

**Labour Goes to War**  
The CIO and the Construction of a New  
Social Order, 1939-45

*Wendy Cuthbertson*



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## Introduction

ON THE EVE OF the Second World War, a group of senior Canadian business executives travelled to Britain on a trade mission. Their assurances to the British government that Canadian industry could supply the United Kingdom with the weapons it needed in the war looming with Germany were well publicized back home.<sup>1</sup> These promises drew a sharp retort from Silby Barrett, then the head of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in Canada. Barrett said business was in no position to make such guarantees because it had not factored in the power of CIO union members to disrupt industrial production.<sup>2</sup>

It was sheer bluster. CIO unions in Canada represented a few thousand coal miners in Nova Scotia, an even fewer thousand Ontario auto workers, and a handful of workers in a miscellany of plants, mostly in Ontario. In these scattered workplaces, furthermore, the CIO's foothold was tenuous. In 1939, the Canadian CIO could no more interrupt war production to any significant degree than it could fly to the moon.

The CIO had come to Canada just four years before war broke out. It was an American import, founded in 1935 as a breakaway from the craft-dominated American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL had shown little interest in organizing workers in new mass-production industries, such as steel, auto, electrical appliance, and textile manufacturing, which employed thousands of unskilled workers who toiled long hours for low wages in sprawling factories where they were regarded as just another commodity that kept an assembly line going. The CIO set up industry-specific organizing committees across the United States and, by 1937, had organized hundreds of thousands of workers in hundreds of factories. The CIO's stunning American success deeply impressed Canadian workers. And so Canadian organizers, with little or no assistance from the American CIO, began to organize Canadian workers under the CIO banner. The CIO phenomenon, in the words of a contemporary Canadian labour leader, simply "jumped the border." The CIO's first Canadian success was the United Auto Workers' (UAW) organizing Kelsey-Hayes, an auto parts plant in Windsor, Ontario, in 1935. CIO organizing then followed in other industries and communities in Canada, including the massive General Motors complex in Oshawa, Ontario, in 1937.

Then the CIO's momentum, after this promising start, sputtered to a virtual halt. But the war changed all that. Trade union membership doubled in Canada, from 358,967 in 1939 to 724,188 in 1944, with the CIO's growth accounting for the lion's share of that increase. Its numbers rose from a few thousand members in 1939 to more than 300,000 by war's end.<sup>3</sup> Labour militancy rose right along with the CIO's numbers. In 1939, there were 120 strikes in Canada; in 1943, there were 401.<sup>4</sup> The CIO's growing strength in the workplace and on picket lines extended to the political realm. The CIO sought labour legislation guaranteeing collective bargaining rights, and, by 1943, all three major political parties had pledged to bring it in. In the Ontario election of that year, the Conservative Party only narrowly edged out the newly ascendant – and CIO-backed – Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), winning thirty-seven seats to the CCF's thirty-four. Nineteen of the new MPPs were unionists, and most of them were CIO activists. By the fall of 1943, the CCF stood first in national public opinion polls. Soon after, in February 1944, Ottawa acceded to CIO demands for legislation regulating and easing union recognition. Only Alberta and Prince Edward Island failed to enact the necessary provincial enabling legislation.

The CIO would continue to grow after the Second World War, but its breakthrough in thousands of workplaces, its coming into strength, its most explosive growth, and its first legislative gains occurred during the war. One question that arises is: how did the CIO manage to do this, especially with the obstacles to organizing the war brought to the workplace and with the scant legal protection afforded unions at the time?

On the face of it, the war had the potential of improving CIO fortunes considerably. The Great Depression, in which the economy was still mired in 1939, meant high unemployment, but the war caused unemployment to vanish almost overnight. Labour shortages appeared as early as 1940, and, by 1941, shortages were so severe there was widespread concern they would impede Canada's industrial war effort. For wartime workers, however, these labour shortages meant more workplace power as employers hesitated to fire or otherwise punish hard-to-replace workers for unionizing. While high unemployment erodes workers' power and confidence, labour shortages boost them.

