

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

BY

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Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
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for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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**WINNIPEG MEAT PACKING WORKERS'**

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on economic growth and the leadership of certain businessmen,

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

<sup>2</sup>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).

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup>Among 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).

<sup>4</sup>David 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.<sup>5</sup> This approach has not yet been extended to the Winnipeg or Canadian meat packing experience, and there exist no such works.

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<sup>5</sup>Fred 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> Winnipeg instantly secured itself as one of Canada's most important meat packing centres.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Winnipeg 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.

<sup>2</sup>The 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.

<sup>3</sup>As 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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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.

<sup>4</sup>For 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup>Following 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.

<sup>6</sup>This 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, from 1933 until 1943,

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<sup>7</sup>From 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.

<sup>8</sup>During 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.

<sup>9</sup>H.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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> The industry, which coined the phrase, "a rope and

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

<sup>11</sup>In 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.

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



knife are all you need to go into business",<sup>13</sup> became dominated in the 1930s by massive plants, national corporations and the reorganization of work through the introduction of mass production work techniques.

Historically, as growing urban populations demanded more meat, improvements in refrigeration encouraged the expansion of the meat packing industry. Slaughtering and dressing operations located themselves close to both livestock reserves and large cities. As the industry proved profitable, capitalists sought ways to reduce production costs and increase profits.

Although the packinghouse industry pioneered moving production lines, the constantly varying size of livestock prohibited extensive use of machinery.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, work in meat packing plants remained highly labour intensive and the implementation of machinery limited. In 1933, for example, only 20 per cent of packinghouse workers operated machinery, while the rest worked by hand.<sup>15</sup> Because of this

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Forum, (Spring 1994), pp.27-28.

<sup>13</sup>Margaret Walsh, The Rise of the Midwestern Meat Packing Industry (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), p.26 and Simon N. Whitney, Antitrust Policies: American Experience in Twenty Industries, vol.1, (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1958), p.67.

<sup>14</sup>While the assembly line is often associated with Henry Ford, Ford is said to have planned his automobile assembly line after watching a meat packing plant in Chicago at Armour. Whitney, Antitrust Policies, p.86.

<sup>15</sup>James R. Barrett, Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1894-1922 (Urbana: University

restriction, and the fact that companies reorganized slaughtering and dressing work into a vast number of simple, one step operations, Winnipeg plants employed vast numbers of semi and unskilled workers.

Since these unskilled workers were part of production lines, management felt constant supervision by authoritarian foremen would ensure high levels of output. Because skilled and unskilled workers laboured in close proximity, both performed physical labour and neither got paid unless slaughtering lines were moving, they shared similar grievances. In part, this commonality later encouraged the popularity of industrial unionism.

As the nature of meat packing prevented the automation of the labour-intensive industry, owners subdivided much of the work so that each worker performed only one or two semi or unskilled tasks, thereby reducing the need for skilled labour. The replacement of highly skilled butchers by semi and unskilled meat cutters reduced labour costs and increased greater control over hiring practices. Management's introduction of assembly lines methods further maintained a constant output and increased production and profits.

By the 1930s, Winnipeg's meat packing industry was a large, impersonal industry in which workers frequently found employment at plant gates. In a situation similar to Chicago's Packingtown, hiring conditions in Winnipeg in the

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of Illinois Press, 1987), p.23.

1930s often paralleled those described by Upton Sinclair in

The Jungle:

[A]ll day long the gates of the packinghouses were besieged. Blizzards and cold made no difference to them, they were always on hand. Sometimes their faces froze, sometimes their feet and their hands; sometimes they froze all together - but still they came, for they had no other place to go.<sup>16</sup>

In Winnipeg, Swift employee John Hauser spent over a month in 1933 waiting for a job at Swift's plant gates. Every morning at 5:30 a.m., Hauser, along with 50 to 100 other men, waited for a timekeeper who chose "sturdy" bodies for a day's work. Since Swift and the other companies had no compelling reason to select a particular worker, companies continually ignored certain men. Winnipeg meat packing companies preferred to hire robust, athletic-looking workers, and avoided heavy or small men as they were considered unsuitable and undesirable for the manual, unskilled labour of packinghouse work.<sup>17</sup>

Another common way to gain employment in the meat packing industry was to have a personal link with a firm. During the Depression, travelling company salesmen often recruited rural workers to work in Winnipeg. Acting as corporate representatives, salesmen enticed town butchers and farm boys

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<sup>16</sup>Upton Sinclair, The Jungle (New York: Grosset & Dunlop, 1906), p.93.

<sup>17</sup>Interview John Hauser by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985. Meat Packing Oral History Project, 1985, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

with promises of work during times of high unemployment.<sup>18</sup> Recruitment of rural workers was particularly favoured by meat packing companies. As Canada Packers superintendent Ronald Matthewson explained, they "understood farm life...animals, the slaughter of animals, manure...[they] weren't pampered".<sup>19</sup>

Once hired, workers completed personnel forms, listing their name, address and previous employment. Fred Benson, who worked as a foreman at Swift Canadian in the 1930s, explained that companies used this type of formula to screen out "potential labour pushers".<sup>20</sup> A hired worker was then placed into one of the many departments of a Winnipeg meat packing plant. A Swift manual described operations similar to those in Winnipeg before World War II, and divided the plant into five departments: Beef Operations; Pork Operations; Sheep and Lamb Operations; Manufacturing; and Service Department.<sup>21</sup> In Winnipeg, the beef and pork departments contained the bulk of

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<sup>18</sup>Interview Fred Billows by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>19</sup>Interview Ronald Matthewson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985. A high number of rural-born workers appeared in Dewalt's collection. Of the 18 workers hired before or during World War II, only 3 were born in Winnipeg while 15 were rural-born.

<sup>20</sup>Interview Fred Benson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985. Following the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919, "blacklists" circulated among many Winnipeg businesses. Blacklists contained the names of workers who were involved, or suspected to have been involved, in union organizations. Blacklisted workers were considered dangerous and disruptive to management and therefore not hired.

<sup>21</sup>Arthur H. Carver, Personnel and Labour Problems in the Packing Industry (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1928), pp.27-28.

Swift's workforce, and saw workers slaughter and dress livestock. Manufacturing departments would then processed offal and meat byproducts into such products as oleo margarine, sausages, animal feeds, fertilizer, soap and glue, while service departments loaded and shipped products.

Throughout Winnipeg plants, semi and unskilled workers performed the majority of work and comprised in excess of two-thirds of the workforce. The one domain which skilled workers retained, was the dressing of livestock. Following the slaughter, hoisting, bleeding and decapitation of an animal, a skilled worker known as the sider, removed the skin.<sup>22</sup> After the removal of an animal's skin, the splitter, another skilled worker, halved the carcass with a cleaver.<sup>23</sup>

With the carcass skinned and split, semi and unskilled workers carried out the remainder of dressing operations. Hung on a line of sliding hooks, successive workers performed specific cuts on the side before transferring the meat into

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<sup>22</sup>The sider has been referred to as the "aristocrat of all butchers", since a nick or scratch lowered a hide's value ore the hide, its value was greatly lowered. The importance of siders to plants was such that the Canada Packers' plant in Winnipeg imported siders from Toronto during the busy fall slaughtering season. Interview Ronald Matthewson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985, and Theodore Purcell, S.J. The Worker Speaks His Mind on Company and the Union (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p.73.

<sup>23</sup>By the early 1940s, the skilled job of the splitter was eliminated when carcass splitting saws were introduced to the labour process. Meat Packers Council, The Growth and Development of Canada's Meat Packing Industry, p.46.

storage coolers.<sup>24</sup> The net effect of such a labour-intensive process was that the killing, dismemberment and loading of one animal could now occupy up to 157 workers.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, by having skilled workers in the middle of the process, additional pressure upon them to speed up occurred.

The nature of work in a meat packing plant, was mainly hard, physical work and usually performed by rural or immigrant workers. There were not many Anglo-Canadian workers in Winnipeg meat packing plants during the 1930s. Anglo-Canadians who did work in meat packing plants typically worked in the "cleaner" areas, performing office or clerical work, shipping, delivering, or supervising.<sup>26</sup> Maurice Yeo, a Canada Packers employee for over thirty years, observed that:

[I]f you were a WASP - a white, Anglo Saxon Protestant you stood a pretty good chance...if you were anything else, well, they needed workers for jobs that weren't exactly nice jobs, and that's where the Czechs, Ukes, and Poles came in.<sup>27</sup>

A common prejudice of packinghouse management before World War II was the belief that certain ethnic groups were more suited

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<sup>24</sup>Victor Munecke, "Operations: Beef, Lamb, and By-Products." in The Packing Industry, The Institute of American Meat Packers, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1924), pp.143-146.

<sup>25</sup>Alfred D. Chandler, The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p.394.

<sup>26</sup>Interview Ronald Matthewson and Henry Baker by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>27</sup>Interview Maurice Yeo by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

to physical labour than others. Canada Packers superintendent Ronald Matthewson affirmed this claiming Eastern Europeans suited packinghouse work since they were "rough and tough people...real snuff chewers".<sup>28</sup> Earl Cockle, who became a foreman at Burns in 1937, also claimed Ukrainians "fit packinghouse work...they would never be late, never stay away...[and] could learn any job".<sup>29</sup> From the perspective of Ukrainian workers, packinghouse work provided employment in an era when many companies refused to hire anyone with foreign-sounding names and jobs were scarce.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Ukrainian workers dominated packinghouse work in Winnipeg and accepted temporarily, at least, low wages and poor working conditions.

As packinghouse jobs often hinged on ethnicity, few Ukrainians became foremen. Prior to World War II, Michael Skrynyk, a Ukrainian-Canadian, attended a managerial class offered by Swift Canadian. At the course, Swift's plant superintendent told Skrynyk that it was not enough to take the course, rather "You have to be liked by someone to get a promotion".<sup>31</sup> This attitude also held at Burns, where management told German-Canadian, Harry Hildebrand "with a name

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<sup>28</sup>Interview Ronald Matthewson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>29</sup>Interview Earl Cockle by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>30</sup>James H. Gray, The Winter Years: The Depression on the Prairies (Toronto: MacMillan, 1966), pp.126-127.

<sup>31</sup>Interview Michael S. Skrynyk by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

like yours you aren't going to go very far with Burns...you have to be Anglo-Saxon to go some place."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in Bryan Dewalt's study of Winnipeg packinghouse employees, five workers eventually reached management positions. Of the five to get promotions, four were Anglo-Saxon, while the fifth, Ukrainian-Canadian Joseph Wirwin noted that he did not have a Ukrainian sounding name, and "I didn't talk with an accent."<sup>33</sup> These racist hiring and promotional policies later led packinghouse workers to demand implementation of seniority guidelines and the establishment of grievance procedures to reduce the arbitrary, racist power of management.

Beyond the ethnic discrimination in packinghouse work, gender also played a discriminatory role. Historically, a widespread stereotype existed that slaughtering and meat packing was "men's work". The early exclusion of women, according to Edith Abbott and S.P. Breckinridge, was a result of the repulsive nature of the work, the physical demands involved, and the chauvinism of male butchers.<sup>34</sup> Following the subdivision of packinghouse work and the limited introduction of machinery, patriarchal management saw an opportunity to

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<sup>32</sup>Interview Harry Hildebrand by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>33</sup>Interview Joseph Wirwin by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>34</sup>Edith Abbott and S.P. Breckinridge, "Women in Industry: The Chicago Stockyards," Journal of Political Economy vol.19 (1911), pp.632-634.



incorporate cheap female labour into the emerging semi and unskilled jobs.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of the labour shortage that emerged in Canada during World War I, a significant number of women workers entered the meat packing industry.<sup>36</sup> Despite their significant presence, women were assigned "female" jobs including packaging, wiener stuffing, bacon slicing, and sausage making. Women did not receive equal pay for their labour. For example, in 1934 at Canada Packers, starting wages for women were 25 cents an hour while men received 30 cents an hour. This situation was even worse at Burns, where starting wages for women were 16 and a half cents an hour, while men received 25 cents an hour. Moreover, while at work, women workers received abuse and discrimination from both fellow employees and management, yet "didn't dare [tell of the abuse] because it was [considered] a good paying job".<sup>37</sup>

The extent of female labour in Winnipeg's meat packing plants is difficult to measure. A glimpse into this domain however was found in the 1936 regional census.<sup>38</sup> Census data revealed that of 808 workers employed in Winnipeg's meat

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<sup>35</sup>Barrett, Work and Community in the Jungle, p.57.

<sup>36</sup>Willis, This Packing Business, p.43.

<sup>37</sup>Interview Harry Hildebrand by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>38</sup>Canada, Department of Trade and Commerce. Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1936. vol.II, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1938).

packing industry, only 41 (5.07 per cent) were women. Data further revealed that of the female workers, none held positions in the skilled, well-paying jobs of butchering or slaughtering. The report also illustrated that most women workers were young, with 26 of 34 (77 per cent) workers under the age of 24, and only 9 per cent over the age of 34. Finally, the census showed the lack of advancement for women workers - in 1936 there was only one woman foreman in the entire industry, and no female managers or owners.<sup>39</sup>

The bulk of work in a packing plant was labour intensive, semi or unskilled, physically demanding, and dictated by one's ethnicity or gender. While some workers laboured in extremely hot conditions, others toiled in the cold and damp. Both environments, however affected workers' health. Workers who processed cold meat or laboured in cooler rooms, suffered reduced blood flow to the skin that caused numbness and made existing joint problems worse. In contrast, those working in warm slaughtering areas fought heat fatigue which increased the potential for accident.

Among Winnipeg packinghouse workers' most serious complaint, however, was the hurried nature of work and the authority of their supervisors. Since the Stock Yards charged for holding livestock, packinghouse management insisted that animal slaughter occur the same day as livestock purchase.

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<sup>39</sup>It was not until 1960 that Burns hired its first female supervisor. Interview Vera Slobodian Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

While livestock usually arrived at night, purchase did not occur until the morning. Consequently, animals seldom arrived on the killing floor before 9:00 a.m..<sup>40</sup> Despite this, companies insisted that workers report for work at 7:00 a.m. and wait, without pay, until the animals were available for processing.<sup>41</sup>

Even worse than the long hours waiting for work, was the knowledge among the workers that their jobs were seasonal and layoffs possible at anytime. In the busy fall season,<sup>42</sup> a worker could expect to work up to 70 to 75 hours a week, without overtime pay.<sup>43</sup> However, when the autumn rush ended, usually following Christmas, layoffs of 16 to 20 per cent of the employees occurred, often without any advanced notice.<sup>44</sup> Under this system, at the end of the day a foreman simply distributed pink or blue slips to workers, indicating that

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<sup>40</sup>George Sayers Bains, The United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers (University of Manitoba: unpublished MA thesis, 1964), p.22.

<sup>41</sup>Interview Robert Watts by Bryan Dewalt, Warren, Manitoba, 1985 and interview John Hauser by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>42</sup>Based on a three year sample of 1937, 1941 and 1945, the busiest months for slaughter in the Winnipeg Stock Yards were October and November for cattle, and November and December for hogs. The slowest months for the slaughter of cattle were May and June, and July and August for hog slaughter. Canada, Department of Agriculture, Livestock and Animal Statistics, 1937, 1941 and 1945.

<sup>43</sup>Interview Henry Baker by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985. See also, Voice of Labour, 19 April 1934.

<sup>44</sup>Interview Earl Cockle by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

their services were no longer required.<sup>45</sup> Aggravation to this precarious situation occurred since seniority was not a deciding factor. Such conditions caused great anxiety among workers about who would lose their job, and later contributed to worker demands for job security and seniority.

Although companies held a hierarchy, the foreman was in charge of daily supervision and operations. In this role, he held the authority to hire, fire, and discipline employees. In the minds of many workers, the foreman had "absolute power...he could do anything he wanted."<sup>46</sup> This unchecked, unquestionable control allowed a foreman to:

[D]ecide absolutely...if he liked what you did then you worked, and if he didn't like what you did [sic] - no way . . . they just fired ya. That's all. Just, goodbye - don't want ya!<sup>47</sup>

To further complicate matters, favouritism usually accompanied such "absolute power", and a worker's popularity influenced his or her likelihood of being laid off or promoted.<sup>48</sup> One former worker commented that since Canada Packers' superintendent Daniel Clements was a Cameron Highlander, "if

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<sup>45</sup>Interview John Hauser by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>46</sup>Interview Maurice Yeo by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985. See also, Purcell, The Worker Speaks, p.123.

<sup>47</sup>Interview Ronald Matthewson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>48</sup>One former worker was able to avoid getting laid off in the 1930s because he played for the company hockey team, and his hockey coach doubled as his foreman. Interview Ronald Matthewson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

you were a Cameron Highlander, or Masonic Order, you had it made...you couldn't get fired no matter what."<sup>49</sup> As a result of this process, the limitation of foreman's power and establishment of a grievance procedure and seniority list were important motivations for workers to support the union.

