

Winnipeg Meat Packing Workers'
Path to Union Recognition and Collective Bargaining

BY

JOHN HANLEY GROVER

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History
University of Winnipeg
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explains why in the 1940s, Winnipeg meat packing workers secured sustainable industrial unionism. By tracing the development of the Winnipeg meat packing industry and investigating previously unsuccessful organizational drives, it is suggested that success in the 1940s corresponded to three broad contributing factors.

The most significant factor was changing local conditions. With the gradual introduction of mass production techniques to the Winnipeg meat packing industry beginning in the early 1920s, the reorganization of Winnipeg packinghouse work occurred. The large scale introduction of semi-skilled workers changed the face of meat packing, as packinghouse work became deskilled without any significant degree of automation.

During this period, craft unionism in the meat packing industry failed on a national pattern. This failure coincided with the 1930s experiment in industrial unionism by Winnipeg workers at Western Packers workers. Western Packing's workers' introduction to industrial unionism also provided the successful 1940s drive with links to the Communist Party.

An overall strengthening in North America of the labour movement beginning in the 1930s provided the second broad contributing factor to success in the 1940s. With the birth

of the CIO in the United States and Canada, Winnipeg meat packing workers gained at the very minimum inspiration.

The impact of World War II accounted for the final contributing factor for success in the 1940s. With a wartime demand creating full employment and the government's desire to maintain production, organized labour found itself in a position of unparalleled power. In combination, a spirit of militancy arose among Canada's labour movement.

From these conditions, meat packing workers in Winnipeg chose and pursued industrial unionism with great success. By the end of World War II, workers in Winnipeg possessed an effective union organization and had won union shops and wage increases. Ultimately however, the union's national success created a centralized, bureaucratic union movement which consequently provided a loss of local autonomy.

ABBREVIATIONS

AFL	American Federation of Labour
CIO	Committee for Industrial Organization
FWIU	Food Workers International Union
PWOC	Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee
TLC	Canadian Trades and Labour Congress
UPWA	United Packinghouse Workers of America
WUL	Workers Unity League

Chapter One Introduction

Despite previous attempts, on the eve of World War II, unionism and collective bargaining did not exist in Winnipeg's meat packing industry. As working conditions began to change in the 1930s, Winnipeg meat packing workers at Western Packing first attempted to organize industrially. Although the ensuing, long - and often violent - Western Packing strike failed to introduce industrial unionism to the industry's workers, the seeds and avenue to worker empowerment were planted.

With the onset of World War II, packinghouse workers at Canada Packers rose and organized themselves as a local chapter of the United Packinghouse Workers of America. Following a highly successful one-day sitdown strike in 1943, industry leader Canada Packers grudgingly recognized the local and began the process towards collective bargaining. With the pillar of the anti-union industry seriously shaken, organizing activities and union recognition spread with great success to the remainder of the Winnipeg industry within a year. By the end of the War, less than two years later, the vast majority of Winnipeg packinghouse workers held union recognition and collective agreements.

Winnipeg's status within the Canadian meat packing industry during this era was renowned for two main reasons. The Winnipeg industry held claim to being Western Canada's

largest meat packing centre, and ranked second in terms of national importance. Secondly, the industry and the city were infamous for a long tradition of anti-unionist policies. Attempts to organize Winnipeg meat packing workers historically had been met with fierce resistance and hostility. From the time that industrial unionism emerged in 1934 as the sole logical approach to empower meat packing workers, it required only nine years until Winnipeg workers organized and won recognition. This thesis investigates why it took until the 1940s before workers in Winnipeg's packinghouses developed sustainable industrial unionism.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, strong external forces exerted influence on the re-introduction of industrial unionism in Winnipeg's meat packing industry. Throughout North America, this period experienced a reviving interest in trade unionism, as harsh economic times combined with a socio-political climate favourable to a growing interest and belief in collective action. As organized labour gained economic power and social popularity, the outbreak of World War II led the Canadian state into an increasingly active role, which deepened as the War brought full employment. These conditions alone did not explain the successful attainment of industrial unionism in Winnipeg's meat packing industry. Rather, these events provided the background against which local conditions combined, and enabled Winnipeg workers to organize and win union recognition.

Among the most significant reasons for the success of the organizing drive of the 1940s was a change in local conditions. Meat packing established itself in Winnipeg in the late nineteenth century. As a growing market for meat products emerged in the early twentieth century, meat packing companies across Canada and the United States sought alternative ways to expand operations and maximize profits. In an era when many industries developed new technologies and replaced skilled workers with machines, the meat packing industry's nature prevented it from adopting such methods. As a result, meat packing's reorganization focused on work performed.

