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ARTICLE

Green Gold, Red Threats: Organization and Resistance in Depression-Era Ontario Tobacco

Edward Dunsworth

THE CANADIAN COUNTRYSIDE has long been viewed as antithetical to worker organization and radicalism. During the Great Depression, as the unemployed in urban centres and relief camps joined together in organizations, voicing radical critiques of the government's response to the economic crisis and demanding action on unemployment and poverty, a crucial reaction of the state was to enact (and later expand) a farm placement plan. This scheme aimed to disperse the actual and potential dissidents across sparse rural landscapes, precluding the possibility of mass mobilization.¹ The countryside, reasoned the government, could absorb the malcontents and transform them from dangers to society into hard-working, keep-earning, respectable subjects.² Elements of

1. On the organization of the unemployed, see John Manley, "'Starve be Damned!' Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929–39," *The Canadian Historical Review* 79, 3 (1998): 466–491; and Mark Culligan, "The Practical Turn of the Communist Party of Canada: How the Social Insurance Campaign Created 'a Party of the Unemployed,' 1931–1936," MA Cognate Essay, Queen's University, 2013. On the farm placement plan, see James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914–1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 159.

2. This was no great innovation on the part of the state – ideas of the softening effect of the countryside and farm work have a much longer genealogy, in Canada and elsewhere. For a discussion of 19th-century intellectuals' and reformers' belief in agriculture as a cure for the social ills of the city in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, see Sarah Carter, "Two Acres and a Cow: 'Peasant' Farming for the Indians of the Northwest, 1889–97," *Canadian Historical Review* 70, 1 (March 1989): 37–40. For the continued relevance of such ideas in early 20th-century Canada, see Jennifer Stephen, "Unemployment and the New Industrial Citizenship: A Review of the Ontario Unemployment Commission, 1916," in Robert Adamoski, Dorothy Chunn, and Robert Menzies, eds., *Contesting Canadian Citizenship: Historical Readings* (Toronto: Gibson Publishing Connections, 2002), 158.

the left have often not been far behind the state in such conceptions of rural workers as inherently docile. A 1937 publication of the Communist Party of Canada claimed that “class consciousness” among farm workers “can scarcely be said to exist.”³ Indeed, the Depression-era Communist Party devoted the vast majority of its attention in rural Canada towards organizing farmers, largely ignoring agricultural wage labourers, with a few notable exceptions.⁴ Historians have, by their silence, implicitly reinforced notions of a conservative, accommodationist rural workforce, with only a small number of studies addressing farm worker organization and resistance.⁵

An examination of southwestern Ontario’s Tobacco Belt during the Great Depression provides a very different picture of farm labour. Here, in Norfolk, Oxford, and Elgin counties – located on the shores of Lake Erie, between Hamilton and London – a vibrant community of workers and small growers frequently organized to protest their conditions and to demand a fairer deal from employers and tobacco companies. Led by Hungarian immigrants, with significant involvement from members of other ethnocultural groups, working people in the Tobacco Belt built an “infrastructure of dissent,” a constellation of formal organizations and informal networks that allowed for the development of radical ideas and provided a platform from which to launch oppositional efforts, both coordinated and spontaneous.⁶ In the 1930s, workers and small growers participated in left-wing organizations, read Communist newspapers, and organized for better conditions, wages, crop prices, and for a more democratic, producer-driven tobacco industry.

However, the bureaucrats and activists who viewed the countryside as a desert of collective action were not completely wrong; organized resistance among Canadian farm workers was (and remains) rare. Tobacco, though, was an exception to this rule. This article explores the contours of tobacco worker protest, and asks why these workers were able to overcome some of the challenges that make collective action so difficult – and uncommon – for farm workers. It argues that the development of an infrastructure of dissent, combined with geographical and structural factors, created a context in

3. Quoted in Allen Seager, “Captain Swing in Ontario?,” *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History / Bulletin Du Comité Sur l’Histoire Ouvrière Canadienne* 7 (Spring 1979): 3.