During the Depression, high unemployment forced workers to accept such horrendous working conditions, since "in them days any job was a nice job...just to have a job was something."<sup>50</sup> This scarcity of jobs allowed companies to create dozens of different pay levels. Starting wages at the plants of the Big Three depended not only on work performed, but the age, sex and perhaps gender of the worker. A table of wages paid by Swift Canadian in 1935, revealed over 171 different pay rates for its employees. Wages for men ranged from 30 cents an hour for unskilled jobs, to 63.6 cents an hour for highly skilled butchers. The gender equality again emerges as women received only 20 to 33 and a half cents an hour.<sup>51</sup> In order for a worker to get a raise, one had to personally ask the foreman - a process that led former foreman

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<sup>49</sup>Interview Maurice Yeo by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>50</sup>Interview Josephine (McNamara) Baker by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>51</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, vol.36 (1936), pp.60-61. This table also revealed the growing dominance of semi and unskilled workers, since of the 171 different paying positions, only nine jobs (5 per cent) paid more than 50 cents an hour.

and superintendent Ronald Matthewson to comment that "getting a raise was like pulling teeth."<sup>52</sup>

The work situation in Winnipeg worsened in the 1930s, when companies adopted the infamous Bedeaux system. A standards process invented by Charles Bedeaux, the "Bedeaux system" measured worker output in a pounds-per-minute output quota. Management established output quotas and rewarded those workers who exceeded it with a bonus. However, if a worker did not meet his or her quota, discipline resulted. This despised system forced workers to constantly work faster and increased tension between workers and management.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, as employees worked at faster and faster speeds, the probability of accidents increased dramatically.

The nature of Winnipeg packinghouse work in the 1930s, prompted former workers to comment that "packinghouses are not the healthiest place to work", and "sometimes the best thing in the world is to get fired."<sup>54</sup> It has been argued that the financial nature of the meat packing industry led companies to be more cost conscious than quality conscious, with increased productivity as the bottom line. Such pressure on workers to

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<sup>52</sup>Interview Ronald Matthewson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>53</sup>The hatred of packinghouse workers for this system, was such that when Bedeaux died in 1944, The Packinghouse Worker, heralded his death as the end of "an enemy of labour."

<sup>54</sup>Interview Fred Billows and Henry Baker, by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985. For an examination of similar concerns in Chicago, see, Purcell, The Worker Speaks, p.116.

increase production, explains the high number of industrial accidents in packinghouse work.

Beyond such immediate risks as knife cuts or gashes,<sup>55</sup> the United States Department of Labor identified a list of health hazards in packinghouse work in 1943. These hazards, which were also found in Winnipeg plants, included: slippery floors, crowded working conditions, improper traffic layout, poor maintenance of machines and work areas, poor housekeeping practices, inadequate planning of plants, and injuries from over lifting.<sup>56</sup> While there are no statistics on packinghouse accidents in Winnipeg, American statistics reveal the hazardous nature of the industry. In 1943, one in ten American packinghouse workers was injured or became ill at work.<sup>57</sup> Further data from Department of Labor revealed that of all packinghouse accidents, 34 per cent were cuts and lacerations, 27 per cent bruises, and 20 per cent strains and sprains.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>As late as 1988, up to 50% of packinghouse work was still done by knives. Joel Novek et al. Mechanization, the Labour Process and Injury Risks in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry (unpublished: Manitoba Federation of Labour Library), p.6.

<sup>56</sup>United States, Department of Labour, Injuries and Accident Causes in the Slaughtering and Meat Packing Industry, 1943 (Washington: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1945), p.54. See also, The Packinghouse Worker, 11 August 1944.

<sup>57</sup>Packinghouse Worker, 11 August 1944.

<sup>58</sup>United States, Department of Labour, Injuries and Accidents, p.59.

Beyond immediate risks, packinghouse work led to long term health hazards such as carpel tunnel syndrome, tendinitis, and brucellosis. With the high degree of specialization in meat packing, one worker often repeated one specific knife cut, or a series of knife cuts, as many as 10,000 times a day.<sup>59</sup> Such repeated movements, combined with gripping and twisting, caused pressure on nerves and result in permanent weakness and pain.<sup>60</sup> This situation worsened if a knife was dull, as extra effort placed further strain on the tendons in the wrist and hand and increasing the possibility of slippage.

While medical diagnosis and treatment were often ignored, former meat cutters described not being able to work as long as anticipated, and having to soak their hands in hot water after work to relieve sore muscles.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, since the nature of packinghouse work has changed little in the past 50 years, recent medical and ergonomical studies of packinghouse work merit attention and cast light on packinghouse work in the 1930s. In 1983, Eira Viikari-Juntara found that of 113

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<sup>59</sup>Chicago Tribune, 25 October 1988.

<sup>60</sup>Modern ergonomics experts have suggested to avoid this problem, joints must be rested through job rotation, frequent rests and breaks, or a reduced pace of work. None of these suggestions were ever implemented in packinghouse work, as jobs were closely guarded, and rests were unheard of. Ulrika Wallersteiner, "Workplace Factors Contributing to the Musculoskeletal Disorders of Meat Process Workers," Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Human Factors Association of Canada (1988), p.106.

<sup>61</sup>Interview Fred Billows by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.



packinghouse workers, 41.7 per cent experienced back problems, 49.1 per cent experienced neck and shoulder troubles, and 59.8 per cent had arm and hand soreness.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, a 1987 study of 400 former Canadian packinghouse workers revealed that 46 per cent of meat cutters had back pains, 29 per cent had shoulder pains, and 22 per cent had hand disorders.<sup>63</sup>

In addition, recent medical studies have also concluded that workers in the meat packing industry hold a high probability to contract brucellosis or Mediterranean Fever. Of the four known ways to be infected with brucellosis, three are, and have always been, present in the meat packing industry. These include: exposure of skin to warm, freshly killed meat; conjunctive contact with droplets of tissue fluids; and inhalation of air-borne dust from animals.<sup>64</sup> Studies on this disease, which causes a loss of appetite, joint pains, weight loss and tiredness, have concluded that

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<sup>62</sup>Eira Viikari-Juntara, "Neck and Upper Limb Disorders Among Slaughterhouse Workers: An Epidemiological and Clinical Study," Scandinavian Journal of Environmental Health, vol.9 (1983), p.288.

<sup>63</sup>Ulrika Wallersteiner and Danielle Sciarretta, Ergonomics and the Meat Processing Industry: Examining the Musculoskeletal Problems in Retail and Wholesale Workers (unpublished: Manitoba Federation of Labour), p.3.

<sup>64</sup>B.C. Alleyne et al. "Rate of Slaughter May Increase Risk of Human Brucellosis in a Meat Packing Plant," Journal of Occupational Medicine, vol.28, no.6 (June 1986), p.445.

employment in a meat packing plant poses up to a 40 per cent risk of infection.<sup>65</sup>

Such harsh and dangerous conditions present in Winnipeg's meat packing industry in the 1930s contributed to an extremely young workforce. As a result of the physically demanding conditions of work, packinghouse workers did not work long in the industry. A 1936 regional census revealed that of 572 Winnipeg packinghouse butchers and slaughterers, almost 50 per cent (281 workers) were younger than 34 years old. In addition, among 167 meat canners, curers, and packers employed in Winnipeg, close to 72 per cent (120 workers) were younger than 34 years old, and less than 13 per cent (21 workers) were older than 45.<sup>66</sup>

By the 1930s, Winnipeg's meat packing industry had reorganized and the nature of work changed. Winnipeg represented a strategic site in the Canadian meat packing industry and possessed one of the largest and most modern meat packing centres in Canada, although ownership and administration were now based in Toronto, Chicago and Calgary. Along with the reorganization of the industry, Winnipeg plant operations expanded as companies invested more capital in their plants. Companies seeking greater profits ignored

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<sup>65</sup>H.S. Heineman and I.M. Dziamski, "Brucella Suis Infection in Philadelphia: A survey of Hog Fever and Asymptomatic Brucellosis," American Journal of Epidemiology, vol.103, no.1 (1976), p.98.

<sup>66</sup>Canada, Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1936, p.19.

limitations imposed on the industry by machinery and introduced new methods of mass production work. In this period, companies reorganized and subdivided traditional packinghouse jobs, and introduced semi and unskilled workers to the industry.

As a result, working conditions in Winnipeg packinghouses during the 1930s were harsh, insecure, dangerous and dictated by one's ethnicity and gender. Workers were not only subjected to long hours of work (without break) in the fall, and layoffs in the winter, but also had to deal with absolute power and favouritism from foremen. With little bargaining power, such grievances led workers to call for change, and seek improved working conditions. As the nature and organization of work changed, Winnipeg packinghouse workers' search for improved working conditions also took a new form. The increasing popularity of industrial unionism offered direction for Winnipeg packinghouse workers, and was first attempted in 1934 at the Western Packing Company.

**Chapter Three**  
**"Support the Heroic Western Packing Company Strikers":**  
**Winnipeg's Packinghouse Industry, Industrial Unionism and**  
**The Western Packing Company Strike of 1934**

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Winnipeg meat packing industry reorganized and adopted modern production techniques. By 1934, working conditions in Winnipeg packinghouses were harsh, dangerous and dictated by one's ethnicity and gender. Workers faced low wages, insecure seasonal employment and authoritarian foremen. These conditions led workers to call for change. The practicality of industrial unionism and necessity of a united organizational approach offered direction and a means to bring about change for packinghouse workers. In 1934 a crucial step in the path to gain collective bargaining and union recognition transpired at the Western Packing Company.

Although the first attempt at industrial unionism occurred in 1934, Winnipeg's skilled butchers and slaughterers had initiated the first attempt at craft unionism in 1916. During World War I, as meat packing companies registered record profits, the first early attempts to transform and deskill work occurred.

At the start of the war, it was not uncommon for one worker to be responsible for the complete dressing of a slaughtered animal. To improve production and reduce labour costs, management began to subdivide this work process. As a result, during the war companies hired unskilled workers for

semiskilled meat cutting jobs, thus decreasing the bargaining power and status of skilled workers while at the same time uniting workers through a commonality of work.

High inflation levels, rapidly declining standards of living and charges of war profiteering against Canada's packers further inspired Winnipeg's skilled workers to organize.<sup>1</sup> In face of these conditions, in 1916, 350 skilled workers from Gallagher Holman, Gordon Ironsides and Fares, and Swift Canadian formed Local 549 of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, to secure their bargaining power and status.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In 1917, charges of war profiteering were directed at Canada's largest meat packing organization, the William Davies Company. Public hatred for this alleged wartime exploitation was so great, that the company's president, Joseph Flavelle, was said to be the most hated man in Canada. Michael Bliss, A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart. 1858-1939 (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1978), pp.336-337; and Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925," Labour/Le Travailleur 7 (Spring 1981), p.63.

<sup>2</sup>Craft based, or horizontal unionism seeks to organize skilled workers exclusively. Industrial, or vertical unionism, on the other hand includes organization of all workers, regardless of skill. There existed few labour organizations interested in organizing the meat packing industry. The craft-based, Amalgamated which was affiliated with the American Federation of Labour maintained a monopoly over Canadian meat packing union organization until 1921. This preoccupation with craft based unionism occurred despite the fact that in 1911, the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress adopted the principle of industrial unionism in certain instances. J.A.P. Hayden, Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, History, Encyclopedia, Reference Book, part II (1939), p.171 and Canadian Labour Congress Papers, National Archives of Canada.

In January 1917, Local 549 approached the Winnipeg companies for union recognition. When the companies refused the workers' demands, the local went on one of the first strikes in Winnipeg meat packing history. Initially the strikers received support from unorganized semi and unskilled workers, and the beef kill stopped. However, as increased numbers of livestock arrived at the plants, the companies brought in replacement workers and the unorganized returned.

Although operations resumed, the presence of strikers and picket lines prompted the companies to pursue legal action. In March 1917, the companies obtained injunctions that prevented union leaders from appearing on the picket lines. In addition, the companies personally sued the local president, secretary and two members of the union for \$10,000 each, claiming they had persuaded strikers from returning to work.<sup>3</sup> Unable to mount an adequate defense against the lawsuit, the union officials promised to stop the picket lines.

Despite the end of picket lines, however, the companies did not rehire the striking workers or negotiate with the union and by the end of April, the companies reported to the Department of Labour that all striking workers had been replaced and the strike terminated.<sup>4</sup> These events crushed

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<sup>3</sup>Voice of Labour, 16 March 1917.

<sup>4</sup>Canada, Department of Labour. Strikes and Lockout Files, (Ottawa: unpublished), T2693, vol.305, No. 27.

the local in Winnipeg. From the defeat came the realization that Winnipeg packing companies would not passively allow union organization in their plants and that successful organization would have to be total. Furthermore, the resumption of work foreshadowed a future trend in which the bargaining power, high wages and status of skilled workers in meat packing plants dwindled.

While the organizational attempt failed, and did not include semi or unskilled worker, a belief in collective action among packinghouse workers did not disappear. During the Winnipeg General Strike, approximately 450 unorganized meat packing workers went on strike from 15 May until 26 June 1919.<sup>5</sup> Although packinghouse workers did not receive improved working conditions from their participation in the General Strike, this action displayed a general conviction for collective action and a belief in unionism by Winnipeg workers.

The Winnipeg General Strike had a profound experience on organized labour. For Canadian packinghouse workers, this manifestation prompted a clampdown on organized labour activity. Prior to 1916, there had been no strikes in Canadian packinghouses. However, with wartime living conditions and gradual steps towards a large-scale reorganization of work, packinghouse workers across Canada

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<sup>5</sup>Canada, Strikes and Lockout Files, T6180, vol. 2272, No. 19-184.

went on a number of unrelated strikes for improved bargaining power and union recognition. Although Winnipeg workers failed in their attempt to improve conditions, workers in Vancouver, Stratford, Toronto and Montreal proved successful during 1917 and 1918.<sup>6</sup>

Following the Winnipeg General Strike, however, Canadian packinghouse workers entered a period of hostile opposition from both management and government. From 26 June 1919 until the end of 1921, ten strikes occurred in Canadian packinghouses. In all ten instances, the employers were victorious.<sup>7</sup>

Following the defeat of the General Strike and the subsequent Red Scare decade of the 1920s, Winnipeg packinghouse workers, like other Winnipeg workers retreated from direct workplace organization.<sup>8</sup> Organized labour learned

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<sup>6</sup>For more information on these strikes, see: Strikes and Lockout Files, vol.306, No.28; vol.308, No.44 and 458; vol.312, No. 107; and vol.315, No.315.

<sup>7</sup>For more information on strike activity in Canadian packinghouses from 1919 to 1921, see: John Tait Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry (University of Toronto: unpublished Ph.D thesis, 1950). For information on packinghouse labour in the United States following the war, see: James R. Barrett, Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1894-1922 (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985); and Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup>In large part, this moderatism may be attributed to the fact that following the General Strike, at least 3,500 Winnipeg unionists were fired and many more were blacklisted. David E. Hall, Times of Trouble: Labour Quiescence in Winnipeg, 1920-1929 (University of Manitoba: unpublished MA thesis, 1983), p.28.



from the General Strike that the state would act as an ally of business, and proved willing to crush any labour organization that threatened the interests of capital.<sup>9</sup> The hostile labour arena worsened with the post-War collapse of the export meat market in 1920 which led North American meat packing companies to reduce wages and lay off workers.

While no formal union action occurred in Winnipeg following the collapse of the export market and the subsequent wage reductions and layoffs, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen led unsuccessful protest strikes in Montreal, Toronto and Chatham and in the United States. By this point, however, opposition to organized labour was too powerful. Consequently when every union-led strike failed, the Amalgamated relinquished jurisdictional control of the Canadian meat packing industry to the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress (TLC). Despite sole organizational jurisdiction, however, the conservative leadership of the TLC took no initiative. The hard times of the Depression furthered the TLC's static position, and within a short period of time all organization ceased in the Canadian meat packing industry.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Irving Abella, On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada 1919 - 1949 (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, Publishers, 1974), p.xv, and Bryan Palmer, Working Class Experience (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), pp.259-261.

<sup>10</sup>Doug Smith, Let Us Rise! A History of the Manitoba Labour Movement (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985), p.75.

Poor organizational leadership from the TLC and high unemployment contributed to a lack of organization in the Canadian meat packing industry from 1921 until 1934. During this sterile, interwar period, Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and Burns introduced company unions to placate their workers.<sup>11</sup> Designed to voice worker grievances and improve plant operations, company unions represented a form of impotent worker representation. Company unions did not offer or provide workers with any real power, since all motions were subject to company veto and outside recruitment of assistance was forbidden.

The revival of unionism in the meat packing industry came from attempts directed by the Canadian Communist Party. In 1928, a new policy of the Communist International advocated building radical new labour organizations rather than trying to work within existing ones. The Red International of Labour Unions stated, "the whole attention of the Communist Party of Canada must be directed towards trade union work."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, following international directives, the Workers Unity League (WUL) was founded on 10 November 1929.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup>These systems were first introduced at Swift Canadian in 1922, and followed at Canada Packers in 1933, and Burns in 1937.