With the 1925 construction of Winnipeg's Harris Abattoir plant, a new genre of meat packing plants emerged and a new philosophy of work introduced. Since meat packing could not mechanize extensively or replace jobs with machines - as many other industries did - alternate modernizing approaches developed. With the construction of massive plants and the large-scale introduction of semi skilled labour, an alternative re-organization of work, exemplifying a new philosophy of mass production, occurred. Although not universal nor perfected for many years, profit-driven national firms deskilled traditional jobs and introduced mass production division of labour strategies instead of increasing automation. Work reorganization meant that each worker

performed only one or two cuts, allowing companies to reduce the need for expensive skilled labour.

As Winnipeg's skilled butchers and meat cutters faced reorganization and the introduction of mass production technologies to their industry, they attempted to unite in craft unions in order to protect themselves in face of the oncoming changes. The failure of meat packing's craft unions was swift and indicative of their declining fate. Paternalistic, anti-union companies and a diminishing bargaining voice doomed the skilled-based unions. By the 1925 creation of the new Winnipeg plant, craft unionism proved itself mortally ineffective and out-of-date in face of the ever-changing industry.

As there were no independent forms of worker organization or representation, working conditions in Winnipeg's meat packing plants proved atrocious. In the late 1920s, semi skilled meat packing workers held no bargaining power and remained at the mercy of profit-driven management. Meat packing companies paid low wages in dangerous working conditions and subjected workers to long hours and irregular employment dictated by ruthless management. This scenario worsened with the onset of the Great Depression.

With no assistance or leadership coming from traditional labour organizations, Winnipeg's packinghouse workers found leadership from the Communist Party and its affiliated union the Winnipeg-based Food Workers Industrial Union. The

Canadian labour movement during the 1920s and early 1930s proved conservative and ineffective. In an economically depressed time when many industries modernized and altered their work structure and labourforce, traditional organized labour movements like the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress refused to adopt progressive strategies or launch organizational drives in new areas. In contrast, the Communist Party recognized the direction of modern work and initiated organizational activities in evolving industries and encouraged a new response. Acting through the Food Workers Industrial Union, the Communist Party pursued the organization of the meat packing industry and provided Winnipeg meat packing workers with an introductory experiment to a new type of association which organized all workers regardless of skill - industrial unionism.

Employees at the Western Packing Company were the first Winnipeg workers to receive such assistance from the Communist Party. Western Packing's workers organized into a local chapter of the Food Workers Industrial Union and sought change and betterment for themselves. When Western Packing's management refused to recognize the worker organization, a long, violent strike occurred to mark the first organization of Winnipeg's semi skilled packinghouse workers.

Anti-union forces in Winnipeg combined to physically and legally crush the strike, and led to the failure of the attempt. While the strike failed to win change or betterment

for the workers, Winnipeg packinghouse workers' first experience with industrial unionism proved significant. First, the attempt provided Winnipeg meat packing workers with their initial experiment in which workers of all skills organized. Second, the organization was led by the Communist Party, which was active again in the 1940s, especially at Canada Packers. Finally, the strike failed under conditions different from those in the 1940s, as the local and national movement was weak and the state aggressively opposed the strike.

In addition to such local conditions, organized labour throughout Canada and the United States experienced an overall strengthening in the mid-1930s. With organizational leadership and victories from the industrially-based Congress of Industrial Organization in the steel and automotive industries in the United States and Canada, unionism became more popular as workers received concrete evidence of the fruits of industrial union organization. These victories helped revive a general interest among workers and restored faith in the virtues of collective action and collective bargaining.

Finally, wartime labour conditions greatly aided the eventual success of the 1940s drive in Winnipeg's meat packing industry. As World War II progressed, a wartime demand for goods and materials resulted in full employment. The urgency and importance of the War combined to create a situation where

the federal government insisted upon maintaining production of such vital industries as the meat packing industry and actively participated in labour matters. Further strengthening labour's position was the federal government's passage of PC 1003, which facilitated union recognition and prevented a rollback of organized labour's gains after the War.

The combination of full employment and the government-enforced need to maintain full production placed Winnipeg meat packing workers in an unprecedented position of bargaining power. It was from this situation that, beginning in 1943 at Canada Packers, Winnipeg packinghouse workers pursued unionism, organized themselves and won union recognition and collective bargaining.

