneur*.

<sup>81</sup> Personal interviews.

argued, "hoping to return to Europe and dreaming of a second chance at home," only loosely identified themselves as workers, generally displayed little working-class consciousness, and proved very reluctant to organize in collective protest against harsh working conditions and low wages for fear of jeopardizing their chances at a speedy and profitable return to their homelands (hence their marked docility).<sup>82</sup>

In contrast, a generation of the so-called "new" immigration historians<sup>83</sup> have successfully demonstrated that arguments like that of Kolko ignored the possibility that migration, far from serving as an alternative to labour militancy, was in fact the very vehicle through which formerly apolitical, atomistic peasant or artisanal immigrants found a voice with which to assert class interests and solidarities. Indeed, according to them, the decision to emigrate could, in and of itself, represent an act of resistance, a form of class protest as it were.<sup>84</sup> Giuseppe Silvestri, for example, looked forward to joining the union after finding work at Page-Camrose in 1965. The union, in his words, "made *la forza*" — gave the workers real strength, in relation to the power of the "boss." That strength, Silvestri discovered, could produce a "better deal" for unionized workers. Other men expressed similar sentiments. Common to all the men was a concern with the "bread and butter" issues — wages and benefits — and a shared belief that the union meant "protection" for workers. "The union is the kind of protection the working people gotta have," one Italian man said, "otherwise, even if you're working for a wonderful man, you still [got no] protection." Another recalled, "people used to tell us that at one time, without the union, there was a preference, ... if you are the son of the foreman, they hire you before and maybe if one day there was a layoff, they layoff me first and he'd be left." The union, in his understanding, had changed all that, "Now with the union, they go according to seniority and they don't care if you're the son of a foreman, ... equal rights for everyone." Another man, Domenico Gentile, an immigrant from Abruzzo, Italy, was won over to unionism when officials from local 523 successfully defended him from management's wrongful accusation that he had been sleeping on the job. "The union defend me when I need [to be] defended," he recalled. "Why should I stick around with a bunch of guys who say that the union is no good, when the union saved my life? If the union not going to be there, the company is gonna walk all over you."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup>Kolko, *Main Currents in American History*, 157-8; Stephen Thernstrom, "Socialism and Social Mobility," in John M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism*, revised ed., (Berkeley 1974), 408-24; J.S. MacDonald, "Agricultural Organization, Migration and Labour Militancy in Rural Italy," *The Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, 16 (1963), 61-75.

<sup>83</sup>For a valuable analysis of the new immigration literature, see Iacovetta's, "Manly Militants."

<sup>84</sup>For this insight, I thank Franca Iacovetta.

<sup>85</sup>Personal interviews.

This comment, aside from helping to explain why unionism appealed to a good many immigrant workers, suggests that there were indeed rumblings among Page-Camrose workers over the value of unionization. According to some oral informants, more than a few Italians fit this category. In fact, the "bunch of guys" referred to by Gentile above were Italians. Not surprisingly, many of the Italians working at either plant took little interest in the causes of unionism, or resented having to pay union dues that were needed, or desired, for other expenses. For many, the union served only to protect those workers who were lazy or disruptive on the shopfloor. So long as workers did their jobs diligently and avoided "trouble," they reasoned, there was no need for union representation. It was an attitude UE member Patsy Mollica encountered often among Italians in the two decades after World War II. Mollica, the Canadian-born son of Calabrian immigrants who spent several decades in municipal politics, acted as one of the UE's feelers at Page-Camrose, helping to ease newcomers into the rigors of factory labour, while explaining to them the benefits of unionization. But, he maintains, few Italians possessed "hard attitudes" against unionization; very few were outrightly hostile to unions.<sup>86</sup>

Whatever their doubts about unionism, the Italian immigrants working at Page-Camrose were members of a union, and when union leaders advised them to reject Stelco's last-minute contract offer in late February 1966, most did.<sup>87</sup> All of them joined their co-workers on the picket line, though a few opted to find temporary or casual employment for the duration of the strike.<sup>88</sup> Significantly, not one man crossed the picket line in the six-week-long strike. It would be a gross exaggeration to attribute this show of solidarity solely to an acute sense among the Italians working there of exploitation at the hands of Stelco management. For most of these men, Stelco was a decent employer, perhaps the best they had ever worked for. The Page-Camrose complexes were good places to work — wages and benefits were among the best in the Niagara region; employment was relatively steady and secure; the plants were relatively clean and safe.<sup>89</sup> Though most appreciated the role of the union in contributing to this state of affairs, some degree of credit, and thus appreciation, invariably went to Stelco. What is more, oral testimonies make clear that despite the public show of solidarity, a good number of Italian men privately opposed the strike, or misunderstood some of the basic issues involved — insofar as they viewed the principal issue to be wages. Behind this opposition lay familiar obstacles to labour militancy. The desire, and the need, for work was

<sup>86</sup> Personal interview with Patsy Mollica.