<sup>12</sup>Lita-Rose Betcherman, The Little Band: The Clashes Between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishments in Canada (Ottawa: Deneau Publishers, no date), p.130.

<sup>13</sup>Since, Section 98 of the Criminal Code made it illegal to belong to a revolutionary association, the affiliation of

WUL's constitution claimed "The organization of the unorganized must be the main and central task". In 1930, WUL organizer Charlie Sims reported:

[T]his means that our work in Southern Ontario stands before us in the following manner: the organization of the unorganized industries...Auto, Steel, Textile, Chemical, Rubber and Meat Packing.<sup>14</sup>

By 1934, the WUL's membership accounted for 21,253 members,<sup>15</sup> or 7.7 per cent of all Canadian unionists, and the organization expanded into the meat packing industry. Formed in 1933, the Food Workers Industrial Union (FWIU) was a division of the WUL based in Winnipeg and placed under the administration of its General Executive Secretary, Winnipeg

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the WUL with the Communist Party was not emphasized. William Beeching and Phyllis Clark, Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck (Toronto: NC Press Ltd., 1977), p.148. For more information on the WUL and the Communist Party in this period, see: Ivan Avakumovic, The Communist Party in Canada A History (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1975); Ian Angus, Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party in Canada (Montreal: Vanguard Publications, 1981); and Betcherman, The Little Band.

<sup>14</sup>"Workers Unity League Constitution, 1933", and "Report of Comrade Charles Sims", in Communist Party of Canada Papers, National Archives of Canada, volume 52.

<sup>15</sup>H.A. Logan, Trade Unions in Canada: Their Development and Functioning (Toronto: MacMillan, 1948), p.371.

Alderman Jacob Penner.<sup>16</sup> The same year, the FWIU organized four locals, including one in Winnipeg.

The Winnipeg Communist Party in the early 1930s included many Ukrainian-Canadians.<sup>17</sup> Following a criticism of organizational action, the Communist Party paper The Worker sent a message to Winnipeg Communists that "The Party wants (organizational) action."<sup>18</sup> It is significant to note that the Communist Party did not restrict its organizational efforts to skilled workers. Realizing the changing nature of the capitalist system, all WUL unions organized workers regardless of skill. Therefore, the FWIU organizational activity represented the first industrial organizational drive in the meat packing industry.

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<sup>16</sup>The reasons for the selection of Winnipeg as FWIU head office, and Penner for the chief executive are not revealed in any primary or secondary sources. One can speculate however that Winnipeg was an obvious choice for a head office given the city's strong Communist connections and organization, militant labour tradition and prominence as a meat packing centre. Moreover, Jacob Penner had served as a longstanding Communist Alderman in Winnipeg and represented a powerful Communist figure and politician in the city.

<sup>17</sup>Betcherman, The Little Band, p.98.

<sup>18</sup>The message from the District Organizing Secretary read, "The Ukrainian mass organizations must actively participate in building the WUL....In Winnipeg, for instance, the Party Comrades...have failed to carry through an industrial registration in the mass organizations....The Party wants action. D. Holmes [Khomyshyn], in The Worker, 7 January 1931, quoted in John Kolasky ed. Prophets and Proletarians: Documents on the History of the Rise and Decline of Ukrainian Communists in Canada (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1990), p.141.

Standard organizational procedure by the WUL involved a delegation of workers approaching the union and requesting help.<sup>19</sup> Organizational work soon began in Winnipeg's Ukrainian-dominated meat packing industry and at the Western Packing Company in particular. Western Packing did not belong to the Big Three, nor was it a nationally-owned corporation. One can speculate that Western Packing was targeted because of the fact that it was a locally-owned company and potentially seen by union organizers as an easier ground for which to succeed. In addition, Western Packing might have proved attractive to union officials due to the high number of first generation Ukrainian Canadians, or since working conditions at Western Packing were among the worst in Winnipeg.

Besides the hazardous, seasonal nature of all packinghouse work, Western Packing workers were the lowest paid in the city. A comparison of wages at Western Packing and Swift Canadian revealed that in 1934, the majority of Western Packing workers received half the salary of their counterparts at Swift's.<sup>20</sup> As a result of such factors, in

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<sup>19</sup>"An interview with Mitch Sago", Manitoba History, Number 9, Spring 1985, p.20.

<sup>20</sup>A comparison of hourly wages at Western Packing and Swift Canadian revealed the pay inequalities:

<u>Departments</u>	<u>Western Packing</u>	<u>Swift Canadian</u>
killing	15-32¢	30-60¢
cutting	15-30¢	30-50¢
casing	22.5-32.5¢	30-45¢
shipping	15¢	36.5-40¢
kitchen	20-25¢	30-35¢
pickling	22-22.5¢	35-40¢
cooler	20-32.5¢	30-40¢

1933, pro union workers at Western Packing requested organizational aid from the WUL and the Party created a FWIU local.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after, the workers elected a shop committee and instructed committee head Joseph Tropak to confront management with their demands.<sup>22</sup>

On 6 March 1934, Tropak and the FWIU delegation approached H.V. Kobold, Western Packing's President and General Manager. The delegation presented Kobold with a list of grievances calling for an end to abusive language from management, and demanding a wage increase of 10 cents per hour, time and a half for overtime and Sundays off.<sup>23</sup> The most important demand, however, was recognition of their union and the creation of a closed shop.<sup>24</sup>

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drivers                                      \$18/week                                      \$24/week  
Source: Voice of Labour, 26 April 1934.

<sup>21</sup>As there exist very few primary sources on the Communist Party in Winnipeg or the Western Packing company, it is difficult to estimate the extent of Communists within Western Packing. One can speculate, however, that given the choice of the FWIU to organize at Western Packing, there must have been support from workers who were either communist sympathizers, associates or Party members.

<sup>22</sup>Of approximately 100 workers at the plant, the union claimed a membership of 100. Voice of Labour, 5 April 1934.

<sup>23</sup>Voice of Labour, 5 April 1934.

<sup>24</sup>Although wage increases dominated contract negotiations during the 1930s and 1940s, it is suggested that workplace conditions translated to demands for wage increases as it was easier to negotiate for wages than to call for a restructuring of operations. For more on this theory, see Richard Hyman, Strikes (London: Fontana, 1977).

Kobold's return was quick and determined. The company manager summoned police and threatened to fire any worker joining strike action against the company. Despite this, on 7 March, all 43 members of the FWIU walked out on strike. This action began what would become one of Winnipeg's most violent strikes, and Western Canada's second longest strike in 1934. In addition, the strike held significant importance for the future of meat packing organization in Winnipeg as this represented Winnipeg workers' first attempt at industrial unionism.

Determined to keep the plant in operation, non union workers remained at work, and management attempted to run operations as usual. On the other side, striking union members formed picket lines and established a soup kitchen for picketers.<sup>25</sup> Violence, a common occurrence during the strike, On 6 March 1934, Tropak and the FWIU delegation approached H.V. Kobold, Western Packing's President and General Manager. The delegation presented Kobold with a list of grievances calling for an end to abusive language from management, and demanding a wage increase of 10 cents per hour, time and a half for overtime and Sundays off.<sup>26</sup> The most

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<sup>25</sup>The strike was characterized by a large, and active role played by sympathizers. Although difficult to prove, one can assume that a large proportion of these picketers were members of the Communist Party or Communist sympathizers.

<sup>26</sup>Voice of Labour, 5 April 1934.

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<sup>27</sup>Of approximately 100 workers at the plant, the union claimed a membership of 43.

<sup>28</sup>The strike was characterized by a large, and active role played by sympathizers. Although difficult to prove, one can assume that a large proportion of these picketers were members of the Communist Party or Communist sympathizers.



picketers. The Winnipeg police department quickly intervened, and arrested its first striker.<sup>29</sup>

Although several other similar instances followed, including police arrests and interventions, the picket lines held strong and the strikers intensified their actions. The FWIU created a large, local support committee that organized a house to house collection<sup>30</sup> for funds to support the strikers, while the Canadian Labour Defense League petitioned that those arrested be released on bail.<sup>31</sup>

Tension increased as the strike progressed. On Monday, 12 March, violence again erupted. With over 100 picketers in place, Kobold personally drove workers into the plant. This prompted picketers to launch a barrage of stones, with one smashing Kobold's windshield and hitting a replacement worker in the face. The picketers then attacked another replacement worker as he entered the plant, and again tried to prevent company trucks from leaving the plant.<sup>32</sup> These actions, the strike's most violent to date, led Winnipeg police to call up reserves to help breakup the picket line. Despite the intensifying violence, Kobold continued to try to lead

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<sup>29</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 13 March 1934.

<sup>30</sup>By 9 March, the FWIU had given relief to the families of four strikers. Voice of Labour, 5 April 1934.

<sup>31</sup>The Canadian Defense Labour League functioned as a national branch of Comintern-directed international aid organization, and was led by Winnipeg's A.E. Smith. Betcherman, The Little Band, p.35.

<sup>32</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 13 March 1934.

replacement workers through the pickets and denounced the strikers as communists and refused to meet or recognize the strikers.<sup>33</sup>

The result was vicious confrontations between the strikers and replacement workers. On 17 March, despite the presence of baton-armed police, two cars carrying employees were stoned. This prompted the cars to stop, and "employee" Ivan Jenkins exited the car with a drawn revolver. Jenkins then pursued picketer John Karwacki across a snow covered field, and fired five gunshots at Karwacki before he surrendered. In a bitter tale of injustice, the man who was shot at was then arrested by Winnipeg police.<sup>34</sup>

By this point, knowledge of the strike had spread throughout Winnipeg. When an arrested picketer appeared before city of Winnipeg magistrate R.B. Graham, he received the maximum sentence for assault.<sup>35</sup> In reading the disposition, Magistrate Graham further lectured that:

[T]his assault was absolutely unprovoked and extremely brutal. By his own admission, the accused was not employed at the packing plant. He had no part in the

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<sup>33</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 12 March 1934. A similarly, anti-Communist attitude was displayed in this period by Canada Packers management, sending out "stooges" to Communist rallies at Market Square to survey the onlookers. Any Canada Packer worker in attendance at such a meeting would later be suspended or fired. Interview with Maurice Yeo by John Grover, Winnipeg, 1994.

<sup>34</sup>Voice of Labour, 5 April 1934.

<sup>35</sup>At the trial, crown evidence revealed that the city had planted spies in the picket lines. Winnipeg Free Press, 22 March 1934.

labour trouble nor did he have any grievance against employees or officials of the firm. He came there simply to cause and foment trouble, and in imposing only a year's sentence, I am acting very leniently.<sup>36</sup>

The same day, the city's anti-Communist Mayor, Colonel Ralph Webb promised to meet Kobold and resolve the matter within two days.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of Webb's failed promise and the recent harsh sentences from city courts, picket line violence continued and another replacement worker was "brutally beaten" by picketers.<sup>38</sup> Faced with the near death of one of its members - in plain face of a hostile police force, and court system - the FWIU could count few allies. The Winnipeg Free Press and the Winnipeg Tribune both revealed an anti-strike attitude through their selective reporting and violent description of the strike.<sup>39</sup> As a result of this situation, the FWIU adopted a new tactic of publicizing the strike.

On 4 April 1934, the FWIU organized a massive show of support in which 2,000 Winnipeggers demonstrated in front of

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<sup>36</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 22 March 1934.

<sup>37</sup>Colonel Ralph Webb, a former army colonel and Winnipeg capitalist, was infamous for his hatred of Communists and his anti-Communist actions. Webb, was re-elected Mayor in campaigning under the slogan, "Raise Hail Columbia with the Reds", and added that all the "Reds" in Winnipeg should be dumped into the Red River. Betcherman, The Little Band, p.96, 146.

<sup>38</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 27 March 1934.

<sup>39</sup>Instead of detailing both sides of the strike or worker demands, attention focused on the company's misfortune, the Communist element of the FWIU, and on picketline violence.

the Western Packing plant. The size of this demonstration displayed the strength and support of Winnipeg's working class community for the strikers and the union. Communist Alderman, and FWIU General Secretary, Jacob Penner, and School Trustee Andrew Bilecki, addressed the participants, who then marched in a parade led by "red kerchiefed singing, young pioneer children."<sup>40</sup> New support also came from the April 1934 debut of Voice of Labour.<sup>41</sup>

At a City of Winnipeg Council meeting on 12 April, Alderman Jacob Penner introduced a motion condemning the conditions at the Western Packing Company. However, in the highly stratified era of Winnipeg city politics, Mayor Webb and his ideological counterparts defeated the motion.<sup>42</sup> In response, the FWIU organized a highly visible protest march down Portage Avenue. Winnipeg police added reserve squads for the protest, but could do little against the peaceful demonstrators. Unable to disperse the law abiding protesters, the police had to content themselves by arresting one of those protesters

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<sup>40</sup>The Pioneers was a children's Communist group, named after a similar organization in the Soviet Union. Voice of Labour, 5 April 1934.

<sup>41</sup>The Voice of Labour's first headline pleaded, "Help Western Packing Strikers Win!" The paper also stressed the efforts of the FWIU and the WUL, revealing that the union had given relief to the families of nine strikers, and assisted in the release of those arrested. Voice of Labour, 5 April 1934.

<sup>42</sup>Voice of Labour, 12 April 1934.

involved for placing defamatory stickers on store windows that sold Western Packing's meat.<sup>43</sup>

A small victory for the workers occurred when Attorney General W.J. Major offered his services as a mediator.<sup>44</sup> No doubt embarrassed by the strike's violence and the sight of a mass of working class demonstrators on Winnipeg's main street, Major offered to mediate the strike.<sup>45</sup> Major's offer was, however, conditional that the strikers lay down their pickets before mediation could begin.<sup>46</sup>

The strikers responded that they had been ready to negotiate from the first day, but that:

We have a legal right to picket and to give up that legal right...would leave us entirely helpless....We are particularly reluctant to abandon our strike struggle on a mere promise...[however] we are ready to negotiate.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 18 April 1934.

<sup>44</sup>Ironically, as Major offered to mediate, the Mayor of Winnipeg was delivering a speech on the evils of Communism. Webb's speech talked of how Communists were taking advantage of the economic depression and unemployment, and were fermenting discontent, trouble and rebellion - rebellion which Webb alleged came directly from Moscow. Winnipeg Tribune, 20 April 1934.

<sup>45</sup>The gravity of the Western Packing strike was revealed through the provincial government's offer to mediate. In the previous ten years, the government had only offered to intervene in a labour dispute once. Winnipeg Tribune, 18 April 1934.

<sup>46</sup>Voice of Labour, 19 April 1934.

<sup>47</sup>"Declaration of the Strike Committee", in Voice of Labour, 19 April 1934.

Perhaps encouraged by these events, Major withdrew his original stipulation and agreed to negotiate. The Attorney-General proposed a respectable wage increase and other improvements for the workers; however, he stopped short on union recognition. Instead, he suggested a rather utopian scenario by which the company would listen to its employees on any matter, at any time. Major's plan failed however to guarantee the rehiring of strikers, and as a result, the offer was rejected and talks broke down. Following the collapse of negotiations, a Western Packing company official stated, "We have offered the men everything possible, gone the limit. We will...not negotiate further".<sup>48</sup>

In late April, the Workers Unity League took up the strikers' cause directly, and Jacob Penner and L. Vassil gave speeches at a mass meeting. Later that night, perhaps inspired by the speeches, picketers attacked the homes of replacement workers.<sup>49</sup> Further support for the striking workers came on May Day, when a parade of 3,000 to 6,000 people, led by Penner and Andrew Bilecki, marched behind a banner which originally read, "Support the Heroic Western Packing Company Strikers."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 27 April 1934.

<sup>49</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 29 April 1934.

<sup>50</sup>Despite the fact that on 1 May 1934, there existed an extremely volatile situation, there were no major disturbances. The only conflict occurred when Winnipeg police, who were reinforced by "special detachments" on every corner of the parade route, would not allow a banner reading

Despite strong support from the community, the length of the strike was beginning to take its toll on strikers. Economic hardships had forced the FWIU to hold yet another collection to help support the strikers. The financial situation became clear through the strikers' changing demands. Dropping the demand for union recognition, the union now concentrated on getting strikers back to their jobs.<sup>51</sup>

The final blow for the strikers came when the majority of the Winnipeg City Council, acting for the benefit of the company and capitalism, attempted to disrupt the mass picketing and weaken the community support. This move came in the form of a decision by the Civic Unemployment Committee, which declared that:

[M]en who are on picket and who are found acting as pickets, or taking active part in strikes in which they are not individually concerned, will be considered as being at work and will be struck off relief.<sup>52</sup>

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"Support the Heroic Western Packing Company Strikers". A quick-thinking demonstrator cut out a section of the banner, so that the slogan simply read "Western Packing Company Strikers". Winnipeg Tribune, May 2 1934 and Winnipeg Free Press, 2 May 1934.

<sup>51</sup>Tropak stated that, "The company proposed that part of the new employees engaged during the strike be retained in employment while part of the old employees be left on the streets. To such a proposition, of course, we can never agree." Winnipeg Tribune, 3 May 1934.