4. Ivan Avakumović, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 81–85; John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, “Workers, Growers and Monopolists: The ‘Labour Problem’ in the Alberta Beet Sugar Industry during the 1930s,” *Labour / Le Travail* 3 (1978): 153–174.

5. See, for example, Thompson and Seager, “Workers, Growers and Monopolists”; Seager, “Captain Swing”; and Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905–1930*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001).

6. On the “infrastructure of dissent,” see Alan Sears, *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2014), 1–23.

which tobacco workers and small growers could overcome some of the barriers to organization and challenge their conditions of exploitation. The article pays particular attention to organizational efforts in 1937 and 1939. In 1937, a limited effort to raise workers' wages was followed by a dramatic growers' movement, which saw over 1,000 small farmers, with the support of workers, band together to demand higher prices from the tobacco companies for their crops. In 1939, the local forces of opposition received a jolt of energy from a massive influx of job-seeking "transients," who brought with them the politics of the Depression-era unemployed, establishing the conditions for what would become the greatest moment of tobacco worker resistance in the decade. The two campaigns also provide a useful means for assessing the efforts of workers and small growers to work together in seeking a better deal from the tobacco companies, with the evidence indicating that growers benefitted more from these collaborations than did workers. As the experiments in grower-worker cooperation suggest, the infrastructure of dissent was not without its limitations. This article pays critical attention to both the strengths and weaknesses of working people's opposition in the Norfolk region, in particular the lack of support from established political parties or unions, and the stringent repression experienced by activists at the hands of police and local and provincial authorities. This exploration of the world of Tobacco Belt dissidents during the Great Depression will, I hope, complicate notions of farm worker acquiescence, and provide some useful historical context and points for consideration for farm labour activists today.

Green Gold, Hard Work

THE 1920S AND 1930S WERE BOOM TIMES in Norfolk and the surrounding counties, as a confluence of geography, market factors, and land prices combined to produce a scramble for tobacco land. The increasing popularity of the cigarette in the early decades of the 20th century transformed markets for tobacco leaf, dramatically boosting demand for flue-cured tobacco, the type used in cigarettes.⁷ Flue-cured tobacco was commonly grown in light, sandy soil, exactly the sort found in the Norfolk Sand Plain.⁸ Jonathan McQuarrie describes how the region had previously been viewed by government bureaucrats and farmers as a "wasteland" of unproductive, unredeemable soil, but the changing market conditions precipitated a rapid transformation in

7. Jonathan McQuarrie, "From Farm to Firm: Canadian Tobacco c. 1860–1950" PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2016, 28–33; Jarrett Rudy, *The Freedom to Smoke: Tobacco Consumption and Identity* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 3, 8–9.

8. Flue-cured tobacco refers to the process of raising tobacco for cigarettes and comprises many different varieties of tobacco seed. See McQuarrie, "From Farm to Firm," 3; Barbara Hahn, *Making Tobacco Bright: Creating an American Commodity, 1617–1937*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

perceptions of the region and in its political economy.⁹ Since the soil had not previously produced high-yield cash crops, land was available for relatively cheap. Together these factors sparked a “green gold rush,” as everyone from large tobacco companies to aspirational farmers to itinerant labourers sought to cash in on the crop.¹⁰ From 1921 to 1941, the acreage of tobacco in the province increased almost ten-fold, the vast majority of the increase coming from flue-cured tobacco, earning it the nickname of “Cinderella crop” of the 20th century, courtesy of agricultural historian B.E. Twamley.¹¹ The region eventually became known as the Tobacco Belt.¹²

Unsurprisingly, prices per pound of flue-cured tobacco could not keep pace with the increased production. From \$29 per pound in 1929 and \$32 in 1930, prices plummeted to \$20.50 in 1931 and \$16.30 in 1932.¹³ The instability prompted the creation of marketing associations in the early 1930s, which helped slow the pace of acreage expansion and stabilize crop prices. Out of the various growers’ groups formed in the 1930s, the Flue-Cured Tobacco Marketing Association of Ontario (f. 1936) emerged as the dominant organization in managing production and marketing crops, though much smaller alternative groups persisted. The Association’s board of directors featured both growers and tobacco company representatives.¹⁴ Marketing associations

9. McQuarrie, “From Farm to Firm,” 28–33, 128–129; Jonathan McQuarrie, “‘Tobacco Has Blossomed like the Rose in the Desert’: Technology, Trees, and Tobacco in the Norfolk Sand Plain, c. 1920–1940,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 25, 1 (2014): 33–62.