On the other hand, the war created new obstacles to unionizing. The wartime industrial workforce included new kinds of workers, which meant that union organizers had to win over people who were new to unionism or who were from backgrounds traditionally hostile to unions, such as those from rural areas or the middle class. With hundreds of thousands of women entering factories and with ethnic divisions exacerbated by wartime tensions, the wartime workforce was also less homogenous. Organizers, furthermore, had to persuade workers

that unionizing – and with it, the possibility of labour disruption – would neither harm the war effort nor endanger the lives of family and friends serving in the armed forces.

Moreover, the war initially did nothing to strengthen the CIO unions' legal position but, rather, arguably weakened it as government collaborated with employers in an energetic drive to maintain war production at all costs. This project enjoyed some success as Canadian unions lacked the legal protection the 1935 Wagner Act, part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, gave unions in the United States. Thus CIO unions in Canada, even after prevailing over adamant resistance from employers and succeeding in signing up a majority of workers, had to *retain* workers' loyalty for months, even years, as government boards delayed union recognition processes and allowed employers either to undermine a new union or to ignore it, meaning that newly fledged CIO unions could not defend workers in the workplace or bargain on their behalf. As a result, throughout the war, the CIO's organizing victories were hard won. In fact, many organizing drives failed.

In looking at how the CIO managed to overcome these obstacles and organize hundreds of thousands of workers, *Labour Goes to War* argues that, while economic forces, especially the severe labour shortages during the war, were critically important to the CIO's exponential increase in numbers and influence, cultural forces were at work as well. It shows how workers' patriotism, their bonds of affection and duty to those on active service, their memories of how the wartime service of veterans and workers alike was forgotten following the First World War, and their perspective on what the country owed them after years of sacrifice were also players in the growth of the CIO and in the evolution of its postwar claims for workers and its demands on the state. The nature of the enemy – Nazism in particular – had its own cultural resonance and produced a discourse of rights the CIO used, for example, to address women's equality in the workplace. The CIO thus came into strength – and was shaped – within a complex wartime context in which it was necessary for labour to respond simultaneously to workers' growing militancy as well as to their patriotic (and conservative) desire not to disrupt production during a hard-fought war.<sup>5</sup>

One CIO response to this ambiguity and complexity was a skilful use of the cultural context the war had created, and this strategy contributed much to its wartime success. CIO unions published a blizzard of union leaflets and newspapers, took to the radio waves, bought paid advertising, and organized countless union educational workshops, socials, and recreational gatherings (in addition to an equally countless number of union meetings), thus creating a union world – a union public sphere – in which workers could meet, learn about, discuss, and debate the ideas and issues of the day.<sup>6</sup> The CIO used this union public

sphere as a communications distribution system and, through it, provided workers with a narrative that expanded their notions of their rights and entitlements as well as of the postwar Canada they should expect. And the CIO did this by strategically adapting and deploying the government's own official characterization of the war as the "people's war."

The CIO made the war a central character in its communications, using symbols, motifs, myths, and language that played on what a "people's" war implied for workers, especially focusing on wartime discourses of "democracy" and "human rights." It told workers that they were as much warriors as was any soldier. And it defined victory as more than defeating the nation's enemies: workers' wartime service had earned them a better Canada, the CIO asserted, a place where they would have their citizenship rights honoured in the workplace and where citizenship itself meant that Canada had to become a fairer, more egalitarian society.

But, the CIO cautioned workers, this better world would not be guaranteed unless they unionized. This was because only by acting collectively could they preserve their wartime gains once labour shortages disappeared. If they combined their strength by means of a strong labour movement, the CIO said, workers would have the power to shape a peace that would benefit them, thus avoiding the callousness and repression that characterized workers' fate in the aftermath of the Great War. Together, these cultural means – the CIO's narrative about the war's meaning for workers and the union public sphere that distributed this narrative – helped the Congress overcome wartime obstacles to organizing by convincing thousands of Canadians to join an industrial union and then to stick with it for months, sometimes years, as virtually every employer refused to recognize a new union and, hence, workers' rights to union representation and collective bargaining.