<sup>52</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 11 May 1934.

Recognizing the impossible situation in which the union now found itself in, on 19 May, an agreement was formally reached and the strike ended.

The agreement included the same conditions proposed by Major nearly a month before, and added the provision that twenty of the strikers be hired immediately, with the remainder to be gradually absorbed.<sup>53</sup> While the settlement of the strike did advance the wages of the workers at the Western Packing Company, this occurred at the expense of a long and violent strike, which saw at least 25 picketers arrested.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, not all strikers were rehired, and workers did not secure their chief objective of union recognition.

Although the FWIU did not have enough time to expand into Winnipeg's other meat packing plants, the threat of union organization prompted Swift Canadian and Burns to offer their workers 10 per cent raises. Furthermore, Robert Watt, a former packinghouse foreman at Swifts, described that in 1934, the

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<sup>53</sup>Having successfully blackmailed the workers by threatening to withhold relief from picketers, the same night the agreement was reached, and the strike was over, City Council instructed the Unemployment Committee to rescind its order which cut off relief to those engaged in strike activity. Voice of Labour, 24 May 1934, and Winnipeg Tribune, 21 May 1934.

<sup>54</sup>These men included: Samuel Barber, Tom Bryson, Leo Carson, H. Chaykowski, Freddie Chernowski, M. Chwaliboya, Philip Denzeka, S. Edwardson, Karl Franczsty, Gisli Gislason, H. Harmachuk, Bohden Harmatiuk, William Hryciuk, John Karwacki, F. Klaptovic, Oshed Magis, Angus McDonald, J. Melnyk, Joseph Prodaniuk, George Rogers, Harry Szarkowski, Michael Teremkiv, John Tropak, and John Yaremkiw. The majority of these men have Slavic names, reflecting the high percentage of Ukrainians in the packinghouse industry.



company received word that a union was going to come down to the plant and try to organize it. Although Watt remembered the union as the International Workers of the World (the "Wobblies"), it is likely that this was in fact the FWIU. What is equally interesting was Swift's response to the situation - all of Swift's foremen were sent up to the roof armed with shotguns and the plant gates were blockaded.<sup>55</sup>

Notwithstanding the enormous personal cost of the strike, for a generation of Winnipeg meat packing workers not familiar with industrial unionism, the Western Packing strike demonstrated the hostile attitude of the government and management to organized labour, and invoked a sense of confidence in collective action among workers. Finally, because of unparalleled efforts in organizing workers in the 1930s, Communist efforts convinced Winnipeg workers that their collective future lay in industrial unionism and provided a valuable link to the successful organization of Canada Packers in 1943.

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<sup>55</sup>Interview Robert Watts, by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985, Meat Packing Industry Oral History Project Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

**Chapter Four**  
**Attacking the Citadel:**  
**The 1943 PWOC Victory at Canada Packers**

The experience at Western Packing in 1934 provided a valuable lesson for Winnipeg packinghouse workers and future organizational efforts. The organizing pattern used at Western Packing exemplified the first instance in the Winnipeg meat packing industry of industrial unionism. Moreover, the support and relative strength of the Western Packing local demonstrated the necessity of vertical industrial unionism, and suggested an optimistic, albeit difficult future for union organization and collective bargaining in the Winnipeg meat packing industry.

The optimism and idealism of industrial unionism did not materialize in Winnipeg for nearly ten years following the Western Packing experience. Due to a lack of leadership from organized labour, and unfavourable local and national conditions, unionism disappeared from Winnipeg meat packing plants until 1943.

During the period from 1934 until 1943, continued harsh working conditions reiterated the need for collective action among workers. Winnipeg packinghouse workers remained poorly paid, discriminated against and without bargaining power. Within ten years however, the atmosphere in Winnipeg improved and proved fertile for successful union organization, recognition and the securement of collective bargaining. Changed local conditions, including the recent reorganization

of work, proven failure of craft unionism and appeal of industrial unionism, combined with an overall strengthening of the labour movement and World War II to create an environment in which pro-union workers at Canada Packers successfully secured unionism in Winnipeg.

Following the defeated strike at Western Packers in 1934, Western Packers workers remained committed to collective action and the Food Workers International Union (FWIU) local continued. Eventually, however, the local crumbled and the 1934 experiment ended. The death of the FWIU did not directly occur as a result of a lack of worker support or through events in Winnipeg. Rather the temporary cessation of unionism came as a direct result of international directives.

In 1935, the Communist International dictated a worldwide order to its national subordinates regarding official Communist policy concerning unionism. To fight the growing rise of fascism in the world, the International abandoned its policy of revolutionary unionism, and directed its constituents to affiliate with mainstream labour organizations.<sup>1</sup> This policy forced a great change in Canadian organized labour. The Communist Workers' Unity League directed 30 locals throughout Canada, including six FWIU locals in the meat packing industry packinghouse. Following the order by the Communist International, 28 of the 30 locals,

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<sup>1</sup>Tim Buck, Thirty Years 1922-1952: The Story of the Communist Movement in Canada (Toronto: Progressive Books, 1952), pp.119-120.

including all six meat packing locals merged with the conservative Canadian Trades and Labour Congress (TLC).<sup>2</sup>

This international directive and resulting merger created serious administrative problems for workers and organized labour in the meat packing industry. The primary difficulty centred on whether or not the conservative craft unions of the TLC would absorb the industrial unionism of the FWIU and continue organizational action. At the 1936 annual convention of the Canadian TLC, ironically held in Winnipeg, heated debates occurred over this issue. While union activists from across the country argued that packinghouse workers were eager to unionize and the meat packing industry was a fertile ground, the conservative hierarchy of the TLC and its affiliated craft unions refused to offer packinghouse workers further organizational support. Although the former FWIU locals in Winnipeg, New Westminster, Vancouver, Toronto, Stratford, and Montreal received status as federal unions, this represented only a minor concession since the locals received little direction or support and soon lost most of their membership.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Only two of the WUL locals were not absorbed by other union movements by the end of 1935. Canada, Department of Labour, Labour Organization (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1935), p.140.

<sup>3</sup>In 1934, the TLC passed a motion which allowed the admission of industrially-based unions into their ranks as federal unions. Canada, Labour Organization in Canada, 1934, p.22. Consequently, in 1936, the FWIU local in Winnipeg realigned with the TLC as the Butchers and Meat Packers Federal Union, Number 97.

The vast majority of Winnipeg's meat packing industry belonged to a larger organization, controlled by national and international firms. This structure necessitated a national dimension to any successful labour relations. Thus, in order for significant improvement in Winnipeg working conditions to occur, compliance and acceptance on a national level was crucial. A desperate plea from a Vancouver union official to the President of the TLC in 1938 for the creation of a national body and organizational support in the meat packing industry received the response:

[I]t is not possible, at this time to give effect to the request contained in the resolution that the Congress initiate a national organization campaign on behalf of butcher workmen and packing house employees.<sup>4</sup>

Since the TLC refused to offer any direction or support in organizing industrial unions in meat packing plants, by 1938 the ineffective packinghouse locals across Canada had lost most of their members and support, and existed in name only.

Worker dissatisfaction with the Canadian TLC was part of a general questioning of the effectiveness of craft unionism in North America, and was reinforced by the growing success of industrial unions in the United States. Three years earlier, organized labour in the United States formally divided on this issue. At the 1935 annual convention of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), a majority of delegates voted

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<sup>4</sup>Letter Tom Moire to Percy Bengough, 31 March 1938, in Canadian Labour Congress Papers, National Archives of Canada, volume 4, file 8.

against adopting a policy industrial unionism, despite strong opposition from groups including the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this decision, a schism among organized labour occurred and a group of pro industrial union leaders formed the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) and began to organize all workers regardless of skill.

Although the CIO sought to "encourage and promote organization of all workers in the mass-production and unorganized industries", they originally intended their organization to affiliate with the AFL.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, this attitude led union representative John Brophy to advise a group of Minnesota packinghouse workers who applied for a CIO charter that:

[T]he CIO cannot grant permission to your body to act as a CIO group organizing packing house workers as this would be contrary to CIO policy. Our advice is that you affiliate with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen and work out your problems with them as this organization favours industrial unionism.<sup>7</sup>

Despite such early camaraderie between the AFL and the CIO, conflicts soon emerged over organizational jurisdictions. Conflicts led to division and following organizational victories in the steel and auto industries, the CIO launched

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<sup>5</sup>For more on the debate over industrial unionism and the 1935 split, see: Walter Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>6</sup>Jack Williams, The Story of Canada's Unions (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1975), p.157.

<sup>7</sup>Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL, p.352.

organizational drives in American meat packing plants in 1937. The presence of CIO organizers in American packinghouses strained a previously amiable relationship between the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen and the CIO, and led a somewhat shocked President of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen to declare in April 1937:

I don't feel that the activity of the CIO representatives within the field of our own International Union is being carried on with the full knowledge of the Washington headquarters of the Committee for Industrial Organization. We can't imagine that you would make an already hard road harder for us.<sup>8</sup>

The displeasure of the Amalgamated with the CIO was confirmed at a national level, when, at the 1937 AFL convention, delegates voted overwhelmingly to revoke the charters of all CIO-affiliated unions. Following the official expulsion of the CIO unions from the AFL, the CIO increased its organizational ventures and in October 1937 a delegation of Chicago packinghouse workers formed the CIO-affiliated Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC), devoting itself to organizing all workers in American meat packing plants.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL, pp.352-353.

<sup>9</sup>Included in the delegation was Stella Nowicki, who later claimed that the concept was a Communist Party initiative. For more information on the creation of PWOC, see: Stella Nowicki, "Back of the Yards." in Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds. Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working Class Organizers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) and Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.297.

Although PWOC had not yet entered Canada, in September 1940, workers at the Toronto plants of Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and the Toronto Packing Company applied for, and received PWOC charters. CIO officials realized a strong demand and opportunity for worker organization in the Canadian industry and promptly hired C.H. Millard of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee and Fred Dowling, the labour editor of the Ontario CCF newspaper The New Commonwealth, to organizational duties for the Canadian district of PWOC.<sup>10</sup>

The action by PWOC, combined with a proven desire by Canadian packinghouse workers to support organization, most likely led to the Canadian TLC's revival of interest in the industry. In May 1940, the TLC announced that Carl Berg, its Western vice-president would head an organizational drive for the newly created, TLC-affiliated industrial union, the Packinghouse Butchers and Allied Food Workers' Union.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>While Canadian workers undoubtedly supported industrial unionism, following a CIO investigation of the Toronto locals, affiliation was withdrawn in September 1940. Investigation revealed that one of the locals consisted exclusively of Communist Party members, most of whom did not even work in the industry (including the editor of the Communist newspaper the Daily Clarion, Mike Fenwick). The other repealed local consisted of a representation of poultry buyers and management who joined in hopes of being able to influence their workers to accept poor working conditions and low wages. Fred Dowling, speech, "Origins of Canadian Section of United Packinghouse Workers of America", in United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, box 430, folder 9.

<sup>11</sup>H.A. Logan, Trade Unions in Canada: Their Development and Functioning (Toronto: MacMillan, 1948), p.271.



The TLC drive initially focused on Winnipeg and subsequently Western Canada.<sup>12</sup> When Carl Berg, the well-known TLC organizer came to Winnipeg in late 1940 and early 1941, he cast an imposing figure on the packinghouse workers of Winnipeg. Canada Packers worker Maurice Yeo, remembered Berg as a "big man - sharp dressed, big blue suit, a big chain across the chest [and] an homburg hat and a pipe."<sup>13</sup> In Winnipeg, Berg promoted industrial packinghouse unionism in plants of the Big Three - Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and Burns. The presence of an organized body encouraged many pro-union packinghouse workers to join and support the local. However, shortly after many workers signed up into the TLC local, the campaign ended abruptly.

Winnipeg packinghouse workers who signed with the local never received an official explanation for the abandonment of the organization. This mysterious event led Winnipeg workers to speculate that Berg had been bought off by the companies, or that the campaign ended since management spies had intimidated enough workers to withdraw support - both theories demonstrating Winnipeg packinghouse workers deep suspicion and distrust of management.<sup>14</sup> While these theories

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<sup>12</sup>One can speculate that this occurred because of Winnipeg's status as a major meat packing centre with a strong tradition of union support, and since PWOC activities focused in eastern Canada.

<sup>13</sup>Interview Maurice Yeo by John Grover, Winnipeg, 1994.

<sup>14</sup>Interview Henry Baker and Joseph H. Wilford by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985 Meat Packing Oral History Project,

might have been contributing factors, the abandonment was also a result of the TLC administration, which decided at its 1941 convention to withdraw all financial support from packinghouse organization.<sup>15</sup>

The refusal of the TLC to finance packinghouse organization, and the perceived unseediness of TLC organizers by Winnipeg workers smoothed the path for organization by the PWOC - a point obvious to the union's administrators. In August 1941, Canadian director C.H. Millard wrote the International Chairman of PWOC that "We urgently need another organizer here...and in the Canadian West (Winnipeg)".<sup>16</sup> When PWOC officials in Chicago replied that the union could not afford such a westward expansion, Millard appealed directly to Allen Haywood, the CIO's Director of Organization for organizational support in Western Canada.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, Millard's pleas to CIO officials were successful, and in March 1942, Fred Dowling arrived in

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Provincial Archives of Manitoba; and interview Maurice Yeo by John Grover, Winnipeg, 1994.

<sup>15</sup>George Sayers Bains, The United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers: Its Development, Structure, Collective Bargaining and Future, with particular reference to Canada (University of Manitoba: unpublished MA thesis, 1964), p.78.

<sup>16</sup>C.H. Millard to J.C. Lewis, 8 August 1941, United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers Papers, box 8, folder 1.

<sup>17</sup>C.H. Millard to Allan Haywood, 9 January 1942. United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers Papers, box 8, folder 1.

Winnipeg. Dowling's visit prompted the PWOC's newspaper, the Packinghouse Worker, to comment:

[I]t is not surprising to hear that they are now tackling Winnipeg...the key to the entire industry in Canada, and for so many years the citadel of packinghouse anti unionism.<sup>18</sup>

Although Dowling's visit did not immediately result in the commencement of organizational efforts in Winnipeg, a groundwork for future developments was set. Furthermore, shortly after Dowling's visit, worker support for union organization grew despite the Winnipeg industry's strong, historic anti unionism.

By the end of 1942, PWOC counted 2,103 Canadian members, although Winnipeg remained unorganized.<sup>19</sup> In addition to an overall strengthening of the labour movement, of key importance to the success of organized labour was the impact of World War II on the industry and Canadian labour.

Canada's declaration of war on Germany drastically changed the face of the Canadian economy. In 1939, the meat packing industry ranked as Canada's third largest industry, and enjoyed its twelfth consecutive year as Manitoba's largest

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<sup>18</sup>Packinghouse Worker, 3 April 1942. Such mention of Winnipeg is remarkable, given the fact that attention to Canadian affairs occurred in the Packinghouse Worker a mere 19 times in 1942.

<sup>19</sup>United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers Papers, box 495, folder 15.

industry.<sup>20</sup> The war boosted nearly all areas of the Canadian economy, and specifically increased the demand for meat and canned meat. During the war, Canadian exports of canned meats tripled from 6,377,972 pounds (worth \$782,364) in 1940, to 18,819,576 pounds (worth \$5,052,065) in 1943.<sup>21</sup> Following this, the profits of the Big Three also increased steadily during the period:<sup>22</sup>

year	Big Three Profits
1939	\$1,671,935
1940	\$1,872,766
1941	\$1,915,880
1942	\$2,864,683
1943	\$2,956,786

During the war, Winnipeg plants expanded to meet the growing demand and created new jobs at an unprecedented rate. Similar expansions occurred in many other Manitoban industries, and by 1941 the province of Manitoba had achieved full employment.<sup>23</sup> For meat packing companies, the labour shortage created an industry desperate for workers. Burns' foreman Earl Cockle hired university students and even travelled to Churchill, Manitoba, to recruit "everyone we could get our hands on", while on occasion Canada Packers

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<sup>20</sup>Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Canada Yearbook (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1925-39).

<sup>21</sup>Canada, Department of Agriculture, Annual Market Review (Ottawa: King's Printer), 1939-1943.

<sup>22</sup>United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers Papers, box 482, folder 13.

<sup>23</sup>Doug Smith, Let Us Rise! A History of the Manitoba Labour Movement (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985), p.98.

bused in up to 200 off-duty soldiers at night to work.<sup>24</sup> When these actions did not prove sufficient to meet the demand for workers, the companies began to hire women workers.

Shortly following the outbreak of World War II, companies were forced to return to female labour to fill a "manpower" shortage.<sup>25</sup> Although assigned to "female" departments such as bacon slicing, packing, wiener production, canning and sausage making, as the war continued, women quickly assumed positions in every department.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, female labour reached the highly important jobs of the beef killing floor and welding shop, where some claimed they did a better job because of their "feminine touch".<sup>27</sup> However, although women now worked in all departments of packinghouses, their wages still did not equal those of the men.