<sup>87</sup> Contrast this situation to that of Toronto's Italian construction workers depicted in Iacovetta's, *Such Hardworking People*.

<sup>88</sup> According to the Report of Industrial Dispute Commencement (NAC, RG-27, vol. 3116, strike 59), only 700 to 800 workers received strike pay. The others, presumably, were otherwise employed in temporary or casual work for the duration of the strike.

<sup>89</sup> Wage-rates for Page-Camrose workers were among the highest in the Welland-area. See *Wages, Rates, Hours and Salaries*, 1966.

perhaps the strongest impulse impeding labour militancy. The underbelly of this attitude was the sense that a prolonged strike for (possible) modest wage increases was simply not worth the effort. In some cases, it was the wives of immigrant workers, or other family members — a father, brother, cousin — who insisted that the family could not afford, financially, to strike, or that the worker should be satisfied with the wages and benefits he was receiving at Page-Camrose.<sup>90</sup>

Many Italian workers concurred. A few of them admitted, too, that they worried the strike would jeopardize their jobs. That few of them dared to voice their concerns publicly reveals much about the ways in which gender and ethnic identities could serve the purposes of labour militancy — in this case by repressing any inclination on the part of some men to dissent with the majority of their co-workers or compatriots. Put another way, many of the Italian men who opposed the strike in that winter of 1966, dared not say so publicly for fear of being branded either as “less of a man,” or as an ungrateful immigrant. John Trufal, the man who helped lead the Lanark strike in 1964, captured the dynamics of this self-censorship when he observed, “There was peer pressure, because they lived together in the same community, they all knew that when the strike was over, they would have to work together again. And if there were some who had doubts, they didn’t dare voice them.” In this, the reticent Italians were not alone. Other workers who questioned the strike were similarly discouraged from speaking up for fear of being branded a “sissy,” or portrayed as an emasculated puppet of a domineering wife.<sup>91</sup> For immigrant workers, the repression of anti-strike sentiments took on an added dimension, the product of the desire to “fit in” — to go along with the strike because everyone else was — and an eagerness to affirm one’s loyalty to all the union “brothers” regardless of their national origin. This dimension produced a dynamic in which Italians who opposed the strike said so only to other Italians, maintaining a facade of support in their dealings with their non-Italian co-workers and union leaders, for fear of being labelled ungrateful immigrants, disloyal unionists, and weak men.

In this way, forms of gender and ethnic identities and solidarities conspired to keep some men from speaking out against the strike. But in most cases, gender and ethnicity combined with class solidarities to induce a proactive response by the Italian men of Page-Camrose to the obstinacy of Stelco. For many of the Italians who struck Page-Camrose in 1966, Stelco’s attempts to tamper with seniority rights, and the company’s parsimonious wage offer, warranted a response. Such was the case with the Angelo Rocco we met at the outset of this story. For men like Rocco, familial concerns were bound up with the issues of class which had been made so plain by the strike. Antonio Graziano, a Molisan immigrant and father of two young children put it this way, “Like I says, nobody likes strikes. Who’s gonna lose? The working people are losing, not the company. But sometimes, it’s

<sup>90</sup>Personal interviews; Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 170.

<sup>91</sup>Personal interview with John Trufal.

necessary, ... you got to go for you own good, even if you're losing money or work. For your security, for your family's security, you need the strike."<sup>92</sup>

But how best to decide when the "family's security" was threatened? More to the point, who decided what was in the family's best interests? These are questions immigration historians have usually not thought to ask, largely because they have presumed to know the answer.<sup>93</sup> Recent feminist scholarship pertaining to the Italian immigrant family has made plain that it was in the home where the Italian woman could, and often did, exert considerable influence. Building upon the Italian male's recognition of her moral authority over the family, many Italian women shared in the decision-making process, and often controlled family finances.<sup>94</sup> But this was in the private sphere, hidden from the light of public scrutiny. To what extent could Italian women use the moral authority they enjoyed within the household to influence male family members in spheres beyond the home, especially when it pertained to the one sphere men claimed as their own: the workplace?

The question bears directly on the issue of labour militancy among Italian immigrant workers. It is generally accepted that the opposition of female family members has often been a considerable obstacle to labour militancy among Italian immigrant men, though it is an influence many men dared never acknowledge publicly. In the case of the Italian men who struck Page-Camrose in the winter of 1966, however, the opposition of female family members was neither very pronounced, nor it appears, much of a factor. Oral testimonies make clear that many Italian men maintained a rigid distinction between the worlds of work and home, though most acknowledged that familial or domestic concerns were intimately bound up with their work outside the home. While wives were let in on some of the goings on at work — a few stories or amusing anecdotes might make their way to the dinner table every now and then — much was kept hidden or obscured, confined to the sacred, masculine culture of the workplace. Such was the case when the possibility of a strike at Page-Camrose was first raised in the winter of 1966. It is true, of course, that female family members were not completely unaware of the looming strike, though it is unlikely most understood precisely what the strike was about, or what it entailed. What they did know was that a strike meant a drastic and immediate reduction in the family's income, a disconcerting reality that propelled many women to urge male family members to vote against the strike, or to cross the picket line.