### **Structure of the Book**

*Labour Goes to War* focuses on the CIO's wartime organizing in Ontario, especially southern Ontario, which was the centre of Canadian war industry and which witnessed an intensity of CIO organizing during the war that was unprecedented. In order to demonstrate the importance of the cultural sphere to the CIO's wartime growth, I look closely at just how difficult building strong, stable unions remained for workers during the war. I outline the new, war-related challenges union organizers had to contend with and show that, even in those labour-short years, union organizing was difficult, grinding, and sometimes impossible work. The first three chapters deal with organizing, examining the CIO's strength at war's outbreak, the obstacles wartime union organizers faced,

and the tactics and strategies organizers used to overcome these obstacles. Chapter 1 puts the magnitude of the CIO's wartime growth in context by describing the devastating impact of the Great Depression on the working class, including the CIO's organizational frailty, political fragmentation, and stalled momentum just before the war. It also looks at the founding convention of the Canadian CIO and the CIO's initial, rather tepid, response to the outbreak of war. Chapter 2 analyzes the obstacles to – and the opportunities for – unionization that the war created. It also probes the backgrounds and personalities of key CIO organizers, their motivation and dedication. Chapter 3 examines the complicated, even tortuous, process of union organizing during the war and then analyzes how organizers met the challenge of signing workers up in the absence of legislation guaranteeing union recognition and collective bargaining. It offers evidence that at least partly explains why wartime union leaders lobbied for stronger labour laws and for the mandatory dues check-off, even though they knew both initiatives posed dangers to the independence and militancy of their unions.

The final three chapters turn to the cultural apparatus the CIO built to persuade workers to join a union. Chapter 4, arguing that the CIO had to “unionize as well as organize” workers, details how CIO organizers created “a union world,” or a union public sphere, by assembling a communications infrastructure made up of publications, workshops, dances, sports events, picnics, and union meetings. It describes the CIO's attempts, not always successful, to include in this union world people often previously excluded, such as women and minority-group members. It also examines the CIO's efforts to maintain communications with workers serving in the armed forces.

Chapter 5 analyzes the rhetoric and propaganda the CIO disseminated to workers via this union world. The CIO took mainstream propaganda about the war's being fought for democracy and human rights and adapted it in order to argue for a more democratic workplace, where workers' human rights and citizenship rights would be recognized. CIO propaganda also told workers that, through the collective organization offered by unionization, they would have a voice in reconstruction, in the shaping of postwar Canada. And finally, to deal with workers' fears that unionization would hurt the war effort by impeding production, CIO materials portrayed workers and warriors as partners who were equally committed to victory, reassuring workers that unionization would aid the war effort by stabilizing labour relations and increasing productivity. Chapter 6 is a case study, and it examines an example of the CIO's use of wartime rhetoric to achieve its goals. Focusing on the CIO's campaign for equal pay for women, it demonstrates how the CIO marshalled wartime discourse

about human rights to organize women workers by asserting that equal pay was more than just protection for men's wages and jobs (labour's traditional arguments for equal pay). Equal pay, the CIO told workers who were fighting a war against Nazism, was a fundamental human right.

### **Historical Context and Contributions to the Literature**

In looking at union organizing during the war and the CIO's use of the war's cultural impact, *Labour Goes to War* contributes to a number of fields of historical study, including the literature that examines Canadian labour in the 1940s. This was a pivotal period in labour history, featuring meteoric union growth, waves of militancy, and legislative/bureaucratic innovations that continue to shape today's labour movement.<sup>7</sup> I offer a new picture of the CIO's weakness at the outbreak of war: its meagre resources and membership and its precarious position in the few places it had organized under the CIO banner. I also show how the government's virtual collusion with employers was experienced at the shop-floor level: how it sapped a union's resources, stalled its momentum, and exhausted its activists.<sup>8</sup>

In *Labour Goes to War*, I illuminate the motivation behind the CIO unions' preoccupation with union security – the mandatory dues check-off from workers' pay cheques – which today is required by law in Ontario but which, during the war, was a flash point for labour frustration and industrial conflict. I give a shop-floor perspective on the CIO's wartime campaign for union security, which culminated in the lengthy UAW strike at the Ford Motor Company in Windsor in late 1945, after the war had ended.<sup>9</sup>