As the wartime need for meat reached new levels, the widespread use of female labour aided in doubling the number of packinghouse workers in Manitoba between 1939 and 1943.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Interview Earl Cockle and Ronald Matthewson by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>25</sup>This phenomenon was not restricted to the meat packing industry. During the War, the number of women unionists grew considerably. For example, from 1941 to 1942, the number of women unionists grew from 30,327 to 51,383 - an increase of almost 70%.  
Canada, Labour Organizations in Canada, 1942, p.23.

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Ronald Matthewson and Joseph H. Wilford by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>27</sup>Interview Maurice Yeo by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>28</sup>Canada, Canada Yearbook, 1939-1943.

Additionally, due to wartime demand, the meat packing industry emerged in 1943 with record profits. At the centre of Canada's prosperous meat packing industry was the city of Winnipeg, which possessed the two largest and most modern meat packing plants in Canada, and boasted the nation's largest stock yards. Such factors allowed the workers toiling inside Winnipeg's packinghouses to emerge in a position of supply-and-demand induced power previously unknown, and ultimately contributed towards Winnipeg workers being able to successfully "tackle...the citadel" in their path towards union recognition and collective bargaining.<sup>29</sup>

On 20 January 1943, Adam Borsk - a former Canada Packers employee in Toronto - was sent by PWOC to organize Winnipeg packinghouse workers.<sup>30</sup> Union strategy held that the key to Winnipeg was to target Winnipeg's largest meat packing plant, Canada Packers. Upon arrival, the PWOC organizer quickly

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<sup>29</sup>Buoyed by the confidence that accompanied full employment was massive protest nationwide. In 1943, one in three Canadian unionists went on strike. Wayne Roberts and John Bullen, "A Heritage of Hope and Struggle: Workers, Unions and Politics in Canada, 1930-1982.", in Modern Canada 1930s-1980s, M.S. Cross and G.S. Kealy, eds. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1984), p.116.

<sup>30</sup>Adam Borsk was an aggressive vocal union organizer who had worked for years as a meat cutter at Canada Packers' Toronto plant. Although he had never previously worked as a union organizer, he held the distinction of being personally fired by company president J.S. McLean for his role in organizing the Toronto plant. These attributes, combined with Borsk's Ukrainian background, made him a popular figure with the Winnipeg workers and encouraged the organization of many workers. Interview Maurice Yeo by John Grover, Winnipeg, 1994.

sought out Canada Packers employees Fred Billows and John Kolba. A meat cutter and a canner, Billows and Kolba's names were supplied to Borsk by former Winnipeg workers now in Toronto as the two Ukrainian-Canadians were pro-union, as well as Communist sympathizers.

The degree to which Communists were responsible for organizing the local at Canada Packers is uncertain. Although Billows was not a Party member,<sup>31</sup> he labelled himself a "sympathizer" and claimed that the first fifty workers to join the union were also Communist "sympathizers".<sup>32</sup> What is clear, however, is that many of those associated with the meat packing industry in 1934 were still present in 1943. As the Secretary General of the Canadian Communist Party Tim Buck generalized, "our Party had trained and developed a whole cadre of people who knew about unions and how to go about organizing them."<sup>33</sup>

Following an initial meeting with Borsk, Billows and Kolba began to secretly sign up fellow workers - regardless of skill. To recruit members, Billows and Kolba often had to do little. The two unionists reminded their co-workers of the miserable working conditions under which they toiled and

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<sup>31</sup>Interview with Mrs. Fred Billows by John Grover, Winnipeg, 1995.

<sup>32</sup>Interview Fred Billows by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>33</sup>Irving Abella, Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour 1935-1956 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p.125.

distributed union-fact sheets outside the plant gates. Union enthusiasts identified the irregular work, harsh discipline, poor wages, and dangerous work that were part of packinghouse life, and argued that a union was the only solution to their problems. Collective bargaining, they claimed would lead to improved working conditions, a stronger negotiating voice, and offered as proof from locals in Ontario and the United States.<sup>34</sup> Winnipeg union supporters echoed American PWOC organizer Herbert March's words:

[T]hat there had to be unity of all workers, regardless of race, color, creed, nationality, skill or lack of skill - that only by forgetting our differences could we unite.<sup>35</sup>

The ideals of collective bargaining and a stronger negotiating voice appealed to Canada Packers employees and many joined. In less than one month, over 88 Canada Packers employees had signed up as members of PWOC. Canada Packers workers supported the union drive with such enthusiasm and zeal that Borsk was soon overextended and had to sign members up on Steel Workers cards. Despite inadequate supplies, Canada Packers workers continued to join the union, illustrating that the drive's success was a result of the workers' initiative and desire to improve working conditions, and not solely a result of the national union's efforts.

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<sup>34</sup>Interview Fred Billows by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

<sup>35</sup>Herbert March, Recollections of Herbert March (verbatim transcript of oral interview. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, no date), p.29.



By March 1943, over 562 workers belonged to the local. As this number represented a majority of the plant, steps were taken to formally direct and legitimize the local.<sup>36</sup> At a meeting on 3 March 1943 at Drewry's Hall, the workers of Canada Packers officially received their charter as Local 216 of the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, and elected an executive headed by Jack Shewchuk. Officially organized, the local decided to seek formal recognition from Canada Packers and commence contract negotiations. On behalf of Local 216, Borsk drafted a letter requesting Canada Packers general manager Joseph Harris, "to meet a committee of your employees and a representative of the Union for the purpose of arriving at a mutual agreement regarding wages, hours, working conditions, etc."<sup>37</sup>

The day following delivery of the letter, Borsk received the company's reply. N.T. Sinclair, Canada Packers' office manager, stated that Harris had left for a vacation and that a definite answer would have to wait until his return on 29 March 1943.<sup>38</sup> Sensing a stalling technique, the local insisted that recognition be given or else action would be taken.

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<sup>36</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, "Report of Board in Dispute Between Canada Packers, Limited, St. Boniface, Manitoba and its Employees", p.5 in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, box 171.

<sup>37</sup>Adam Borsk to Joseph Harris, 3 March 1943, in United Food and Commercial Workers, box 141.

<sup>38</sup>N.T. Sinclair to Borsk, 4 March 1943, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 141.

Sinclair then communicated with Canada Packers' head office in Toronto, and informed Borsk that the Winnipeg plant was not going to recognize the union, that all personal dealings with Borsk were to end, and that all future negotiations were to be conducted through the plant relations committee.<sup>39</sup> As a result of Canada Packers' belligerent actions, the executive of the Local 216 called a general assembly on 16 March 1943. At the meeting, the local decided to apply to the Department of Labour for a Board of Investigation and Conciliation to investigate the matter.

On 29 March 1943, while awaiting a decision from the Department of Labour, an incident over plant cleanliness proved to be a crucial event in labour relations in the Winnipeg meat packing industry. Having returned from vacation, General Manager Joseph Harris and his elder brother, a company vice-president, undertook an early morning inspection of the plant. During their tour, Joseph Harris noticed in the sausage kitchen a pile of several empty cartons. Embarrassed by the mess in front of his elder brother, Harris instructed the foreman, Reg Hazel, to do something about it. Hazel found that an assistant sausage

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<sup>39</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, "Report of the Board in Dispute Between Canada Packers, Limited St. Boniface, Manitoba and its Employees", p.7 in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 171. The plant relations committee was the principle instrument of Canada Packers' company union. Although sometimes able to smooth daily operations, the committee had no real power and its decisions were subject to the company's veto.

maker, Angus Ross, had placed the cartons there, and suspended him on the spot for two weeks without pay for "poor workmanship".<sup>40</sup>

Ross, who was a union member as well as a member of the plant relations committee, felt unjustly punished and protested the suspension. He went to see plant superintendent Daniel Clements, but was refused a hearing. Frustrated, Ross then turned to the union for support - a sign to other workers of both the ineffectiveness of the plant relations committee and of the direct growing status of the local in plant operations. Angus Ross sought out Maurice Yeo in the canning department, who, as a union member and organizer represented the closest thing to a union representative available. After hearing the details, Yeo told Ross to wait in the dressing room until lunchtime, at which point Yeo would go to Borsk.

Yeo explained the situation to Borsk, who then asked Yeo three questions. First, was Ross popular? Secondly, did Yeo feel the union had enough membership signed up to support any strike action? Finally, Borsk asked Yeo did he think the "time was ripe?" Yeo answered that Ross was popular, the local held over 50 per cent of the workers, and that they could soon find out if the time was indeed "ripe".<sup>41</sup> Borsk told Yeo to return to Canada Packers and spread the word that if Borsk, acting on behalf of the union, could not resolve

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<sup>40</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 31 March 1943.

<sup>41</sup>Interview Maurice Yeo by Bryan Dewalt, Winnipeg, 1985.

the matter with management during lunchtime, they should refuse to return to work. Borsk also cautioned workers to put away all unfinished work so they could not be accused of wartime sabotage, and not to leave the plant since that would contravene wartime labour laws against wildcat strikes.<sup>42</sup>

When Adam Borsk presented himself to Canada Packers management as an agent of Local 216, he was refused reception or recognition. As a result, at one o'clock, when workers were due to return from lunch, 592 workers, from all departments of the plant remained in the dressing room despite the yelling of plant superintendent Daniel Clements to go back to their jobs or else vacate the building.

The sitdown strike gained support from every department of Canada Packers, and included 457 (76 per cent) male workers, and 135 (24 per cent) female workers.<sup>43</sup> Such strong support for the local prevented the plant from operating and shut down plant operations for the day. Given the haste of the situation, the overwhelming degree of support among workers was remarkable, especially since most workers had no previous experience with union structures or labour protest. While the suspension of Angus Ross served as a catalyst to the

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<sup>42</sup>Under wartime legislation PC 7307, strikes were only allowed following a thirty-day advance notice and a federally-supervised strike vote. The so-called "sitdown strike", was therefore a common tactic of the CIO and labour organizations.

<sup>43</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, Preliminary Report 30 March 1943, in Strikes and Lockout Files, T3030, vol.426, no.93.

work stoppage, this clear act of worker solidarity must be seen as a climactic response to years of mistreatment from management, and a testament of faith of the workers' faith in both collective action and the local.

The same day Adam Borsk issued a statement to the Winnipeg media explaining the work stoppage. Borsk explained that the action was "a spontaneous walkout in demonstration against the company's refusal to take action on longstanding grievances at the plant."<sup>44</sup> The sitdown strike also received coverage from the union newspaper, The Packinghouse Worker, which reported how, "these timid, browbeaten souls had rebelled...[against] the meat baron".<sup>45</sup>

With the matter still unresolved, the members of Local 216 held a meeting at the One Big Union hall to decide upon a course of action. The Local resolved to resume work the next day subject to four conditions. In addition to the reinstatement of Ross and the compensation of all employees for loss of time, the local insisted upon the establishment of an adequate arbitration board dispose of grievances - not the plant relations committee - and the immediate commencement of negotiations in regard to a vote for union recognition.<sup>46</sup> The meeting concluded with the local executive instructing Borsk

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<sup>44</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 29 March 1943.

<sup>45</sup>The Packinghouse Worker, 23 April 1943.

<sup>46</sup>"Submission of Local 216, UPWA to Board of Conciliation and Investigation re. Canada Packers Limited, 1 May 1943", in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

to contact Joseph Harris and arrange a meeting between management and the union officials to discuss union recognition and a variety of employee grievances. The adoption of return to work conditions marked the first instance of concrete dealings between the local and Canada Packers, and illustrated the democratic and peaceful direction in which Winnipeg packinghouse workers chose to pursue union recognition and collective bargaining.

The following day, although their conditions remained unchanged, work resumed. Determined to defeat the union, Harris belligerently claimed that such a conference was unnecessary and pointless.<sup>47</sup> Instead, management sought to defuse the potentially volatile situation through a closed meeting between plant superintendent Daniel Clements and Angus Ross.

Following the meeting, Clements posted a statement throughout the plant in which he claimed that Ross admitted wrongdoing and his suspension was reduced to only half a day. Clements clarified that Ross' suspension occurred due to poor workmanship, and that Ross had not appeared for an appointment with him to discuss the grievance. The statement concluded that:

[T]he method used on Monday was contrary to the whole operation of collective bargaining and your plant relations committee exists for this very thing. In addition to being a violation of our relations it was also a clearly illegal act.<sup>48</sup>

Faced with this one-sided view, Ross and the local offered a very different interpretation of the meeting with Clements, and claimed that Clements had intimidated Ross into admitting

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<sup>47</sup>"Submission of Local 216", p.4, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>48</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 31 March 1943.

guilt.<sup>49</sup> To this end, Ross personally issued a signed statement which explained that he made six attempts to contact Clements, and that:

I admitted the only reason I was wrong was because I had no empty truck to put the cartons in as I emptied them. If I had a truck there would have been no question of any wrong. I said I had done my work to the best of my ability...I feel that I was not wrong and should not be penalized.<sup>50</sup>

The union was not prepared to let the matter drop. It pursued the issue with the Department of Labour and won an investigation into the incident. Amid renewed charges of union intimidation, on 2 April 1943 the federal government appointed industrial relations officer Harris S. Johnstone to explore the matter.<sup>51</sup> When Johnstone's efforts proved futile, national officers of the union approached Canada Packers' President J.S. McLean in Toronto to personally discuss the dispute.<sup>52</sup> When this attempt also proved for naught, the union threatened strike action. Faced with the threat of national strike action, on 17 April 1943, Canada Packers agreed with PWOC to submit a joint request for a Board of Conciliation and Investigation to rule of the issue.

In late April, the federal government created a tripartite Board of Investigation and Conciliation consisting of University of Manitoba Commerce professor W.F. Lougheed, G.A. Brown of the Canadian Railway Brotherhood, and Canada Packers counsel E.K Williams. The Board's mandate focused on

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<sup>49</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 1 April 1943.

<sup>50</sup>"Angus Ross' Statement of the Incident", in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>51</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 3 April 1943.

<sup>52</sup>Letter C.H. Millard to Adam Borsk, 9 April 1943, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, p.132.

investigating charges of improper conduct by Canada Packers, central to which was the company's refusal to recognize the union.<sup>53</sup>

On 14 July 1943, following only two meetings - one with Canada Packers representatives and one with Local 216 representatives - the Board presented their findings. With regard to the charges of improper conduct, the Board ruled, "the Company in no way made any attempt to handicap or obstruct the employees in their Union activities".<sup>54</sup> As for the main issue of union recognition, the Board vaguely concluded that " a proper approach be made to the officials of the Company by persons competent to conduct negotiations."<sup>55</sup>

Although the Board recommended that negotiations between Canada Packers and the workers occur, they did not specify whether such negotiations should be held with a plant relations committee or the local. Furthermore, as the Board ruled that no improper conduct by Canada Packers had occurred, it is not surprising that the local rejected the report. On 22 July, a dissatisfied Jack Shewchuk, the President of Local 216 president wrote federal Minister of Labour Humphrey Mitchell that the:

[U]nion cannot accept the findings and recommendations of the Board...[which have] evaded the real issues before it, which were official union recognition and the right of the Union to negotiate through its chosen

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<sup>53</sup>"Submission of Local 216, U.P.W.A. to Board of Conciliation and Investigation re Canada Packers Limited, 26 May 1943", pp.19-20, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>54</sup>"Report of the Board of Conciliation and Investigation re Canada Packers Limited, 9 July 1943", pp.19-20, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 141.

<sup>55</sup>"Report of the Board of Conciliation and Investigation re Canada Packers Limited, 9 July 1943", p.23, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 141.



representatives...[the union] demands official recognition.<sup>56</sup>

Twelve days later, with no response from Mitchell and the company still refusing to negotiate with the union, Shewchuk again wrote Mitchell. Shewchuk wrote that since Canada Packers still refused to negotiate with representatives of Local 216, "We would appreciate the assistance of your department...so that the matter at issue can be disposed of in a mutually satisfactory manner."<sup>57</sup>

Mitchell's response to the volatile situation in one of the largest plants of a crucial wartime industry, was to reappoint Johnstone to investigate the matter. Johnstone, who had proven ineffective earlier in the dispute, was again unable to bring the company and the union to an understanding. Consequently, on 13 August, with no other options available, Jack Shewchuk wrote Mitchell that since the "efforts of Mr. H.S. Johnstone...to induce the Company to recognize our Union and to negotiate with our representative have been abortive". Unsatisfied with the actions of Mitchell and the Department of Labour, the Local officially requested a sanctioned strike vote as soon as possible.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Jack Shewchuk to Humphrey Mitchell, 22 July 1943, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>57</sup>Jack Shewchuk to Humphrey Mitchell, 3 August 1943, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>58</sup>Jack Shewchuk to Humphrey Mitchell, 13 August 1943, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

With a sanctioned strike vote approaching, a confidential letter was written to the Minister of Labour by Winnipeg South Central Member of Parliament, Ralph Maybank.<sup>59</sup> The Member of Parliament for the Canada Packers area, Maybank wrote, "I read the conclusion which the Board arrived at, and, honestly, it sounds pretty foolish...I couldn't help coming to the conclusion that there had been some pretty clever legal footwork done by the company's representative", and that "I got the impression that there was a desire to hold back from giving the Union its rights".<sup>60</sup> Maybank concluded:

It would be a darned serious thing if we had a strike in this industry. Personally, I believe if you did have a strike in this industry...you could very well have a general sympathetic strike in support of the principles. I think the whole thing could be settled very easily if your rep here (Johnstone) were firmly instructed to take a firm hand and bring this matter to an end.<sup>61</sup>

Despite Maybank's personal plea for stronger government action and caution about a potential general strike, the Department of Labour took no action. On 29 September 1943, a federally supervised strike vote occurred at Canada Packers. The vote ballot asked:

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<sup>59</sup>Maybank, a former Winnipeg barrister was the Liberal Member of Parliament for Winnipeg South Central since 1935. His interest in the matter most likely was a result of the Stock Yards area being in his district.

