



THE STRIKE WAS A SUCCESS NOT JUST IN WINNING THE STRUGGLE FOR UNION SECURITY, BUT ALSO IN ESTABLISHING THE LEGITIMACY OF UNIONS IN CANADA.



Women marching in the picket line on Charles Street, Windsor

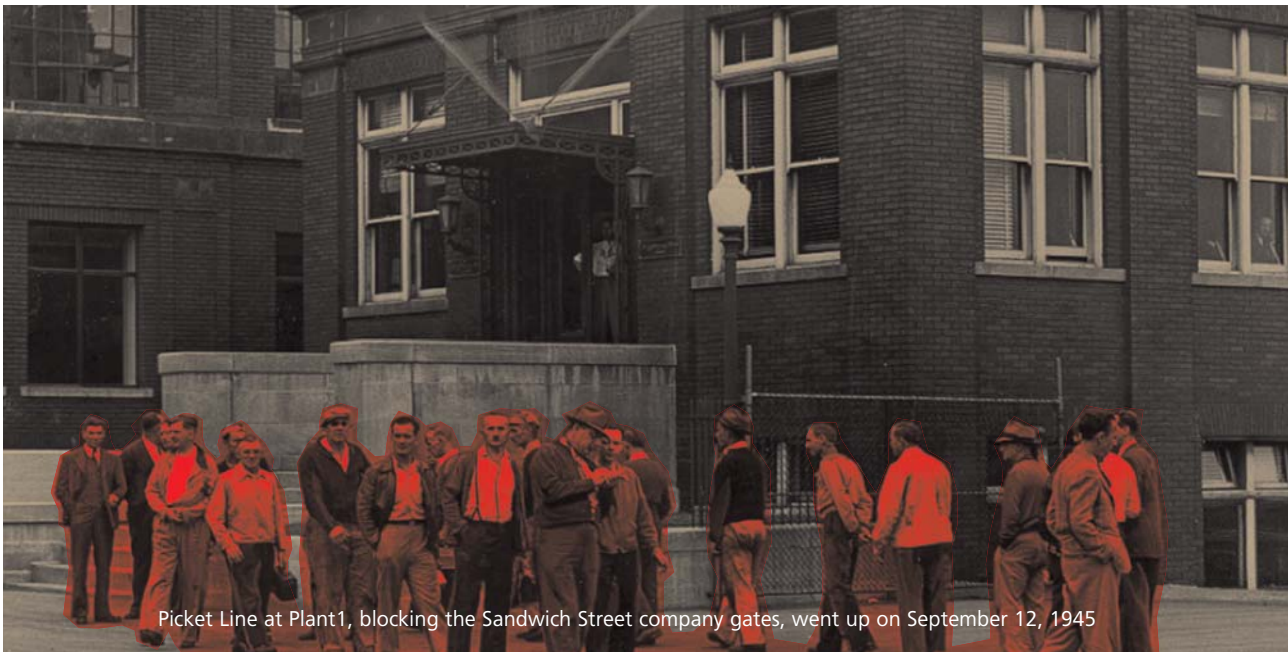


THE FORD WINDSOR STRIKE 1945

In 1945, UAW Local 200 at Ford's Windsor plant made "union security" a key demand.

Many employers wished to use the end of the war as an excuse to return to conditions as they were prior to the war when workers were unable to form unions. In order to ensure that this did not happen, Local 200 demanded that the company agree to a union shop as well as automatic dues check-off. Ford had agreed to these terms with its workers at Ford's River Rouge plant in Detroit in 1941. Union security was needed to allow the union to effectively represent its members. During the war, the UAW had to collect dues directly from its members on a monthly basis. With thousands of members, this became a full-time activity and made it difficult for the union to function.

Negotiations stalled and on September 12, 1945, 11,000 Ford workers went on strike and stayed out for 99 days. The 1945 Windsor Ford strike was historic. It not only established the principle of union security, but it also ensured that the gains labour won during the full employment years of the war would not be reversed. Unions could take their place as a legitimate part of Canadian society. As the strike started, World War II was just coming to an end. Thousands of soldiers were returning to Canada and re-entering the work force.



Picket Line at Plant 1, blocking the Sandwich Street company gates, went up on September 12, 1945

Corporations were looking to return to the pre-war years when they had greater control over workers. In taking on the largest company in the country, Ford workers led the way in establishing a mood of confidence that Canadian workers could continue to fight to make gains.