The story of Winnipeg's meat packing industry has received very little public attention, and even less has been written on the workers of Winnipeg's meat packing industry. This absence is surprising given the workers' remarkable struggle for union recognition and collective bargaining, and the industry's economic and social importance to Winnipeg. Thus far, short articles by Canada Packers' vice-president Ralph Parliament and political scientist Jim Silver remain the sole investigations of the Winnipeg meat packing industry.

Jim Silver's article, "The Origin of Winnipeg's Packinghouse Industry: Transitions from Trade to Manufacture", traces the origins and development of the Winnipeg meat

packing industry.¹ Silver provides a brief history of Winnipeg entrepreneurs and early meat packing companies. The article documents how the Winnipeg industry evolved from its origins as a local industry in the late nineteenth century to a growing, nationally-centred operation in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Silver's work provides a valuable comparison of nineteenth and twentieth century meat packing plants in Winnipeg. Although limited to a time span which does not reach 1925, Silver's work provides a starting point from which one can trace the transformation of the Winnipeg industry towards a modernized system which deskilled work and introduced mass production techniques.

Apart from Silver's work, Ralph Parliament's curt examination of the Winnipeg meat packing industry remains the only other piece to detail the Winnipeg experience. Parliament's article "Winnipeg Livestock and Meat Processing Industry: A Century of Development" provides an overall description of the Winnipeg meat packing industry.² Focusing on economic growth and the leadership of certain businessmen,

¹Jim Silver, "The Origins of Winnipeg's Packinghouse Industry: Transitions from Trade to Manufacture", Prairie Forum, (Spring 1994) 15-30.

²Ralph Parliament, "Winnipeg Livestock and Meat Processing Industry: A Century of Development" in Winnipeg 1874-1974 Progress and Prospects, Tony J. Kuz, ed. (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Industry and Commerce, 1974).

Parliament's work provides a glance at close to one hundred years of the industry.

This thesis differs from the existing works on Winnipeg's meat packing industry. Whereas Silver and Parliament focus their energies on a corporate, economic agenda of the meat packing industry, this work examines the institutional labour history of Winnipeg's meat packing workers.

The history of Winnipeg's meat packing workers provides an insightful examination of twentieth century industrial workers. The Winnipeg experience traces the changing nature of the industry from one which was highly skilled and localized, into a nationally-based, mass production industry. The subsequent history of the workers involved, therefore provides an illustration of how Canadian workers responded to such change.

Specifically, this thesis examines the path in which Winnipeg workers organized themselves to gain greater control. It is argued that the successful organizing drive in the 1940s occurred as a result of changing local conditions, a general strengthening of labour in the mid-1930s, and finally due to wartime labour conditions.

Examinations of the meat packing industry has thus far focused on work or labour relations. Initially these broad investigations described a wide range of occupations and enterprises, with particular attention on the rise, consolidation and growth of national unionism. For example,

historian Harold Logan argued in the 1950s that the history of organized labour could be best understood through examination of national developments.³ A subsequent generation of labour historians continued this approach, but focused their attention specifically on individual industries. Examples of these subsequent labour histories include works by David Brody, Leslie F. Orear and Stephen Diamond, Lewis Corey, John Tait Montague and George Sayers Bains.⁴

These early labour histories filled a so-called "gap" in Canadian and American historiography. For hundreds of years histories had been written for, and about kings, generals and statesmen of society. While there is no disputing the value of such a service, the absence of historical study on working class peoples created a glaring historical gap. The early labour histories of Logan, Brody and Montague filled this gap

³Among the first studies to focus on the history of organized labour came from J.R. Commons in the United States and Logan in Canada. These works include: H.A. Logan, Trade Unions in Canada: Their Development and Functioning (Toronto: MacMillan, 1948); The History of Trade Union Organization in Canada (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928); and John R. Commons, History of Labor in the United States (New York: MacMillan, 1921).

⁴David Brody, The Butcher Workman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); Leslie F. Orear and Stephen Diamond, Out of the Jungle (Chicago: Hyde Park Press, 1968); Lewis Corey, Meat and Man (New York: The Viking Press, 1950); John Tait Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry (University of Toronto: unpublished Ph.D thesis, 1950); and George Sayers Bains, The United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers (University of Manitoba: unpublished MA thesis, 1964).

and provided a necessary and focused historical account of organized labour.

As the history of the working class and organized labour progresses however, these early accounts must be recognized as starting points. Although such accounts provide detailed histories of organized labour at the national level, they fail to extend specific attention to local events and to workers. Rather, these histories present scenarios in which the powerful, national union rescues the helpless, exploited workers. In doing so, these one-sided investigations unfortunately eclipse and minimize the importance of local incidents and events.