<sup>60</sup>Ralph Maybank to Humphrey Mitchell, 17 September 1943, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>61</sup>Ralph Maybank to Humphrey Mitchell, p.4, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

Are you in favour of going on strike if the Company continues to refuse to meet a committee, all members of which are freely chosen by the Union?<sup>62</sup>

Canada Packers employees overwhelmingly supported strike action. Of the 954 workers who voted, 97 per cent (916) voted in favour of strike action.<sup>63</sup> This overwhelming victory for the union and its pursuits occurred despite attempts by Canada Packers to thwart the process. Acting as counsel for the Local, Manitoba Member of Legislative Assembly Louis St. George Stubbs made five charges of improper conduct against the company on the day of the vote.<sup>64</sup> In a formal letter to Humphrey Mitchell, Stubbs stated that Canada Packers refused to supply the government agent with a list of its employees to ensure that everyone voted. Furthermore, he claimed that the company refused to allow the vote to take place on company property and refused to give employees time off to vote. Finally, Stubbs charged that management tried to prevent the vote by threatening and intimidating the workers. In one

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<sup>62</sup>Local 216, United Packinghouse Workers of America (CIO) and Canada Packers Limited, Statement of Union's Case, Winnipeg, 1943. Personal Collection of Maurice Yeo.

<sup>63</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 30 September 1943.

<sup>64</sup>Louis St. George Stubbs had been a sympathetic working class and labour Winnipeg judge who was removed from the bench in 1929 for prejudicial conduct. Following his removal, he continued to practice law and was elected as a provincial member of legislature from 1936 until 1948. James H. Gray, The Winter Years: The Depression on the Prairies (Toronto: MacMillan, 1966), pp.93-95 and Lewis St. George Stubbs, A Majority of One: The Life and Times of Lewis St. George Stubbs (Winnipeg: Queenston House, 1983), pp.36-45.

instance, a foreman physically barred the exit to prevent female employees from going to vote.<sup>65</sup>

With the path to a strike now firmly entrenched and the local enjoying strong support, the National Executive of the union took a more active role. Perhaps seeking to establish a national relationship with the head office of Canada Packers, the UPWA encouraged negotiations instead of pursuing strike action. Because of this, Stubbs' charges of the illegal acts of the company were not vigorously pursued as the Canadian Director of the union, Fred Dowling, felt it might hinder negotiations with Canada Packers.<sup>66</sup>

Following the National Executive's suggestion, Jack Shewchuk wrote Joseph Harris stating that despite a strike mandate, the local remained "desirous of negotiating with the Company concerning rates of pay, hours of labour and other working conditions with a view to the conclusion of a collective agreement" instead of going on strike.<sup>67</sup> No response was given from either Harris or Canada Packers management.

Several days later, the Winnipeg Tribune reported that the federal Minister of Labour had appointed Mr. Justice

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<sup>65</sup>Louis St. George Stubbs to Humphrey Mitchell, 30 September 1943, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>66</sup>Fred Dowling to Adam Borsk, 1 October 1943, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 141.

<sup>67</sup>Jack Shewchuk to Joseph Harris, 4 October 1943, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 141.

MacPherson as industrial disputes inquiry investigator in order to avoid a strike in the vital wartime industry.<sup>68</sup> The announcement came as a surprise to the local, which was unaware of the appointment.

The Local executive perceived the appointment as an attempt by the government to slow and drag out the entire process to the benefit of the company. In response, several letters to Mitchell were written by Stubbs on behalf of the Local. On 8 October, Stubbs clarified the Local's position when he declared, "this announcement was entirely unexpected and came as a bombshell to the Union", and that in view "of the developments of this dispute over the last six months, its effect, if not its design, is to frustrate the Union and stalify [sic] the Government, in an effort to appease the company."<sup>69</sup> Stubbs added on 9 October, that the only solution to the matter was that the "Union must be granted its legal rights". The same letter closed with the warning that "The Union means business. It will strike."<sup>70</sup>

As it appeared inevitable that a strike would occur in the Winnipeg plant, serious negotiations in Toronto commenced between the National Executive of the union and national officials from Canada Packers. The importance of the Winnipeg

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<sup>68</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 6 October 1943.

<sup>69</sup>Louis St. George Stubbs to Humphrey Mitchell, 8 October 1943, in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

<sup>70</sup>Louis St. George Stubbs to Humphrey Mitchell, 9 October 1943, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

plant to national operations and the war demand encouraged progress in the talks. The Canadian Director of the union, Fred Dowling, wrote Borsk that in "my opinion...a solution acceptable to Local 216 will be arrived at." However, since the matter was a Winnipeg affair, Dowling reassured Borsk that "No action will be agreed to until it has been approved by the local union in Winnipeg."<sup>71</sup>

Several days later, on 11 October, the legal counsel of the union in Toronto announced to the federal Minister of Labour that an agreement had been formally reached with Canada Packers and a strike prevented.<sup>72</sup> The agreement stated that both parties agreed to a vote which would determine whether or not the employees wanted collective bargaining. If a simple majority voted in favour of Local 216, the company would recognize it as sole collective bargaining agent of its workers.

Winnipeg workers sharply criticized the announcement of the agreement reached in Toronto. The apparent victory was not warmly greeted by the membership of Local 216. Instead of relief and gratitude that the union would be recognized - subject to a vote of confidence by the employees - Local 216 officially voiced displeasure at having to submit themselves to a second vote of recognition, sensing that this move was an

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<sup>71</sup>Fred Dowling to Adam Borsk, 4 October 1943, United Food and Commercial Papers, box 141.

<sup>72</sup>Edward Joliffe to Humphrey Mitchell, 11 October 1943, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

unnecessary and backward step. Furthermore, the deal contradicted Dowling's message of 4 October which stated that no action would occur without the Local's consent. From the perspective of the Winnipeg Local, it appeared that a deal had been struck behind their back. The absence of Local 216 representatives in Toronto and the local's relatively new association with the union furthered this sentiment.<sup>73</sup>

The local's sense of betrayal and irritation was expressed in a telegram from St. George Stubbs to Deputy Minister of Labour A. MacNamara, which read:

UNION REPUDIATES DOWLING DEAL WITH MCLEAN - DOWLING AGREED PERSONALLY AND LETTER NO ACTION WITHOUT APPROVAL LOCAL UNION - UNION REFUSES PART IN FARCICAL PROPOSED REPRESENTATION VOTE - GOVERNMENT CONDUCTED STRIKE VOTE DECISIVELY REPRESENTATIVE - UNION FED UP - SITUATION APPROACHES CRISIS - EMPLOYEES' PATIENCE RESTRAINT OVERTAXED - UNION EXPECTS GOVERNMENT TO OBSERVE OWN LAWS AND COMPEL EMPLOYERS AS WELL AS EMPLOYEES TO OBEY THEM.<sup>74</sup>

For Winnipeg workers, the situation appeared to be approaching a crisis point. On 22 October 1943, a special general meeting of the local passed three resolutions, all of which reflected a sense of betrayal and frustration. Most significantly, the Local overwhelmingly passed a resolution that stated:

[T]hat this Union rejects and repudiates the said agreement made by the said parties, in the

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<sup>73</sup>Local 216 member Maurice Yeo recalled that the Local's legal counsel, Louis St. George Stubbs, had vigorously campaigned for the Local to reject the offer. Interview with Maurice Yeo by John Grover, Winnipeg, 1994.

<sup>74</sup>Louis St. George Stubbs to Alan MacNamara, 13 October 1943, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 132.

circumstances aforesaid, and refuses to be bound or obligated thereby in any way whatsoever.<sup>75</sup>

The turmoil brought an immediate response from Toronto and the National Executive of the union. National union representatives Fred Dowling and C.H. Millard arrived in Winnipeg to personally assure the members of Local 216 they had not attempted to strike a private deal, and that a vote of confidence would be a mere detail. As a result of this personal assurance, in a curious turn of events, by 26 October, the executive of Local 216 reversed its position in exchange for a key clause being added to the agreement.

On 26 October, Local 216 initiated a slight change to the national agreement. The principle difference between the two offers was that the second one took for granted that Local 216 as sole collective bargaining agent and references to a possible company union dropped. At the meeting, Dowling assured the members that the national executive had not struck a deal behind the Local's back. Dowling pleaded that the new agreement before them and the presence of national officers in Winnipeg, spoke to their good intentions. These assurances, and the fact that the new agreement did not contest the Local as sole collective bargaining agent, convinced the Local Executive to accept the new proposal.

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<sup>75</sup>"Minutes of General Meeting of Local 216, U.P.W.A., 22 October 1943", in United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, box 141.



These turn of events represented a victory for Local 216. Although a second vote was necessary, the Local forced both the national executive and the company to revise their agreement to the Locals' desires. Following another successful vote of recognition, Local 216 was official recognized by management as the sole collective bargaining agent for Canada Packers workers in Winnipeg. The path towards collective bargaining and union recognition for Winnipeg workers at Canada Packers was complete. The next step for Winnipeg workers was to expand the union into the rest of the Winnipeg meat packing industry and to better working conditions.

**Chapter Five**  
**The Expansion of Unionism**  
**and Winnipeg's Meat Packing Workers, 1944-1947**

Following the successful union "tackle" on the Canada Packers "citadel" and the procurement of union recognition and collective bargaining in 1943, focus and organizational direction shifted to the remainder of Winnipeg's meat packing industry. As early as 1941, national union executives had identified the need for an organizational drive in Winnipeg.

The low wages, harsh and dangerous working conditions, and authoritarian discipline faced by Winnipeg workers made the meat packing industry ripe for union organization.

Following an organizational strategy that had proven successful in the United States, the union targeted industry leader Canada Packers with the expectation that a victory at Canada Packers would clear the path for further organization.<sup>1</sup> The organizational efforts of the national office alone however were not decisive. Ultimately the strong support, dedication and belief in collective bargaining of Winnipeg packinghouse workers realized the successful establishment of unionism in the Winnipeg meat packing industry.

The 1943 organizational victory at Canada Packers represented the first step in union strategy to organize all

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<sup>1</sup>In the United States, the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee launched their first organizational drive in Chicago at Armour. Much like Canada Packers, Armour represented the largest meat packing plant in the city, and was seen as an industry leader by the other meat packing companies.

packinghouse workers in Winnipeg. Following quickly on this success, the union moved to sign up workers in Winnipeg's other plants. Shortly after initial contact with Canada Packers workers, worker-turned-union organizer, Adam Borsk began further organizational activities. Concentrating on the larger industry-leading firms, Borsk initially pursued organization at the plants of Swift Canadian and Burns, the remaining members of the Big Three.

Utilizing a similar strategy to that which had been successfully used at Canada Packers, a nucleus of pro-union packinghouse workers at Swift Canadian and Burns spread the union message to workers. The prospect of improving the wretched working conditions within Winnipeg's meat packing plants combined with the successful example at Canada Packers, encouraged Swift's and Burns' workers to join and support the union.

The union enjoyed success at both plants as workers sought to improve their working conditions. Less than one month following the sit down strike at Canada Packers, packinghouse workers at Winnipeg's second largest meat packing plant held a vote on worker representation. On 22 April 1943, 506 workers - accounting for nearly 95 per cent of the total workforce at Swift Canadian - voted in favour of being represented by the union and established Local 219.<sup>2</sup> Workers at the remaining member of the Big Three also joined the union

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<sup>2</sup>The Packinghouse Worker, 30 April 1943.

and by 30 July 1943, a majority of Burns' workers had joined the union and forced a similar vote on worker representation. Seeking to improve working conditions through collective bargaining, 334 workers, representing nearly 88 per cent of Burns' total workforce voted in favour of union representation and established Local 224.<sup>3</sup>

The successful establishment of locals in the Winnipeg plants of the Big Three represented an extremely significant victory for Winnipeg meat packing workers. The immense size and importance of these three plants can be seen by the fact that in 1943, 65 per cent of employment in the Canadian meat packing industry was found in the Big Three.<sup>4</sup> This point is more significant when one considers the even higher proportion of Big Three workers in Winnipeg. Statistics taken from 1945 revealed that close to 90 per cent of all Winnipeg meat packing workers held employment at Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and Burns.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the remarkable success of unionism in Winnipeg's Big Three plants led to creation of the All-Executive Council in November 1943. Designed as a forum for

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<sup>3</sup>The Packer Worker, 6 August 1943.

<sup>4</sup>George Sayers Bains, The United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers: Its Development, Structure, Collective Bargaining and Future, with particular reference to Canada (University of Manitoba: unpublished MA thesis, 1964), p.76.

<sup>5</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockout Files, T47074, vol.441, number 133.

communication and coordination among the three locals, the Council proved indicative of the growing power among Winnipeg meat packers workers. Among the early goals pursued by the All-Executive Council was each individual local's right to collective bargaining and to expand organization activities into the remainder of Winnipeg's meat packing industry.

Since the Winnipeg plants of Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and Burns belonged to a larger, national structure, their company headquarters dictated their labour relations policies. Consequently, collective bargaining negotiations between the Winnipeg locals of PWOC and the Winnipeg plants of the Big Three in late 1943 and early 1944 occurred exclusively on a local level and on a plant-by-plant basis. Despite this, in their first experience at collective bargaining in Winnipeg, the three locals were able to secure several improvements in working conditions, while at the same time assuring recognition for the union.

Although contract negotiations among the three locals occurred independently of one another, three significant clauses appeared in all collective agreements with the Big Three. First, to prevent workers from withdrawing support for the local, a maintenance of union membership clause was incorporated in all contacts. This provision stated that no worker need join the union as a condition of employment, but that all workers who voluntarily joined must maintain their membership during the agreement as a condition of continued

employment. Second, a checkoff clause was incorporated in order to secure and ease the collection of union membership fees. Under the checkoff clause, the employer was authorized to deduct union dues and transmit these funds directly to the union. Finally, all workers of the Big Three received an additional premium of five cents for night work.

As a result of the first collective bargaining experience, and owing to the effect of wartime inflation, workers in all three Winnipeg plants received increases in night pay. Dangerous working conditions, long hours and discrimination were not explicitly addressed or improved by the first contracts. Although this exclusion may have been due to naivete in bargaining, the presence of wartime inflation and a need for increased real wages and union security can not be underestimated. Consequently, the fact that all locals insisted upon maintenance of membership and checkoff clauses, suggests that such union-strengthening conditions and economic securities were of paramount importance.

The most pressing organizing work in the Winnipeg meat packing industry also was finished with the completion of organizing Winnipeg's Big Three workers. Consequently, the union expanded its organizational scope to smaller plants and related industries. Subsequent drives were eased by the passage of Order-in-Council PC 1003 in 1944. PC 1003 guaranteed automatic legal recognition of a union following a

government-supervised vote, the eventual success of unionism in the Winnipeg meat packing industry was primarily a result of the influence of the Big Three.<sup>6</sup> As the consolidation of industry power lay with the companies of Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and Burns, the Big Three controlled policies and practices within the industry. Therefore, once union recognition and collective bargaining had been accepted by the Big Three, subsequent union organization and bargaining among Winnipeg's smaller firms occurred without dispute.

In late 1943 and 1944, the union launched organizational drives in smaller meat packing plants across the city and province, and in related industries. Within one year of the organizational victories at the Big Three, and with no resistance from employers, packinghouse workers at Western Packing, St. Boniface Abattoir and the Public Abattoir had organized. As these plants were significantly smaller than those of the Big Three, their memberships combined to form Local 228 in 1944.<sup>7</sup> Later the same year, the success of the union in Winnipeg allowed Borsk to visit Brandon. Again in

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<sup>6</sup>For information on the implications of the passage of PC 1003, see: Stuart Marshall Jamieson, Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-1966 (Ottawa: Task Force on Labour Relations, 1968).

<sup>7</sup>Data taken from 1945 revealed that Local 228 had 203 members, with the following breakdown: St. Boniface Abattoir - 25 members; Public Abattoir - 28 members; Western Packing - 150 members. Canada, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockout Files, T4074, v.441, no.133.

Brandon, packinghouse workers realized the benefits of collective bargaining and organized as Local 255.