I also help fill a gap in academic labour history literature: union organizing. As Bryan Palmer notes, little academic work has been devoted to the day-to-day efforts involved in a union organizing drive.<sup>10</sup> I, however, look at an era of historically significant union organizing – the wartime growth of CIO unions in Canada – and probe the background and skills of wartime union organizers, detailing how they went about persuading workers to join a union and then to stick with it when employers countered with anti-union campaigns. Union organizing is hard and grinding work, burdened with many setbacks and often thankless, but it is the foundation of the labour movement. I provide a highly descriptive account of that gritty, difficult, and daily enterprise, an enterprise that reveals much about the relationship between workers and unions – for organizing is so clandestine, so reliant on mutual trust, so dependent on one-on-one communication, that it is probably the most intimate relationship with workers that union activists can have.

*Labour Goes to War* also contributes to the field of citizenship studies, looking at how CIO unions during the war urged workers to demand a stronger voice

in determining not just conditions in the workplace but also, since their citizenship during the war had meant so much sacrifice, in the affairs of the country. The notion that workers were entitled, as citizens, to greater workplace democracy was a central feature of CIO appeals during the war. The United Steelworkers told the government in a 1942 brief, for example, that unions meant far more to workers than improved wages and working conditions. Using language that the later civil rights movement would make familiar to millions, the Steelworkers said that belonging to a union gave a worker the “feeling that he is being treated as a man, a responsible and intelligent citizen of a democracy, not as a robot.”<sup>11</sup>

According to the CIO, citizenship rights in the workplace would also strengthen workers’ democratic rights outside the workplace because only through organized, collective strength – that is, through belonging to the labour movement – would the working class be admitted to the councils of the nation so that it could participate in decisions that shaped the nation. As labour lawyer J.L. Cohen argued in 1942, the struggle for labour rights was as significant as the struggle for representative government.<sup>12</sup>

By defining citizenship rights as more than occasional visits to a voting booth, labour was claiming new social rights that gave workers claims on government for a decent life. At its first convention in 1939, held shortly after the war broke out, the CIO made only limited demands on the state. By war’s end its list of demands had grown dramatically. As Peter Warrian argues in “Labour Is Not a Commodity,” during the war workers came to believe that their status as citizens of a democracy gave them the right to expect their wartime sacrifice, as citizen-workers, to be acknowledged.<sup>13</sup> One such acknowledgment involved the right to participate in deciding what was meant by “victory.” If it were truly a people’s war, the CIO’s logic went, then postwar Canada should be a better place for the working-class people who had fought, died, and toiled for victory. *Labour Goes to War* adds to the literature about what historian Leonard Kuffert calls the “culture of reconstruction,” a culture that encompassed the hopes, ideas, and excitement accompanying the national preoccupation with making postwar Canada a better place in which to live and work than was prewar Canada. Kuffert describes the national “excitement over reconstruction,” quoting one contemporary commentator who said that Canadians’ “favourite indoor sport” had become postwar planning.<sup>14</sup>

While Kuffert looks at how Canada’s elite cultural critics created their own vision of a new Canada, I examine the CIO discourse about reconstruction, about the hopes and dreams labour had for postwar Canada, a country that would be fairer, more prosperous and more democratic, with workers and their unions respected and heard in the councils of the nation.<sup>15</sup>

Peter McInnis, in his *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943-1950*, tells us that, once the war was over and the labour movement had secured a degree of permanence, union leaders informed workers that labour's only goal was larger pay cheques. As McInnis notes, this change fuelled consumerism, abandoned issues of worker control and class solidarity, and stifled rank-and-file initiative.<sup>16</sup> But, in the CIO's wartime propaganda, idealism coexisted with pragmatism: the CIO promised workers a more democratic workplace and a stronger voice in the country's affairs as often as it promised them larger pay cheques. In *Labour Goes to War*, I show how union activists, writers, and editors used wartime idealism to persuade workers that unions were important enough to fight for, even if that struggle, in defiance of pragmatism, cost workers income as they walked picket lines. And, while labour militancy may have exploded after the war in the mammoth 1945-46 strike wave, workers' determination to build permanent unions was evident during the war as well, and that determination was fuelled by their hopes – and fears – of what postwar Canada would be. Would the working class have a better deal in a reconstructed Canada or would workers and their unions experience renewed repression, as had happened after the Great War?