10. B.E. Twamley, “A Living from the Land: A Brief History of Field Crops in Ontario,” in T.A. Crowley, ed., *First Annual Agricultural History of Ontario Seminar* (Guelph: University of Guelph, Office of Continuing Education, 1976), 83–84; Lylal Tait, *Tobacco in Canada* (Tillsonburg: Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers’ Marketing Board, 1968), 60–68; McQuarrie, “From Farm to Firm,” 183–226.

11. “Ontario: Area of Field Crops, 1941,” *Census of Agriculture Bulletins*, *Census of Canada*, 1941, 3–17; *Census of Agriculture*, *Census of Canada*, 1921, 34; Twamley, “A Living from the Land,” 83.

12. The area was first dubbed the “New Tobacco Belt,” distinguishing it from the Essex- and Kent-based “Old Belt,” which primarily grew the burley and darkleaf varieties used for pipe or chewing tobacco. Before long, the “new” was dropped altogether. McQuarrie, “From Farm to Firm,” 1–52; Tait, *Tobacco in Canada*, 59–72.

13. *Statistical Handbook of Canadian Tobacco* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1947), 9–10. Even factoring in the currency deflation of these years, the price decreases were still dramatic. Adjusting the dollar amounts to 1932 purchasing power, price per pound fell by about 38 per cent between 1930 and 1932. My calculations, using “CPI Inflation Calculator,” United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labour Statistics, accessed 4 March 2016, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=32&year1=1930&year2=1932>. This calculator uses US statistics but is broadly reflective of the Canadian context, since the two dollars were essentially on par in this period. See James Powell, “A History of the Canadian Dollar,” (Bank of Canada, 2005), accessed 4 March 2016, http://www.bankofcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/dollar_book.pdf, 90–91.

14. The creation and evolution of marketing associations is a far more complex and fascinating

helped establish flue-cured tobacco as a profitable cash crop, indicated, for example, by tobacco's share of Ontario's total farm revenue. From 1926 to 1929, tobacco represented 2.34 per cent of the province's total farm income; from 1935 to 1939, this percentage more than tripled to 7.49 per cent.¹⁵ Newspapers reported glowingly on Klondike-like opportunities in tobacco farming, with a 1939 *Toronto Star* headline declaring, "\$30,000 to start 100-Acre Tobacco Farm – But One Year's Return May Be \$50,000."¹⁶

The crop's profitability attracted everyone from itinerant labourers to tobacco conglomerates, but not everyone benefitted equally. Tobacco agriculture was characterized by a class system that was hierarchical, but contained a remarkable degree of social mobility in its lower echelons. At the top were the companies that bought farmers' crops (including manufacturers and wholesalers), the most important of which was the Imperial Tobacco Company. Close to the buying companies were the region's largest farms, many structured as corporations, complete with boards of directors and stock offerings. These corporate farms were unironically dubbed "plantations," and the largest were truly massive: the Ontario Tobacco Plantations, financed by capitalists from Guelph and Toronto, held 1,900 acres in 1928; Windham Tobacco Plantations, with backers in Guelph and New York, owned 5,300 acres.¹⁷ Plantations were divided into smaller farms of between 20 and 40 acres of tobacco, each of which was managed by a share grower, as sharecroppers were more commonly known in the Tobacco Belt. The arrangement between share growers and plantations, while obviously designed to produce a surplus for the plantation, was far less exploitative than the sharecropper-landlord relationship in the southern United States. In contrast to the debt bondage that sharecropping entailed in the South, many share growers in the Tobacco Belt were able to accumulate enough capital to purchase tobacco lands of their own.¹⁸ Precise statistics are difficult to obtain for this period, but while a significant proportion of tobacco was grown within the share growing system, smallholding tobacco farmers

story than the space here allows for. For a superb treatment, see McQuarrie, "From Farm to Firm," 242–255. See also Tait, *Tobacco in Canada*, 125–147.