For the most part, however, these protestations fell on deaf ears. In fact, oral informants suggested that the decision to strike was taken independent of wives or

<sup>92</sup>Personal interviews.

<sup>93</sup>The tendency in the scholarly treatment of Italians in Canada has been to treat the family as "a nongendered and reified collectivity that acts in a self-interested manner." So writes Iacovetta, in "Making 'New Canadians'" in *Gender Conflicts*, 265.

<sup>94</sup>Surely this is one of the most important insights contained in Iacovetta's, *Such Hardworking People*, and her "From *Contadina* to Woman Worker."

other family members.<sup>95</sup> For the Italian men working at the plant, the decision to strike was theirs to make. The intervention of the Ladies' Auxiliary in the form of home visits was not welcomed. In this they were reflecting Old and New World patriarchal assumptions of what men were expected, indeed obligated, to do. As one Italian man put it, "A man, *if he's a real man*, should sometimes do decisions which a woman can't come close to! [emphasis added]" Another man expressed a related sentiment when he was asked whether he consulted with his wife before deciding to strike: "No, she's got nothing to do with that, ... for the strike, *we are out of the house, that's different things, work-related* [emphasis added]."<sup>96</sup>

Or so they portrayed their decision to strike in 1966. It may very well be that the wives of the Italian strikers had a greater influence upon their husbands' decision to strike than the latter are willing to admit. However, it is also likely that, as these women indicated in oral interviews conducted in the presence of their husbands, they trusted their husband's judgements regarding a matter most acknowledged they knew little about. What is more, once the decision to strike had been taken, there was little female family members could do other than voice their anxieties over the added financial burden a prolonged strike posed, and do what they could to stretch already meagre family budgets. Their striking husbands, fathers, or brothers generally shared these anxieties, despite the seeming equanimity, indeed eagerness, with which the men, heretofore strangers to labour militancy, adopted the aggressive postures of the picket line. Indeed, beneath the veneer of solidarity and combativeness, and the assertion of their "manly" obligations as breadwinners, lay, in some cases at least, real fear: fear of losing a cherished job because of a prolonged work stoppage; fear of being associated with the more militant strikers, many of whom resorted to verbal intimidation and acts of violence against persons and vehicles which attempted to cross the picket line; fear of being photographed by the local media and thus "outed" to management and the public as a rabble-rouser; even fear of being physically harmed in the human blockades of vehicles attempting to enter either the Page or Camrose complex. On the last count — fear of physical harm — several oral informants recalled the only real "incident" of the strike, in which about a hundred strikers lay across railroad tracks leading into the Page complex in order to block an incoming train. The police were called in at the company's request, but aside from a few tense moments when the train, travelling at a snail's pace, inched dangerously close to the human blockade, the situation was diffused peacefully. For some of the Italian men involved in the blockade, the experience was a terrifying one. It was not the police presence that worried them. (Though they did go to great lengths to avoid the kind of "trouble"

<sup>95</sup>It was a practice union leaders were keenly aware of, and by no means confined to immigrant workers. As John Trufal observed, "a man can get worked up at a meeting. For years, in our union too, you have a meeting, you tell everybody what [the strike] is about and you have a strike vote." Personal interview with John and Millie Trufal.

<sup>96</sup>Personal interviews.



associated with the physically destructive actions of some of the more militant strikers.) No, the fear several men expressed was grounded in the physical danger participation in the human blockade posed. One man, Antonio Carpino, explained the fear he felt in the following manner: "I think, maybe I no gonna see my wife and kids no more. Then what are they gonna do?"<sup>97</sup> Though hardly representative of oral informants, Carpino's case does urge us to look beneath the veneer of combativeness exhibited by the strikers in 1966. And it underlines the limitations of using cultural determinism to explain labour militancy, or of assuming gender identities to be immutable and universal absolutes.