I argue that the war's cultural impact was ambivalent. In addition to fuelling workers' expectations, it had a conservative influence in that their patriotism cautioned against any militancy that would hurt industrial production.<sup>17</sup> Union leaders, reading public opinion polls that showed four of five Canadians wanting strikes banned during wartime, probably believed that many, and perhaps the majority, of the workers to whom they were appealing were *not* in the minority 20 percent of the population reflected in those polls.<sup>18</sup> They were also keenly aware that public support was essential if labour was to gain some of its legislative objectives. Not surprisingly, therefore, wartime union literature reveals that unions felt it necessary to tell workers that, far from threatening production, unions improved productivity by forcing managers to manage better, more humanely, less arbitrarily, and, above all, in a spirit of cooperation with their workforce. But the conservative influence extended beyond the issue of strikes. Labour said that, in return for behaving "responsibly," it should be given a voice in determining the affairs of the nation; thus, notions of partnership and cooperation dominated CIO discourse about postwar Canada.

*Labour Goes to War* adds to the considerable scholarly work examining the impact of the Second World War on Canadian women, including its long-term effects. It does this by examining the efforts of the labour movement to further women's equality during the war.<sup>19</sup> The majority of historians who have looked at the position of women during the Second World War argue that, far

from transforming forever the status of women, the war accomplished little, if anything, of permanence for women. Ruth Roach Pierson, for example, in her fine history of Canadian women during the war, *They're Still Women After All*, argues that the war's "disquieting reconstruction of womanhood" led to no permanent change in the status of Canadian women.<sup>20</sup> Her opinion is shared by many other Canadian and American historians who have also looked at women's status during the war.<sup>21</sup>

However, Jeffrey Keshen, in *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War*, argues that the war changed society's perception of women and energized the long-term drive for workplace equality.<sup>22</sup> I support the view that the war did have some positive, demonstrable outcomes for women, and I argue that the CIO's wartime advocacy of equal pay is one provenance of Ontario's 1951 legislation that mandated equal pay for women.

CIO activists had no choice but to appeal to women workers during the war simply because women made up a sizeable portion of Canada's wartime industrial workforce. Seizing the opportunity offered by the CIO's professed philosophy of full sexual and racial equality, CIO unionists took up the cause of women's equality during the war, arguing forcefully and particularly for women's right to equal pay for equal work. The CIO may have initially supported equal pay merely as a tactical measure to attract women workers to the union fold, but the records show that, by the end of the war, many unionists had come to talk about women's equality as a fundamental human right and made efforts to defend not just equal pay but also women's seniority rights in the face of the widely held view that women should return to their kitchens after the war and give their jobs back to men. While it is true that the CIO's efforts to defend women's pay and seniority rights were usually abandoned once women were no longer in the industrial workforce in great numbers, it is also true that Ontario, the CIO's stronghold, was the first jurisdiction in the British Commonwealth, only a few years after the war, to bring in equal pay legislation. As Ruth Frager and Carmela Patrias point out in their study of Canadian working women, significant concerns about the conditions endured by working women arose in the immediate aftermath of the war, especially in Ontario, long before the Second Wave of feminism.<sup>23</sup> It can plausibly be argued that the CIO's evolution on the issue of women's equality, its equal pay gains, and its publicity campaign contributed to creating a public mandate for such legislation, although, regrettably, its own voice advocating equal pay became all but silent in the postwar period.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, *Labour Goes to War* adds to the growing literature concerning the Canadian home front during the Second World War. The study of how

governments and populations dealt with the demands of total warfare, which calls upon the energies of the civilian population as well as of the military, is vital for understanding the fortunes of a war. While Canadians escaped the grim fate of tens of millions of civilians in the war's theatres of operations, they were conscripted and their movements were restricted. They were taxed, importuned to save, rationed, and called upon to devote themselves to the war effort in myriad other ways, all with a high degree of social control as family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbours risked their lives overseas. By focusing on Ontario's industrial sites *Labour Goes to War* adds to such community studies as Serge Durflinger's *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec*, which looks at how that city dealt with the demands of war; and Stephen Kimber's *Sailors, Slackers, and Blind Pigs: Halifax at War*, which similarly analyzes how the citizens of Halifax reacted when their community became the crucial harbour for Allied shipping.<sup>25</sup>