When former union officials began composing their own histories, emphasis fell on local events. This style portrayed union organization not as the result of an omnipotent national union organizing drive, but as a result of local workers' determination and efforts to improve their lot. Included in this category are works by Fred Blum, Arthur Kampfert and Stella Nowicki.⁵ This approach has not yet been extended to the Winnipeg or Canadian meat packing experience, and there exist no such works.

⁵Fred Blum, Towards A Democratic Work Process: The Hormel Packinghouse Workers' Experience (New York: Harper & Brothers Publisher, 1953); Arthur Kampfert, History of Meat Packing Industry Unions, 5 vols. (State Historical Society of Wisconsin: unpublished, 1945); Stella Nowicki, "Back of the Yards." In Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working Class Organizers. Alice and Staughton Lynd eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973): 67-89.

This thesis therefore seeks to fill a further gap in labour historiography while explaining the path in which Winnipeg workers won union recognition and secured collective bargaining.

To best accomplish such an explanation, the thesis begins with an examination of the change and reorganization of the Winnipeg meat packing industry in the twentieth century. Changing conditions, which led to the first attempt by Winnipeg meat packing workers to unite in 1934, are then examined. The thesis then describes how local change, an overall strengthening of organized labour and wartime labour conditions contributed with a desire on the part of Winnipeg workers' to culminate in successful union recognition and collective bargaining. Finally, the thesis concludes with an examination and analysis of how the United Packinghouse Workers of America adopted a vigorous pursuit of national bargaining and the implications this strategy had on Winnipeg workers.

Chapter Two
"Winnipeg's Jungle":
Work and Industry in Winnipeg's
Meat Packing Industry during the 1930s

On 25 February 1925, William Harris' son Joseph announced plans for the construction of a massive, modern meat packing plant in St. Boniface.¹ The construction of the Harris plant, which instantly became the most modern in Canada, emphasized the strategic importance of Winnipeg to the Canadian meat packing industry and served as the first large-scale example of the industry's emerging ideology of mass production. By locating the new plant next to the largest stock yards in Canada,² Winnipeg instantly secured itself as one of Canada's most important meat packing centres.³

¹Winnipeg Free Press, 26 February 1925. Although St. Boniface was an independent city in the 1930s and 1940s, due to its close proximity with Winnipeg and eventual incorporation into Metropolitan Winnipeg, this examination includes St. Boniface as part of Winnipeg.

²The St. Boniface Stock Yards were the largest in Canada, covering almost 200 acres of land, holding 1,300 livestock pens, and 10 kilometres of rail tracks. Ralph Parliament, "Winnipeg Livestock and Meat Processing Industry: A Century of Development." In Winnipeg 1874-1974 Progress and Prospects. Tony J. Kuz ed. (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Industry and Commerce, 1974), p.77.

³As a national demand for meat grew, Winnipeg's centralized geographic location gave the city's meat packing enterprises prominence. Since Western Canada provided a surplus agricultural area with vast land for livestock grazing, following the completion of the Trans-Canada railway and developments in railway refrigeration, it became more economical to slaughter and dress meat in Winnipeg than to ship livestock to eastern markets. For more on this subject, see: A.W. Craig, The Consequences of Provincial Jurisdiction for the Process of Company-Wide Collective Bargaining in Canada: A Study of the Packinghouse Industry (Cornell

In addition to exemplifying a new structure of mass production organization within the meat packing industry, the Harris plant displayed a pattern of ownership and managerial strategy for the Winnipeg industry which lasted several decades. Headquartered in Toronto, the Harris Abattoir formed part of a national meat packing organization which in turn belonged to an industry oligopoly.⁴ During the first decades of the twentieth century, many large-scale, national meat packing companies centralized and expanded operations. In doing so, these companies lowered unit costs and pressured many smaller companies to close operations or into affiliation.

During this era, meat packing companies gradually reorganized work production by subdividing packinghouse work through the implementation of assembly-line techniques. In order to maximize profits from this transformation, companies turned to semi and unskilled workers. By deskilling work in meat packing plants, management avoided the high salaries and strong bargaining position of meat packing's skilled workers.

University: unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 1960), p.88; and William A. Kerr and S. Monica Ulmer, The Importance of the Livestock and Meat Processing Industries to Western Canada (Ottawa: Economic Council of Canada, 1984), p.6.

⁴For more information on the nature of the Canadian meat packing industry see: A.J.E. Child, The Predecessor Companies of Canada Packers Limited: A Study of Entrepreneurial Achievement and Entrepreneurial Failure (University of Toronto: unpublished MA thesis, 1960); and J.S. Willis, This Packing Business: The History and Development of the Use of Meat to Feed Mankind, from the Dawn of History to the Present (Toronto: Canada Packers, Limited, 1963).