Due to the closely related nature of cold storage plants with packinghouses, workers in Winnipeg's two cold storage plants joined the union. With the evidence of the benefits of collective bargaining before them, Adam Borsk and local organizers signed up the majority of Winnipeg cold storage workers so that by the end of 1944, workers at Manitoba Cold Storage and North Star Cold Storage had organized as Local 235.

By the end of World War II, the vast majority of packinghouse workers in Manitoba were organized. This remarkable figure is even more astounding since only four years earlier, there were neither organized workers in the province, nor organizing bodies. The growth and success experienced by Winnipeg packinghouse workers were part of a trend throughout both Canada and the United States. By the end of 1943, packinghouse workers had won recognition and agreements in meat packing plants across Canada, and the number of UPWA locals in Canada increased from 21 in 1943, to 35 by the end of 1944.<sup>8</sup> The expansion and success of the union also led to the replacement of the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee with a new, independent union - the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA).

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<sup>8</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, Labour Organization in Canada (Ottawa: Queen's Printer).



Although PWOC had enjoyed immense success in organizing packinghouse workers in Canada and the United States, the body was technically only an organizing committee of the Committee of Industrial Organization (CIO). As an organizing committee, the CIO administered and governed PWOC, rather than by union-elected officers and policies. Therefore, because of the growth and success of industrial unionism in the meat packing industry, on 16 October 1943, PWOC dissolved and the United Packinghouse Workers of America, a fully autonomous union affiliated with the CIO, emerged in its place.<sup>9</sup>

The newly formed UPWA explicitly defined its area of organization as:

[A]ll workers employed in connection with the handling and slaughtering of livestock, the processing and distribution of meats and by-products, and kindred industries.<sup>10</sup>

Although clearly a significant administrative change which allowed the union more autonomy, very little, if anything, changed from Winnipeg workers' perspective, the Winnipeg locals remained part of the relatively autonomous Canadian district and retained all of their administrative personnel. The one area in which the new union affected the lives of Winnipeg workers was through the goals of the newly-formed UPWA, which immediately sought to expand collective bargaining to the national level.

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<sup>9</sup>For more on the dissolution of PWOC, see: Walter Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>10</sup>"International Constitution of the United Packinghouse Workers of America". In Canadian Food and Allied Workers Papers, National Archives of Canada, volume 52.

As in Winnipeg, the success of unionism in the meat packing industry throughout Canada and the United States during the War was breathtaking. By the end of the war in 1945 the UPWA counted 275 locals and almost 110,000 members in both Canada and the United States.<sup>11</sup> Although these figures represented great achievement, nationally-based meat packing companies in both Canada and the United States still refused to negotiate with the union on a national level, preferring to have their companies negotiate locally. The newly-formed UPWA recognized this as a weakness of the union, since working conditions for packinghouse workers would not improve significantly until the nationally-based meat packing companies could be forced to negotiate a collective agreement on a national level.

Negotiations for collective agreements in 1944 between the union and Canadian meat packing companies were influenced by a changed government attitude concerning labour relations. Faced with fears of post-War unemployment, the federal government's passage of PC 1003 in early 1944 marked a new era of labour relations. In addition to guaranteeing the legal right to organize and implementing a procedure to ensure union recognition, PC 1003 denied the right to strike during the life of a contract, and obligated unions and management to bargain in good faith. Finally, for certain industries deemed essential (those listed in Schedule A), PC 1003 banned all strikes and lockouts until after federal investigation.<sup>12</sup> The effect of PC 1003 was to create an atmosphere of labour relations that eased the struggle to gain union recognition

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<sup>11</sup>Canada, Labour Organization in Canada, 1945.

<sup>12</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, 1944, volume 44, pp.135-143. Section 92 of the Constitution Act, 1867 gave power over labour matters to the provinces, therefore, with the war emergency nearly over labour relations in all industries except those listed in Schedule A returned to provincial jurisdiction.

and therefore allowed the union to concentrate on the pursuit of national negotiations, rather than fight for company recognition plant by plant.

Although greatly benefitted by PC 1003, the meat packing industry's exclusion from Schedule A meant that disputes in the industry were not automatically given investigation from the Department of Labour. This exclusion prompted the UPWA's Canadian Directory of the UPWA, Fred Dowling, to ask the Minister of Labour whether the meat packing industry's omission was an "oversight" or a "mistake".<sup>13</sup> When the Department of Labour responded that the exclusion was not a mistake, the government sent an implicit message stating that meat packing was not considered an essential industry.<sup>14</sup> The government's action, however, also eased the way for the meat packing industry to pursue strike action.

With the passage of PC 1003, the issue of company recognition disappeared as a major concern. With legislation now in place which provided specific methods of gaining company recognition, the 1944 annual convention of the UPWA decided to pursue national negotiations and a master agreement with the Big Three.<sup>15</sup> Advocates of this position argued that

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<sup>13</sup>Letter of Fred Dowling to Humphrey Mitchell, 2 March 1944, Canadian Food and Allied Workers Papers, National Archives, Ottawa.

<sup>14</sup>Letter Paul Martin to Fred Dowling, 3 March 1944, Canadian Food and Allied Workers Papers, National Archives, Ottawa. Although not included in Schedule A, the subsequent three years of labour relations in the meat packing industry were characterized by a strong interventionist role by the federal government, thus proving in the end, the exclusion mattered little.

<sup>15</sup>Although largely autonomous, the Canadian delegation's decision to pursue national negotiations was influenced by similar actions in the United States, where national negotiations had first been implemented with Armour in 1941. 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 University:

the national structure of the meat packing industry demanded that if the union was to establish itself as a strong negotiator to improve the working conditions of its members and to obtain universal benefits for workers, it would have to be achieved on a national level. The union claimed that local negotiations were time consuming and ineffective since they did not allow the union to match the strength of the companies.

In the summer of 1944, UPWA launched its first attempt to conduct national negotiations and win a single, master agreement for the entire industry. The process began with preliminary contract negotiations with the head offices of the Big Three in the summer of 1944. These talks ended abruptly, however, when representatives of the Big Three claimed that a master agreement was impractical, thereby stalling negotiations. By September 1944, with the previous year's contracts expiring and no progress in sight, the Director of the Canadian UPWA requested federal intervention in the matter.<sup>16</sup>

Since the meat packing industry was not listed in Schedule A, the federal government informed the union that they could not intervene without a joint application. As the companies were not prepared to comply with such an application, the union became faced with a serious challenge to its position and achievements. On 5 October 1944, Dowling notified the Department of Labour and the Big Three that if contract talks remained stalled, strike votes would be held across Canada, including Winnipeg.

By 1944, the UPWA held 35 locals in Canada with 6,716 members.<sup>17</sup> With such significant numbers, the lucrative

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unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 1960), p.96.

<sup>16</sup>Craig, p.99.

<sup>17</sup>Canada, Labour Organization in Canada, 1945.

Canadian meat packing industry was vulnerable to a national strike. The threat of a strike had its desired effect and officials of the Big Three quickly met with union representatives. As a result of the meeting, a joint application requesting a special investigator emerged and a national strike avoided. On 15 October 1944, S.E. Richards of the Manitoba Court of Appeal was selected by both union and company representatives as Industrial Disputes Inquiry Commissioner for the matter.<sup>18</sup>

Richards held joint meetings in Toronto, between the national officers of the UPWA and representatives from Canada Packers, Swift Canadian and Burns which concluded with an agreement. However, since the meat packing industry was not included Schedule A, Richards was not allowed to adjudicate the issue of a master agreement, wages or hours. Rather, the 3 November 1944 agreement, known as the "Richards Report", dealt with the relationship between the union and the companies. The Richards Report outlined a joint commitment by the union and the companies to settle all future disputes through negotiations, conciliations or through an established grievance procedure. While the Richards Report stipulated that all future contracts were to include a maintenance of membership clause, it failed to promote national negotiations or a master agreement, instead stating that all collective agreements were to be negotiated and concluded on a local level.<sup>19</sup>

The 1944 contract negotiations represented the first national negotiations between Canadian meat packing companies and organized labour. Despite this, the union received

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<sup>18</sup>Order-in-Council PC 4020 was passed on 6 June 1941, and provided for the appointment of an Industrial Disputes Inquiry Commission to investigate industrial disputes as well as charges of discrimination or intimidation.

<sup>19</sup>Labour Gazette, vol.44 1944, pp.1484-1486.

criticism from its members for having acted with a purely national interest in mind. From the perspective of packinghouse workers, the Richards Report offered very little. Winnipeg workers feared that the union concluded the deal without their consultation and that the agreement would severely curb their option to pursue strike action. As a result, following the release of the Richards Report, the president of Edmonton Local 243 resigned in protest and the president of Moncton Local 244 threatened to resign.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps because of the controversy surrounding the Richards Report, the national office of the UPWA used an incident at Canada Packers' Toronto as an illustration of the union's independence and militancy immediately before contract negotiations in 1945. The conflict in Toronto arose on 17 July 1945 when Canada Packers employee John Reid refused to stop work at quitting time. Since this act violated union unity, the local expelled Reid and called on management to release Reid for failure to comply with the maintenance of membership clause. Canada Packers' refusal to dismiss Reid, led the local to charge that the company violated the Richards Report's maintenance of membership clause.

When Canada Packers' 1944 collective agreement with the Toronto local expired in June, the local felt unrestricted by anti-strike legislation, and conducted a strike vote. Toronto workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action and the national office of the UPWA decided to use this matter as a show of union militancy and seriousness. Consequently, the national office authorized sympathy strike votes at the Canada

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<sup>20</sup>Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry, p.160. There was no such similar protest recorded on behalf of the Winnipeg locals.

Packers plants in Edmonton, Vancouver, Peterborough and Winnipeg.<sup>21</sup>

On 26 July 1945, workers at Canada Packers' plant in St. Boniface voted overwhelmingly in favour of sympathy strike action, and the next day plant operations ceased with 1,346 Winnipeg Canada Packers workers on strike.<sup>22</sup> The same evening, the Manitoba All-Executive Board of the UPWA unanimously passed a motion from the national office of the UPWA to support the Toronto strikers through a sympathy strike involving all Winnipeg locals.<sup>23</sup> With the motion passed, on Monday 30 July a sympathy strike vote among the members of Winnipeg Locals 119, 224, 228, and 235 occurred. Winnipeg workers at all locals voted in favour of a sympathy strike, with the Swift and Burns' locals unanimously voting in favour of strike action.<sup>24</sup>

On 2 August, 1,943 Winnipeg meat packing and cold storage workers joined 1,346 Canada Packers workers in a sympathy strike, for a total of 3,289 Winnipeg workers.<sup>25</sup> The result of this action was that Winnipeg's meat packing industry

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<sup>21</sup>For more information on the July 1945 strike in Toronto, see: Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry, and Canada, Strikes and Lockout Files.

<sup>22</sup>"Report of the RCMP 'D' Division", in Canada, Strikes and Lockout Files, T4073, vol.441, No.123.

<sup>23</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 28 July 1945.

<sup>24</sup>Local 219 Minutes, 30 July 1945, United Food and Commercial Workers Papers, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

<sup>25</sup>A breakdown of all Winnipeg workers on sympathy strike revealed: Canada Packers - 1,346 workers; Burns - 900 workers; Swift Canadian - 757 workers; Western Packing - 150 workers; Farmers Abattoir - 33 workers; Public Abattoir - 28 workers; St. Boniface Abattoir - 25 workers; and Manitoba Cold Storage - 50 workers. Winnipeg Tribune, 2 August 1945.

completely shut down for the first time in its history.<sup>26</sup> The strike grew in power when Winnipeg construction and street railway workers refused to cross the picket lines.<sup>27</sup> When told of the situation in Winnipeg, an elated Fred Dowling concluded, "if [all] the [Winnipeg] plants go out, the situation will be pretty close to a general strike in the meat packing industry!"<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, however, the situation defused itself. The same day that the Winnipeg meat packing industry shut down, an agreement was reached in Toronto and work resumed in Toronto and Winnipeg the next day. For Winnipeg packinghouse workers, the one-day strike, although brief, demonstrated an incredible display of militancy and support for union beliefs. Sympathy strike action occurred by workers at Canada Packers plants in Edmonton, Peterborough and Vancouver, but the overwhelming support from Winnipeg packinghouse and cold storage workers was unmatched and unprecedented, and proved their trust and faith in collective action and the national office.

Shortly after the Reid strike, the UPWA began contract negotiations with Burns. The union demanded a master agreement, with a 30 per cent general wage increase and a 40-hour work week. When Burns refused the principle of a master agreement, the UPWA announced that a national strike vote would take place among all Burns employees.<sup>29</sup> Since the

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<sup>26</sup>While workers at Canada Packers were without contract, workers at Swift's, Burns and many smaller Winnipeg firms were still under contract, and therefore violating the 1944 Richards agreement. This prompted Elliot Wilson, chairman of the Manitoba Wartime Relations Board, to declare that "the tactics of the union...are absolutely wrong". Winnipeg Free Press, 2 August 1945.

<sup>27</sup>The Packinghouse Worker, 31 August 1945.

<sup>28</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 2 August 1945.

<sup>29</sup>Canada, Labour Gazette, November 1945, vol.45, p.1673.



militancy of the UPWA had been recently displayed with the Reid strike, and with approximately 10,000 workers on strike at the Ford Motor Company in Windsor, and 7,500 miners on strike in Sydney, the federal government intervened.<sup>30</sup>

Instead of appointing an investigator, Ottawa seized control of Burns plants in Prince Albert, Regina, Edmonton and Winnipeg and appointed J.G. Taggart, of the national Meat Board, as controller. The federal government's rationale in these actions was, "to prevent...any interruption of meat shipments to Britain and other European countries".<sup>31</sup> This action quickly prompted strike votes in 13 Canada Packers and Swift Canadian plants across Canada. It appeared that a nationwide strike of Big Three workers in 1945 was inevitable.

The union's action prompted the federal government to reconsider its options. Upon review, Ottawa again appointed S.E. Richards to resolve the matter. Richards oversaw two weeks of negotiations between the union and the Big Three, and concluded an agreement in Winnipeg on 2 November. While the "Winnipeg Settlement" did not include a master agreement, it included a standard 45-hour week and a 6.6 per cent pay raise for all locals. More importantly for the union, Richards stated that collective agreements did not have to be negotiated on a local level.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the fact that the Winnipeg Settlement gave company-wide contracts, 1945 represented the first national negotiations in which the federal government intervened. Following the brief, but extremely well-supported Reid strike, the unity and militancy of the UPWA had been proven.

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<sup>30</sup>Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry, pp.180-181.

<sup>31</sup>Department of Labour News Release, 12 October 1945, Canadian Labour Congress Papers, National Archives Ottawa.

<sup>32</sup>Canada, Labour Gazette, volume 45, November 1945, pp.1673-1674.

Consequently, when negotiations between with the Big Three and the UPWA proved futile, and government actions appeared hostile, workers throughout Canada pursued strike action. Faced with this turn of events, the federal government intervened in the dispute, despite the fact that jurisdiction in the industry was legally outside their authority. While the settlement did not apply to the entire industry, it did establish the pattern of company-wide bargaining, and reaffirmed the national importance of the union.

The following year, a strong international demand for canned meat kept profits for the Canadian meat packing industry in the black, and in 1946, Canada Packers' St. Boniface plant stayed open for 18 hours a day.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, organizational drives by the union increased and resulted in the expansion of Canadian locals from 45 to 56.<sup>34</sup> With industry profits increasing, the union again pursued a master agreement with the Big Three as well at an average pay increase of 26.6 cents an hour, a guarantee of 40 hours a week, and time and a half for work before or after scheduled hours.<sup>35</sup>

Preliminary negotiations between national officers of the union and the Big Three halted, however, when Swift officials refused to deal with the union on a national level. Since this represented the greatest challenge to the national status of the UPWA and the process of company wide bargaining thus far, international officers of the union threatened Swift Canadian's American parent company. Union officials vowed

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<sup>33</sup>R.C. Bellan, Winnipeg First Century: An Economic History (Winnipeg: Queenston Publishing Company Ltd., 1978), p.229.

<sup>34</sup>Canada, Labour Organizations in Canada, 1945.

<sup>35</sup>Canada, Labour Gazette, vol.46, p.1438.

that unless negotiations reopened, Canadian and American packinghouse workers would strike.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the threat of an international strike, American officials of Swift insisted they could do nothing. With the War over, Ottawa remained idle and again refused to intervene. Consequently, on 1 August 1946, Swift locals in Canada received instruction from the national office of the UPWA to hold strike votes.<sup>37</sup> The same day, UPWA locals in the United States filed notice with the American Department of Labor that they intended to strike in sympathy.<sup>38</sup> When Canadian workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action, on 12 August Swift officials folded and reluctantly agreed to follow the lead of Canada Packers and Burns and negotiate on a company-wide level.