In *Labour Goes to War*, I add a workplace dimension to the study of the home front by examining the demographic changes and the intense worker organization the war brought to the workplace. I look at how the war became a player in the workplace, first as an economic driver, as Canadian manufacturing exploded in scale. But I look, too, at how the war was also a player in the changing values of the era, adding, again, a workplace dimension to studies such as Keshen's *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, which argues that the war challenged the social and moral values of Canadians. For my part, I look at the words and deeds of workers who were unionizing, their rising expectations, their enlarged definition of what their citizenship rights were, including equal rights for women, and their expanded demands of government.

## Sources

I consulted the minutes of union meetings; the correspondence, reports, autobiographies, and oral interviews of CIO organizers; worker affidavits; and company personnel files as well as such contemporary third-party sources as the *Labour Gazette* and the daily press. The main source, however, is the literature that CIO unions distributed to their members and potential members, namely, the organizing leaflets handed out at plant gates and the newspapers, both national and local union, that unions began to publish during the war – a source that has been largely unexplored in the labour history of the era.<sup>26</sup> These sources, especially the local union newspapers, allow us to tune into the voices of union shop-floor activists, their excitement, tribulations, victories, and defeats.

Union publications had to compete with a plethora of other media, and the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) was keenly aware of competition. Labour's

publicity materials were “to aid organization and otherwise enlighten the public on the social benefits of unionization” and to be produced in a manner “compelling the attention of workers whose interest is often deflected by anti-union publications.” The role, therefore, of union publications had to be educational: the purpose of the labour’s communications program was to “keep union members and the public fully informed of the aims of industrial democracy.”<sup>27</sup> But one person’s “propaganda” is another’s “education,” so the reliability of union-sponsored publications as indicators of workers’ and labour leaders’ views can be questioned. They were not independent publications; they were house organs, edited and published by the union’s leaders at the local or national level. As such, they were almost certainly biased in favour of the leadership’s views, and dissenting views were rarely published. But publications also had to be effective. They needed to strike a resonant chord with their readers if they were to be successful in their appeals to workers.

Wartime workplaces were characterized not just by the influx of hundreds of thousands of workers new to unionism but also by repeated and large turnovers in labour as companies expanded their plants to meet production demands and men and women entered military service. Union organizers were, therefore, conducting ongoing, unceasing organizing drives, constantly appealing to new hires to join the union while persuading the more senior hands to maintain their union membership status. Every piece of union literature and publicity was, as a result, an organizing tool prepared and distributed to persuade workers to sign a card or pay their dues. Literature that did not contain an argument that appealed to workers would not have been effective. Thus, while the newspapers may have reproduced labour leaders’ views about such issues as what Canadian society, for example, should look like after the war, writers and editors would have taken pains to ensure these views were presented in a way “compelling the attention of workers.”

But certainty about the truth of such a proposition, especially when one is exploring records from decades ago, is not a realizable objective. The meanings I impute to these records are necessarily filtered through the experience of the intervening years and my own biases. The on-the-ground story of wartime union organizing that is told in *Labour Goes to War* describes the lived experience of workers as they struggled to organize. The hard road they had to navigate was a reality faced, shared, endured, and eventually celebrated by hundreds of thousands of Canadian workers. The CIO marshalled the rhetoric of the war effort to that cause because it thought that such a strategy would work. Did the CIO’s rhetoric structure workers’ ideas about the world? Or did it reflect workers’ views? The CIO’s organizing successes indicate that union writers and editors

were at least sensitive to what was happening in workers' lives (as employees surviving in a workplace and as citizens fighting a war) and suggests a complex and nuanced interaction between the CIO's rhetoric and the reality of workers' lived experience – an interaction in which that experience was both reflected and structured by discourse.<sup>28</sup>

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