15. My calculations, from *Farm Wages in Canada, 1948–1963* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada), 48.

16. *Toronto Star*, 29 July 1939.

17. 17. *Simcoe Reformer*, 23 August 1928; *Simcoe Reformer*, 30 March 1933, 8; Judy Barker and Donna Kennedy, research historians, *The Tobacco Leaf: Yesterday and Today* (Delhi: The Township of Delhi Public Library 1979), 5–6.

18. In the Tobacco Belt, farm owners typically supplied the land, lodging, greenhouses, kilns, equipment, and a certain percentage of the plants, fuel, and fertilizer, while share growers provided their own labour, hired wage labourers, and covered any remaining costs. The two parties evenly divided the returns from the crop. *The Tobacco Leaf*, 5; *Simcoe Reformer*, 8 October 1931; *Simcoe Reformer*, 15 November 1928. On sharecropping arrangements in the South, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 34–35.

also contributed a large share of production.¹⁹ Great variability existed within the ranks of smallholding farmers: while many owned farms of similar sizes to those managed by share growers, in 1939, 403 out of the region's 2,026 tobacco growers (about 20 per cent) planted fewer than 13 acres.²⁰ On the upper end of the smallholding spectrum, farmers with the means to do so expanded their tobacco lands, which at a certain point could entail the hiring of one or more share growers.²¹ Beneath the smallholders and share growers in the Tobacco Belt's class system were wage labourers, though here too there was significant stratification, most notably between "skilled" curers and supervisory positions, and "unskilled" male pickers (called primers) and other production workers, both male and female.²² While the class system was undoubtedly hierarchical, it was not static, and indeed there was significant occupational mobility between the categories of worker, share grower, and farm owner in the 1930s.

The largest share of tobacco workers and growers were recent immigrants from Belgium and Hungary and they were joined by Lithuanians, Dutch, Poles, various other groups of European Canadians, and Americans. While these immigrants represented minorities in the Anglo Canadian dominated population of the overall region, they comprised the bulk of growers and workers in the tobacco sector, which had very limited participation from Anglo Canadians.²³

19. Estimates of the percentage of the tobacco crop grown on plantations in the late 1920s and 1930s range from 26 per cent to 65 per cent. McQuarrie, "From Farm to Firm," 32–33; *The Tobacco Leaf*, 7; *Simcoe Reformer*, 20 January 1938.

20. Imperial Leaf Tobacco Company of Canada Limited to Producer Members of the Flue-Cured Tobacco Marketing Association of Ontario, 25 April 1939, Premier Mitchell Hepburn Private Correspondence, box 296, file "Agriculture Department General Correspondence," Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO).

21. See for example, questionnaires with Arthur Devos and Leon Spriet, Delhi Tobacco Belt Project Papers (hereafter DTBPP), F 1405-61, B440612, file 9959.1, AO.

22. As is the case for land tenure, there are no precise statistics on the exact size and breakdown of the labour force. Provincial Department of Agriculture representatives in Norfolk estimated in 1936 that 15,000 temporary workers were required in the county each year to provide harvest labour for tobacco, fruit, and canning crops. The vast majority of these workers would have worked in tobacco, but this number does not account for year-round or local workers. Agricultural Representatives' Field Report – Norfolk County (hereafter ARFRNC), 1936, reel 40, Microfilm Collection, AO. On the different categories of wage labour in tobacco, see Tait, *Tobacco in Canada*, 103–116.