The trend towards reorganization and nationalization extended throughout the industry. In 1926, the owner of the largest meat packing plant in Western Canada, Pat Burns, bought the smaller Winnipeg firm of Gallagher-Holman. More significantly for the Winnipeg and Canadian industry, four of Canada's largest meat packing companies merged to form Canada Packers in 1927.⁵

The result of such developments was that by the late 1920s, the Canadian meat packing industry had become an oligopoly of three national firms: Canada Packers, Burns, and Swift Canadian.⁶ Known collectively as the Big Three, Canada Packers' immense power dominated the oligopoly. Canada Packers controlled eleven meat packing plants and operated twenty-nine branch houses. With company holdings in almost every Canadian province, Canada Packers employed thousands of workers.

Following the 1927 merger, Winnipeg's status as a keystone of the Canadian meat packing industry grew. Winnipeg

⁵Following the refusal of credit to the Hamilton-based meat packing company of Gunns Limited, in February 1927, the Harris Abattoir acquired the company for \$1,193,220. Four months later, in a similar acquisition, the Harris Abattoir bought the financially-troubled Canadian Packing Company for \$1,275,000. This pattern cumulated in August 1927, when the two largest meat packing companies in Canada, the Harris Abattoir and the William Davies Company merged to form Canada Packers Limited. Willis, This Packing Business, p.51.

⁶This was confirmed by a 1935 Royal Commission, which concluded, "the packing industry...presents an illustration both of large scale production and monopolistic concentration". Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads, Final Report (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1935), p.59.

possessed the most modern meat packing plant in Canada and served as Canada Packers' sole meat packing plant and distribution centre in Western Canada, while also improving the company's access to the eastern Canadian market.⁷ Finally, the city of Winnipeg held the distinction of being Canada's only city with meat packing plants of Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and Burns. This national design of the industry would later play a vital role in both the organization of workers and in the interaction of industrial relations.

As Winnipeg's meat packing industry entered the Depression, a stable demand in Canada for meat allowed the industry to remain relatively prosperous.⁸ Although the volume of meat production declined by 7 per cent from 1929 to 1932, the norm for all other Canadian manufacturing industries was 33.4 per cent.⁹ Consequently, from 1933 until 1943,

⁷From 1927 until the 1950s, Manitoba's meat packing and slaughtering industry, based almost exclusively in Winnipeg, ranked as the province's largest industry in terms of gross value of products. Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Canada Yearbook (Ottawa: King's Printer), 1927-59.

⁸During the Depression (1929-1939), per capita meat consumption in Canada remained high at 50.30 pounds, with a relatively stable standard deviation of 2.58. Per capita pork consumption also was high at 51.07 pounds per person, and held a low standard deviation of only 2.83. Canada, Department of Agriculture, Livestock and Animal Statistics (Ottawa: King's Printer), 1929-1939.

⁹H.E. Bronson, "The Saskatchewan Meat Packing Industry: Some Historical Highlights," Saskatchewan History, vol. 26 (Winter 1973), p.28.

slaughtering and meat packing never dropped below fourth place among Canada's leading forty industries.¹⁰

Further developments in Winnipeg displayed the prosperity of the Winnipeg industry and the continuation of emerging trends in the industry. On 6 August 1937, Canada's second largest meat packing company, Swift Canadian, announced its relocation to a new two million dollar plant in St. Boniface.¹¹ The construction of Swift's ultramodern plant strengthened Winnipeg's status as Canada's single largest meat packing centre, and furthered the transformation towards a mass production-style of packinghouse organization. With the completion of the new plant in 1938, Winnipeg possessed the two most modern meat packing plants in Canada, and Canada's largest stock yards.

Beyond the reorganization of the industry, the work process in meat packing plants also underwent great change. Gone forever were the days when meat packing operations were seasonal or a family - usually a butcher and his son - affair.¹² The industry, which coined the phrase, "a rope and

¹⁰"Facts of the Meat Packing Strike." (1947), p.2. In United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers Papers, box 482, folder 15.

¹¹In an agreement reflecting Swift's corporate power in the 1930s, St. Boniface city council passed a by-law fixing the assessment rates on property and buildings for the next 20 years. In exchange, the company agreed to lend \$33,000 to the city interest free for improvements of sewage pipe and street pavement. Winnipeg Free Press, 7 August 1937.

¹²Jim Silver, "The Origins of Winnipeg's Packinghouse Industry: Transitions from Trade to Manufacture", Prairie