THE BLOCKADE

During the strike, the strikers closed the company's powerhouse down, shutting off the heating system for the plant. As winter approached, pressure built to reopen the powerhouse. The local Police Commission proposed using the police, over-ruling the Mayor of Windsor, Art Reaume, who supported the strike. At the same time, the province sent in hundreds of OPP and RCMP officers. Roy England, President of UAW Local 200, expressed his outrage at the growing threat of police aggression:

"The proposals of members of the Police Commission to use police to break through picket lines to escort watchmen in the powerhouse is nothing less than an attempt at strike-breaking. This is not what our returning veterans and the production workers fought for during the war in which they so gloriously upheld Canada's part in victory."

Mary E. Baruth-Walsh & G. Mark Walsh, Strike: 99 Days On The Line

On November 5, as tensions mounted, 8,000 workers from 25 plants organized by Local 195 walked off the job in solidarity with the Ford workers. They stayed out for one month with no strike pay. The next day, the union, anxious to avoid bloodshed, formed a blockade of cars and trucks stretching 20 blocks around the giant Ford plant.

Below is how UAW Canadian Director George Burt described the Windsor blockade:

"We were not well enough off in those days to have the thousands of people with cars they had in the United States, but most of the workers with cars did respond, and they established a barricade so that when public cars came down Riverside Drive they unwittingly were trapped in the congestion and reinforced our park in-siege.

The city buses were organised, and I don't know whether they acted with aforethought, but they drove into the jam and tangled into this great clot of cars. We did make one mistake. There was a fellow with a load of fish, and at our invitation he left his truck in the middle of the demonstration. It stayed there for days and when a spot of warm weather came along we very much regretted we had extended our hospitality to the fish monger."

Where Was George Burt?, UAW Pamphlet



Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers flown in from Ottawa disembark from chartered plane, November 5, 1945

Three days later, the blockade was removed. It had been a success. The police and the RCMP did not intervene. On November 23, following the resumption of negotiations, the powerhouse was reopened with the permission of Local 200.

The strike received strong support from the Windsor community. Soldiers back from the front lines marched in solidarity rallies. Church groups and local businesses pitched in to help the strikers and their families. The Women’s Auxiliary fed 11,000 picketers. Financial support came from unions across the country.

Here is an excerpt from a letter from the Ford Strike Committee in 1945 to Toronto unions appealing for financial assistance:

“No strike in the history of Canada has caught the imagination and the sympathy of the Canadian workers like the present Ford strike...they have put up an epic and heroic struggle not only for union security but also for increased vacations with pay and an insurance plan, for increased wages, an annual living wage and other points so essential for workers in order



to gain economic security. We urge upon you and your membership to make your contributions to the Ford strikers at this time, because the outcome of the Ford Strike will determine labour conditions throughout Canada for years to come.”

Mary E. Baruth-Walsh, G. Mark Walsh, Strike: 99 Days On The Line

THE STRIKE ENDS

On November 29, the Federal Government tabled a proposal to end the strike. The proposal included binding arbitration on the union shop and dues check-off issues. On December 16, after 99 days on strike, the membership voted to accept the terms and allow the issue of union security to go to third party arbitration on the condition that the arbitrator be someone who was sympathetic to the union. The decision of the arbitrator, Justice Ivan Rand, provided for the dues check-off, but not for the union shop.

The strike was a success not just in winning the struggle for union security, but also in establishing the legitimacy of unions in Canada. This gave the Canadian labour movement the confidence to fight for post-war gains. George Burt summed up the view of the union in his report to UAW Canadian Council following the strike:

“It is our belief that we have won the strike and we have confidence that the weight of this strike has had the effect of shaking the government into a greater realization of the problems of organized labour and has awakened the Canadian people to the realization that the success of post-war rehabilitation depends a great deal upon the labour movement. We feel the strike will have an effect of softening the manufacturers when our demands for wage increases are made public.”

Report to Canadian Council, January 19 and 20, 1946.

Local 200 was also looking for medical benefits, two weeks paid vacation and seniority rights for veterans. In a “union shop” everyone working in a plant would automatically be members of the union. With “dues check-off” the company would deduct union dues from the members’ pay cheques and hand the dues over to the union.

A blockade had been used to great effect by the UAW at Ford in Detroit in 1941.



Henry Howarth in the strike-supporter “sound-car”, November 2, 1945