Although the union won a significant moral victory, negotiations with the Big Three again stalemated when Canada Packers and Burns' offered only a five-cents raise. Since this offer represented only one-fifth of the union's demand, negotiations broke down, and the union's national office suggested that strike action occur.<sup>39</sup> Acting on the recommendation of national officers, strike votes were held and passed in plants of Canada Packers and Burns across the

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<sup>36</sup>Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry, p.208.

<sup>37</sup>There is little official information regarding Winnipeg's role in 1946 as there are no union records extant for this year at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, the National Archives of Canada or the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>38</sup>Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry, p.209.

<sup>39</sup>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 University: unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 1960), pp.123-124.

country. With the memory of the 1945 strikes still vivid, Canada Packers and Burns joined the UPWA in requesting for federal intervention. Consequently, on 20 August 1946, for the third time the federal government appointed S.E. Richards to arbitrate the dispute between Canada Packers and the UPWA.<sup>40</sup>

Under Richards' direction, an agreement between the two companies and the union called for a 10-cent an hour raise. During this period, however, negotiations between the union and Swift Canadian again broke down. Although Richards' mandate included Swifts, the company refused third party intervention and jeopardized relations for the entire industry when a strike deadline was established for 4 October. Ironically, as the meat packing industry braced itself for another cross-Canada strike, Swift and the UPWA concluded a last-minute agreement only six hours before the deadline.

While the 1946 contracts did not secure a master agreement for the entire industry, the negotiations saw the union withstand company threats and secured federal intervention for the third time. Finally, the pattern of company-wide bargaining initiated the previous year continued as did the national status and power of the United Packinghouse Workers.

Beginning in 1944, and increasing every year, national negotiations between the UPWA and the Big Three dominated the union's attention. While this course brought great advancements in working conditions and power to the national office, it occurred at the expense of local autonomy. Incidents between 1946 and 1947, exemplified the union's changing priorities.

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<sup>40</sup>The importance of Richards to national negotiations and the UPWA was so great that when he died in 1950, the UPWA sent one wreath to his funeral and Fred Dowling personally sent another. Canadian Food and Allied Workers Papers, Ottawa, National Archives of Canada.

In Winnipeg during the 1946 national negotiations, 43 beef boners at Canada Packers stopped work from 30 September until 2 October in protest of the change from piece work to an hourly wage. A second work stoppage occurred for five days beginning on 23 October, when 26 unorganized poultry workers at Swift Canadian's poultry plant went on strike to gain union representation and a collective agreement.<sup>41</sup>

While these incidents were not vital to the national success of the UPWA, their treatment by the union showed its priority with a national agenda. During each of these disputes, union support was not offered from other departments, let alone the rest of the city or country. Rather, these incidents demonstrated that as the UPWA grew, it focused on national events rather than small, local disputes which it would have pursued earlier.

A final example of the UPWA's new inclination became evident during a two-day strike of 64 workers at Swift Canadian during January 1947.<sup>42</sup> While the dispute was not relevant to national negotiations, this incident proved equally important as the Toronto negotiations for the 64 workers who stopped work in protest over the transfer of certain jobs. However, instead of organizing a plant, or citywide protest, the union did nothing. Finally, when Winnipeg media asked the union office to comment on the strike, the union was unable to do so, since it was not aware of the stoppage until the second day.<sup>43</sup>

As the UPWA increasingly pursued a national agenda, in 1947 the face of labour relations in Canada again changed as

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<sup>41</sup>For more information on the strikes, see: Strikes and Lockout Files, T40484, vol.451, No.211 and T40489, vol.451, No.206.

<sup>42</sup>For more information on the strike, see: Strikes and Lockout Files, T4804, vol.453, No.6.

<sup>43</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 20 January 1947.

the federal government reverted to its pre-War disposition. With the passage of Order-in-Council PC 302 on 3 January 1947, wage determination was formally returned to the ambit of free collective bargaining, and industries designated as war industries during the War returned to provincial jurisdiction. For the meat packing industry this meant more restriction, as the federal government no longer held the power to intervene in labour disputes. Almost immediately the passage of this act prompted Fred Dowling, the Canadian Directory of the UPWA, to predict that this would lead to a strike in the industry.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the return of labour relations to the jurisdiction of provincial legislation, the UPWA pursued its demands for the 1947 contract in the same manner as first established in 1944. Union delegates had decided to pursue national compulsory check off, a 40-hour week, a wage increase of 15 cents, and an elimination of wage inequalities between and within plants.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, the union did not seek a master agreement during contract negotiations during 1947, as it had realized the impracticality of securing such a goal.

Although the first approach to Big Three negotiations occurred in July, contract talks were not opened until August - well after the expiration of the 1946 agreement. During negotiations, management of Swift Canadian claimed that a deliberate nationwide slowdown was underway and on 26 August 1947, fired 13 workers in Toronto, and suspended the entire staff of their New Westminster plant.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Craig, The Consequences of Provincial Jurisdiction, p.186.

<sup>45</sup>Montague, Trade Unionism in the Canadian Meat Packing Industry, pp.224-225.

<sup>46</sup>United Packinghouse Workers of America, "Swift Canadian Company", p.1 (1947), in United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

As a result of these belligerent actions, negotiations with Swift Canadian broke down, and the UPWA petitioned the federal government for intervention. Following the recent withdrawal of the federal government from labour disputes, however, there existed no structure for Ottawa to resolve these national issues. Faced with the prospect of losing the hard-fought practice of company-wide bargaining, the national office directed all Swift locals to take strike action. Strike votes occurred in Winnipeg and across Canada on 27 August 1947 despite the fact that it violated many provincial grievance procedures. An overwhelming degree of union solidarity and support was demonstrated when 97 per cent of Swift workers nationwide voted to take strike action. The solidarity and support of packinghouse workers was even stronger in Winnipeg, where 98.3 per cent (358 of 364 workers) of Swift's Winnipeg workers voted in favour of strike action.<sup>47</sup> Immediately following the strike votes, workers walked out, and picket lines went up at Swift's plants across the country.

Coinciding with these events, on 8 September 1947, union negotiators rejected offers from Canada Packers and Burns.<sup>48</sup> With no body to arbitrate the matter, the UPWA urged that strike votes occur at all Canada Packers and Burns locals. When workers across the country showed near unanimity in support of strike action, operations at eleven Canada Packers plants and six Burns plants stopped. The addition of striking Canada Packers and Burns workers raised the total number of Winnipeg packinghouse workers to 2,634.<sup>49</sup> By 10 September,

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<sup>47</sup>Canadian Labour Congress Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

<sup>48</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 9 September 1947.

<sup>49</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 9 October 1947.

Canada's first national meat packing strike was underway, and 90 per cent of Canada's meat processing stopped.<sup>50</sup>

With the strike entering its second week, and Ottawa refusing to intervene in the dispute, the Premier of Ontario called a meeting of all provincial labour ministers. When the politicians were unable to agree on a common plan, however, each province pursued its own course of action, while Manitoba allowed the strike to continue.<sup>51</sup>

With separate provincial action intensifying, the strike spread to various independent locals throughout Canada. The solidarity of Winnipeg packinghouse workers became clear on 7 October, when 74 workers from Local 228 at the St. Boniface Abattoir and the Farmers Abattoir joined the striking workers. The next day, another 188 workers from Local 228 at Western Packing and the Public Abattoir Limited also went on strike. The effect of these moves was that as Winnipeg workers of the Big Three entered their one month strike anniversary, all seven of Winnipeg's meat packing plants, and over 2,896 workers, joined them and were now also on strike, completely stopping production in Winnipeg's meat packing industry for the second time in two years.<sup>52</sup>

As the strike continued, the Ontario government again tried to reconcile matters, and on 11 October held a meeting between UPWA officials and Canada Packers and Burns. Despite the absence of Swift Canadian, who refused all third party intervention, the meeting proved successful. The agreement

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<sup>50</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 13 September 1947.

<sup>51</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockout Files, T4088, vol.457, no.161, and T4089, vol.457, no.161. Prince Edward Island seized the Charlottetown plant of Canada Packers, Quebec declared the strike illegal and gave an injunction against picketing and Saskatchewan and Alberta prepared to seize control of their affected meat packing plants.

<sup>52</sup>Winnipeg Tribune, 9 October 1947.



called for a general seven cents an hour wage increase, and sent all other issues to final and binding arbitration once Swift Canadian workers returned or agreed to the plan.

Since officials of Swift Canadian refused to follow the proposition, however, the strike continued. In an effort to resolve the deadlock, the Ontario Minister of Labour personally visited Swift's head office in Chicago. Despite meeting with Swift's American president, the mission failed with the parent company claiming they could do nothing.<sup>53</sup>

With mounting pressure to reach an agreement and the strike approaching its fifth week, on 18 October 1947 an agreement was finally reached between the UPWA and Swift officials. Agreeing to the union's demands, the proposal recognized company-wide bargaining and called for a general 10-cent increase and incorporation of the company's sick and accident plan into the collective agreement.<sup>54</sup> Once Swift workers consented to the proposal, work resumed in Winnipeg and across the country on 21 October 1947.

The same day, union officials officially accepted the Ontario government's proposal for Canada Packers and Burns and workers returned. Fifty-seven days after it started, Canada's largest meat packing strike was over. The final arbitration between Canada Packers, Burns and the UPWA was released on 29 November 1947 and raised wages to match those at Swift Canadian.<sup>55</sup> While the arbitration did not grant a master agreement, it drew packinghouse workers of the Big Three into uniformity with one another for wages, hours and working

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<sup>53</sup>Craig, p.173.

<sup>54</sup>Additional increases of 2.27% were awarded to St. Boniface and Edmonton, while Moncton workers were given an additional pay increase of 3 cents an hour. Canada, Labour Gazette, December 1947, vol.47, p.1791.

<sup>55</sup>Labour Gazette, December 1947, p.1793.

conditions and reaffirmed the challenged concept of company-wide bargaining despite the absence of the federal government.

The 1947 strike established industry records of 14,150 workers on strike at 47 plants and a loss of 275,000 days, and displayed the UPWA's determination to maintain company-wide bargaining.<sup>56</sup> Following the passage of PC 302, the federal government withdrew its authority to intervene in labour matters, thereby placing the UPWA's hard-fought battle to gain company-wide bargaining in jeopardy. When Swift Canadian directly challenged the concept of company-wide bargaining, the resulting strike fulfilled Fred Dowling's strike prophecy and Canada's longest meat packing strike occurred. While a master agreement was not obtained, the achievement of identical company-wide agreements with the Big Three established a precedent that lasted for the next forty years. The events of 1945, 1946 and 1947 also evidenced the national office of the UPWA's preoccupation with national negotiations, which came at the expense of local autonomy and local interests.

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<sup>56</sup>Labour Gazette, November 1947, vol.47, p.1733.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The meat packing industry in Winnipeg underwent a process of considerable change in the twentieth century. This process of change altered existing structures of work, labour relations and economics for packinghouse workers. As the railway connected Canada from coast to coast, Winnipeg's geographic location, combined with its close proximity to vast grazing lands, encouraged meat packing firms to establish in the city. In the early twentieth century, a strong national and international demand for meat accelerated the growth of the Canadian meat packing industry and led to the modernization of meat packing plants.

Originally the meat packing industry was serviced by small, seasonal operations. In such ventures, one highly skilled individual performed both the slaughter and dressing of meat animals. As the industry grew, it became driven by capitalists seeking greater profits and the expansion of their industry. Gradually, Winnipeg meat packing companies built massive new plants and introduced new methods of production to improve productivity and increase profits. Since the industry

could not be fully mechanized or automated, alternative mass production techniques were introduced.

The slaughtering and dressing of animals became no longer performed by a highly skilled worker. Rather, this operation was broken down into a series of one-cut operations carried out by semi and unskilled labourers. In addition to assembly line techniques, the industry introduced a tightly controlled work environment in which packinghouse workers were constantly pushed to work faster and produce higher output levels under hazardous working conditions.

By the 1930s, the Winnipeg meat packing industry was characterized by harsh working conditions and dangerous work, which was dictated by one's ethnicity and gender. Workers endured seasonal employment at low wages, and worked under dangerous conditions and authoritarian-like discipline. Whereas the industry had once been staffed by skilled craftsmen with a common skill and background, workers were now little more than parts of a large machine. Workers held no skills with which to bargain and remained at the owners' mercy.

As the nature of the industry began to change, so did packinghouse workers' response. When the first steps towards reorganization of work and the deskilling of labour began,

skilled packinghouse workers went on strike to secure their bargaining power and status. The continual changing nature of the industry and failed strikes by skilled workers' craft unions demonstrated the decline of the dominating presence of skilled workers in Winnipeg's meat packing plants.

Faced with horrific working conditions, in 1934 Winnipeg packinghouse workers experimented with industrial unionism. With the realization that modern industry was no longer dominated by skilled workers, industrial unionism sought the organization of all workers regardless of skill. Through organizational action directed by the Communist Party of Canada's Food Workers Industrial Union, Winnipeg workers at Western Packing sought to improve their lot through collective bargaining.

When Western Packing refused to recognize the movement or its leaders, a long, violent strike ensued. Although hostile opposition from both the company and the City of Winnipeg forced the strikers to return to work unorganized, the experience proved valuable for Winnipeg meat packing workers. The 1934 Strike introduced a generation of Winnipeg packinghouse workers to the power of industrial unionism, and demonstrated, both directly and indirectly, the benefits of collective action. Furthermore, the experience also provided

a link to the successful events of 1943 through personnel and the Communist Party.

Due to a lack of leadership from organized labour and political direction, the 1934 experiment in industrial unionism fizzled. With no organization to unite Winnipeg workers, working conditions in the industry remained atrocious. At the same time, as a result of a general strengthening throughout North America of the labour movement, unionism grew in popularity.

World War II's increased supply and demand placed Winnipeg packinghouse workers in a position of unparalleled bargaining power. With full employment and an accommodating relationship with the state, organized labour flourished. The Winnipeg appearance of the industrially-based Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee in 1943, combined with wartime conditions to present an opportunity for Winnipeg workers to secure unionism and collective bargaining.

Spurred by a will to improve the conditions under which they toiled, workers at Winnipeg's largest meat packing plant organized a local and pursued union recognition and collective bargaining. When management at Canada Packers refused to recognize the union, a spontaneous plant-wide sit down strike showed the support workers held for the union. The support

and enthusiasm by Winnipeg workers, combined with changed local conditions and wartime economics and politics, to see Canada Packers workers secure union organization and collective bargaining.

The workers' victory at Canada Packers in turn influenced other Winnipeg packinghouse workers to support organizational drives and helped facilitate company recognition. By the end of 1944, the majority of Winnipeg packinghouse workers had organized with the union and won recognition and secured collective agreements.

Similar growth and consolidation were also experienced in this period throughout Canada and the United States. This remarkable success factored in the creation of a new, independent packinghouse union - the United Packinghouse Workers of America. Often using strike action, or the threat of strike action, the new nationally-minded union was able to secure federal intervention in national labour disputes between the union and the national companies, and eventually secured company-wide bargaining.

While the achievement of national negotiations and the growth of the union on a national level often came at the expense of local interests, and workplace accidents and injuries remained high, the achievement of union recognition

in Winnipeg's meat packing industry was of great significance to Winnipeg meat packing workers. The benefits obtained by Winnipeg workers through collective bargaining are best presented in a comparison of working conditions prior to union organization, and after.

Prior to union organization, in 1934 Winnipeg workers at the Western Packing plant typically worked 55 hours a week, without job security, overtime, breaks, vacations, or seniority. Workers had no elected representatives or body to voice grievances through, and were discriminated on terms of gender and race, often by authoritarian foremen. In contrast, following the achievement and success of industrial unionism and collective bargaining, by 1947, Winnipeg packinghouse workers worked a minimum of 37.5 hours of work a week and were paid overtime pay after 44 hours of work. Winnipeg packinghouse workers held contractually guaranteed plant-wide seniority, sick pay, rest periods, and eight paid statutory holidays throughout the year. Finally, a comparison of wage rates in Canadian packinghouses reveals packinghouse workers in 1947 were paid close to 70% more than workers in 1939.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. Canada, Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, vol. 47, p.1850.



While this thesis has attempted to demonstrate the changing nature of work in Winnipeg's meat packing industry in the 1930s and 1940s and how packinghouse workers responded to it, there remains more research to be done in this field. To draw overall conclusions about the Winnipeg meat packing worker in the twentieth century, attention needs to be devoted to an overall, complete history of the meat packing industry and its workers from the industry's birth in the late nineteenth century, until the closure of the Winnipeg stockyards in the late 1980s.

This thesis examined a crucial period in the consolidation and growth of unionism in the Winnipeg meat packing history, however, it was limited to a brief span of twenty some years. Since Winnipeg's meat packing history includes much both before and after this era, what is needed is a total history of the Winnipeg meat packing worker. In this sense, future works on Winnipeg meat packing workers would be able to delve more fully into the neglected field of the workers' social and cultural history, as well as their response to the changing nature of the industry in the mid-twentieth century. The net effect of such a work, would provide future generations with a much needed documentary of

Winnipeg's meat packing workers and one branch of Winnipeg's  
working class.

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