### *Conclusion*

The Page-Camrose strike ended in success for striking workers and their hardworking union representatives. It ended quickly, too, with workers accepting overwhelmingly the terms of settlement in the second week of April, just over six weeks after they had walked off the job. Stelco's plan to weaken seniority protection for injured or chronically-ill workers, the major issue at stake in the strike, was withdrawn.<sup>98</sup> What is more, the strike was resolved peacefully, with almost no incident, and a minimum of police involvement. The UE's national president, C.S. Jackson, remarked at the end of the strike that Page-Camrose pickets were the most disciplined he had seen in over 30 years of trade union activity.<sup>99</sup>

How to account for the differences in tone and outcome between the two strikes? On one level, the answer is simple. The Lanark strike failed because Essex Wire was able to capitalize upon the principal weakness of its largely female workforce — the expendability of cheap female labour — evidenced by the ease with which Lanark management recruited hundreds of strikebreakers within a span of a few weeks to cross the picket lines set up by members of UE local 523 in August of 1964. The ease with which this was accomplished is telling, for it points to the major factor upon which the strike's outcome turned — the indifference, if not outright hostility of the residents of Dunnville, in particular the elected officials who did not need to worry about the electoral potential of the strikers, to the

<sup>97</sup> Personal interviews.

<sup>98</sup> The terms of agreement called for an immediate across-the-board increase in wages of 11¢, bringing tradesmen's wages to \$3.10 per hour, and that of general labourers \$2.33 per hour. The union also succeeded in its desire to have incentive payments and piecework eliminated from the plant. It should be noted that the infamous seniority provision was not withdrawn entirely. The company refused to grant indefinite seniority protection for workers off the job for more than 12 months, though it did extend the grace period for workers with greater seniority. And so, for instance, a worker off the job for more than 12 months would lose his job if, at the time he left, he had at least 90 days but less than 2 years seniority. See PAO, RG-7-145-0-5 for details of the terms of agreement.

<sup>99</sup> See Jackson's letter to H.L. Rowntree contained in PAO, RG-7-145-0-5, and *Welland Evening Tribune*, 9 April 1966, 4-5; *UE Local 523 Voice*, May 1966.

workers' cause. It was the striking workers, most of whom commuted to the Lanark plant daily and rarely ventured outside the plant gates except to leave Dunnville when the workday was done, who were the "strangers" in town. If striking workers generally cared little for the town of Dunnville, the town of Dunnville cared little for them, or for their strike.

Things were radically different for the workers who struck the Page-Camrose plants in 1966. This was Welland-Crowland, a multiethnic, blue-collar town with a legacy of inter-ethnic collaboration, union organization and labour militancy; an area with an electorally powerful working-class constituency, and a legacy of ethnic and working-class representation at all levels of government. Of equal import, the Page-Camrose factories were temporally and spatially wedded to the community in which they resided. Both plants drew their workers from Welland Crowland. Generations of Welland-area families had had fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, cousins, or neighbours working in the pipe mills. Cross-class solidarities were solid, as evidenced by the financial support area-businesses lent to the cause of striking workers in the 1966 strike. In the 1966 strike, it was the recently arrived Steel Company of Canada that was the outsider, the stranger in town, a fact which ultimately made the use of strikebreakers inconceivable.

Among the Italians involved in these episodes, gender mattered, but in different ways than is normally assumed. Gender mattered, to the extent that the Italian men framed their decision to strike, and their subsequent participation, in terms of manly duty as the family's decision maker and chief breadwinner, where Italian women, though sometimes breadwinners themselves, did not. Gender mattered to the extent that most of the Italian women viewed their paid labour as contingency, and defined their femininity fundamentally in relation to the domestic sphere, as homemaker, wife, and mother, even if most had worked outside the home all of their lives. But gender did not operate like some immutable law of nature to determine the activities and consciousness of the Italian workers, male and female, who partook in the strikes of 1964 and 1966. The Italian women who struck the Lanark plant in 1964 did assume, for the most part, or for a time at least, the ostensibly foreign and very public role of labour militant, and they did so with seeming equanimity. At the same time, some of the Italian men who struck the Page-Camrose plants did not want to, even though they said they did, and some of them were afraid to assume the public role of labour militant precisely because it was public, because they feared losing their jobs, or because they worried about the physical danger involved in the exigencies of the picket line.

*This article is a revised version of a Masters paper submitted to the Department of History at the University of Toronto. A doctoral fellowship by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council aided greatly the work of revising the paper for publication. Many thanks to the members of the Toronto Labour Studies group for*

*their cogent advice on how to make this a better paper than it was. The anonymous readers for Labour/Le Travail helped make the paper worthy of publication. I owe a profound debt to Ian Radforth, whose keen editorial eye saved me from making several embarrassing mistakes, and to Franca Iacovetta, the thesis supervisor, whose own scholarship inspired me to consider this project in the first place, and whose demanding questions gave the paper a conceptual rigour missing in earlier drafts. Of course, this article would not have been possible were it not for my oral informants, the women and men who graciously invited me into their homes, and shared with me details about their experiences. The usual caveat — that any omissions or errors are my responsibility — is duly noted.*