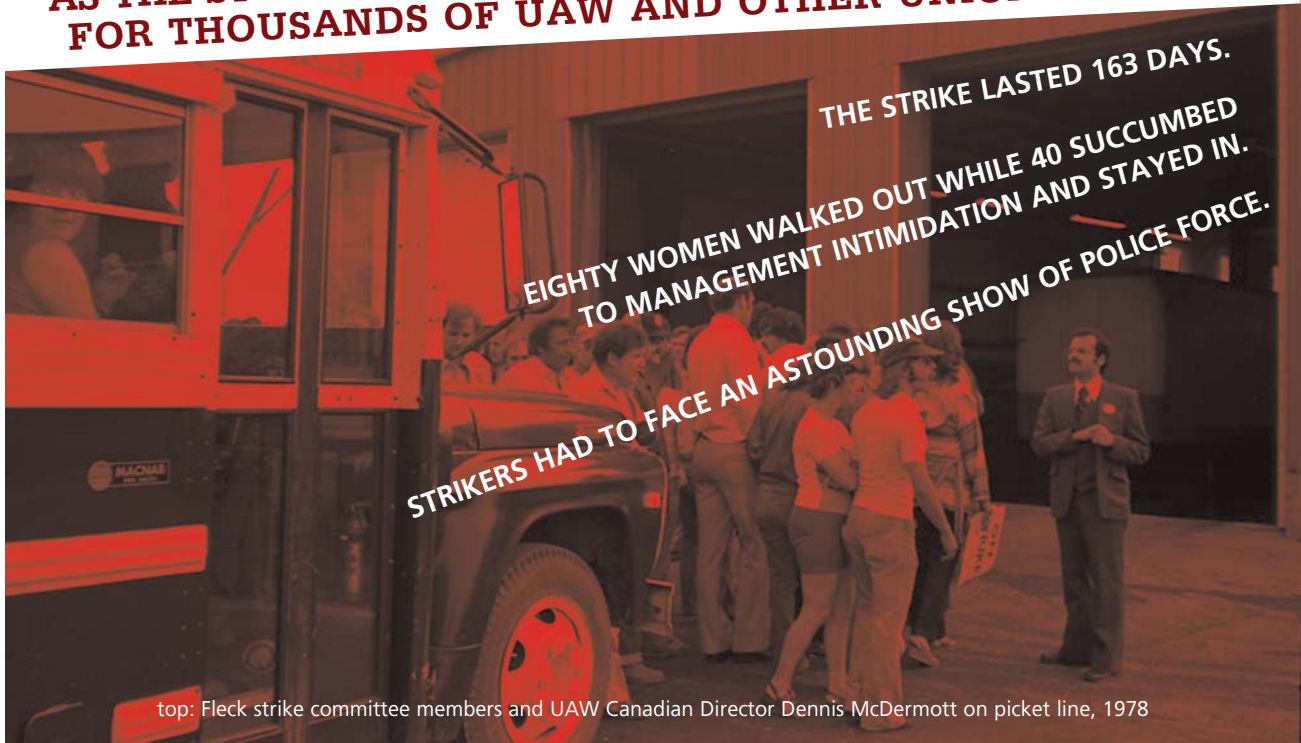




AS THE STRIKE DRAGGED ON IT BECAME A RALLYING POINT FOR THOUSANDS OF UAW AND OTHER UNION MEMBERS



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top: Fleck strike committee members and UAW Canadian Director Dennis McDermott on picket line, 1978



FLECK STRIKE 1978

Ford workers won the Rand Formula in the historic 1945 strike. In 1977, there was still no legislation making the Rand Formula a right for all unionized workers.

"In the beginning Fleck looked like a routine, first-contract bargaining situation. It was a small auto-parts plant with 140 employees, mostly women. Conditions in that place were simply terrible. It was infested with rats and mice. The safety precautions were negligible, the machinery was dangerous and there were only four toilets. To make a bad situation worse, a good many of the women were being sexually harassed by men in senior levels of management."

Bob White, Hard Bargains, 1987

Workers at Fleck, an auto-parts plant in Centralia, Ontario, produced wire harnesses and earned slightly more than minimum wage. In the fall of 1977, the UAW signed up the majority of the workers and certified Local 1620. By March the following year, a first contract was still not settled. The company refused to agree to the UAW demand for union security and the dues check-off. According to management at Fleck: "Employees should be free to be members of a union or free not to be."

The union stood its ground, vowing: “We are not about to turn the clock back 30 years and throw out the Rand Formula.”

The ensuing strike lasted 163 days. Eighty women walked out while 40 succumbed to management intimidation and stayed in. Strikers had to face an astounding show of police force. By the second month, 500 OPP officers in full riot gear were lined up against the 80 striking women (average age 21) and their supporters. Police used extreme force, frequently hitting strikers. Eventually, it came out that the plant was part-owned by James Fleck, then Ontario Deputy Minister of Industry and Tourism.

As the strike dragged on it became a rallying point for thousands of UAW and other union members, as well as the women’s movement, the NDP, and the cultural community. The Fleck women showed great courage and solidarity, with some touring the province to raise funds for the strike.

Five and a half months after the strike began, a settlement was reached and workers won a modest raise. They also won a Labour Relations Board order for compulsory payment of union dues. The Fleck women had won union security. Their struggle led to amendments in the Ontario Relations Act in 1980. Unionized workers now had a legislated right to have the Rand Formula in their agreements.

Below, you can read Bob White’s 1978 letter to Ontario Premier Bill Davis demanding that the Rand Formula be legislated.

August 17, 1978.

Dear Mr Davis:

I am writing this letter shortly after my return from Centralia, Ontario, where, as you are no doubt aware, a settlement has been achieved in that long and bitter Fleck strike.

Almost every Ontarian and many outside Ontario know the history of this strike. A history which shows a gallant group of women workers who did everything they legally could to have a union, but unfortunately were working for an employer who was determined they would not succeed, and adopted a posture in collective bargaining designed to ensure that position prevailed.

The Fleck strike terminated with the workers winning their right to have a union, but the cost to those workers financially, physically, and mentally was great. I want to assure you, Mr. Premier, that as one labour leader in this province, I am not prepared to say the end of the Fleck strike settles the issue and we should forget about what happened during the struggle.

Never again in Ontario should workers have to do what Fleck workers did “strike for a Rand Formula check-off”. Never again in Ontario should massive use of police be used to support an employer trying to break a strike and deny the workers their right to have a union. It is time for action by your government on this issue. The compulsory dues check-off should be automatic by legislation, once a union is certified by the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

I am urging you to consult with The Honourable Bette Stephenson, Minister of Labour, and bring forth legislation immediately on this issue other provinces in this country have already done so.

I suggest to you such legislation would do a great deal to avoid a repeat of the “Fleck” strike.

Yours truly,

Robert White
Director for Canada and
International Vice-President