23. The 1941 Census reported 2,055 Belgians and 1,308 Hungarians in Norfolk County, representing 5.8 per cent and 3.7 per cent respectively of the county's total population. Various estimates suggest that Hungarians represented up to a third of tobacco growers by the late 1930s, while Belgians raised up to 45 per cent of the region's tobacco. All the estimates agree that the major constituents of tobacco growers and workers were Belgians and Hungarians, followed by various other groups of European immigrants and Americans; John Kosa, *Land of Choice: The Hungarians in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 32; McQuarrie, "From Farm to Firm," 38–45; Tait, *Tobacco in Canada*, 66; Linda Dégh, *People in the Tobacco Belt: Four Lives* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), xvii, 244; Cornelius J. Jaenen, "Quelques aspects des activités professionnelles des immigrants belge

A significant number of the transplants – in particular the Hungarians,²⁴ Lithuanians, and Poles – had immigrated first to western Canada under the Railway Agreements of the 1920s, but bleak economic conditions in the prairies had compelled the newcomers to seek opportunities elsewhere. Kinship networks were crucial in directing agriculturalist immigrants to the Norfolk region, where friends and family members reported attractive opportunities in tobacco farming.²⁵ Many of these immigrants came to the Tobacco Belt as wage labourers with the aim of saving enough capital to become share growers and eventually farm owners, and in fact, a fair number appear to have been successful in this goal.²⁶ Prospective proprietors often worked for members of their same ethnic group, further complicating the region's dynamics of class and ethnicity.²⁷ Tobacco workers faced great challenges in securing year-round employment, often following the harvest season from farm to farm, as different crops were taken in. During the winter, they looked for work in manufacturing, logging, mining, or elsewhere. A lucky few were able to combine tobacco farm labour in the spring and summer with manufacturing work at Imperial Tobacco's Delhi plant over the winter.²⁸ A large migrant labour force also came to the Tobacco Belt each summer, hoping to make a quick, hard-earned buck in the six-week harvest. These workers came mostly from surrounding

(xix–xxe siècles),” in Serge Jaumain, ed., *Les immigrants préférés, les Belges* (Ottawa: Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1999), 151.

24. It should be noted that there was no single “Hungarian” identity; immigrants from Hungary came from different ethnocultural groups, including the Swabians, German speakers who largely identified as ethnically German. Most of my sources do not distinguish between different Hungarian ethnicities, so it is not a theme dwelled upon in this article. It is, however, important to be aware of this – for example, speeches in German at events in the Tobacco Belt might have been given by German-speakers from Germany, Hungary, or elsewhere. See McQuarrie, “From Farm to Firm,” 40–41n95.

25. Carmela Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians: Politicizing Hungarian Immigrants in Interwar Canada* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 61–70; Dégh, *People in the Tobacco Belt*, xvii, 244.

26. McQuarrie, “From Farm to Firm,” 38–42; DTBPP, F 1405-61, B440612, B440613, B440614, AO.

27. This complexity is reminiscent of other sectors in early phases of industrialization, such as Toronto's Jewish garment industry, where great tensions developed at the intersection of ethnic and class identities as militant Jewish workers organized against Jewish capitalists, even as many of these workers aimed to become entrepreneurs themselves. See Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Lester, 1992), 133–137, 204–225. Robert B. Kristofferson describes class mobility and fluid class identities in mid-19th century industrializing Hamilton in *Craft Capitalism: Craftworkers and Early Industrialization in Hamilton, Ontario, 1840–1872* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 76–110.

28. Delhi Women's Institute, *History of Delhi, 1812–1970* (Simcoe: Second Ave. Printing, 1970), 32; *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939; Dégh, *People in the Tobacco Belt*, 9, 228, 231; McQuarrie, “From Farm to Firm,” 35–43.

areas – from cities such as Brantford, Hamilton, and Toronto – but also from more distant places, including the southern US.²⁹ Some migrants worked for the same grower year after year, while others congregated in the downtown areas of the principal tobacco towns of Delhi, Tillsonburg, and Simcoe, where farmers would come looking for harvest labour. The novelist Hugh Garner, who worked as a tobacco primer in 1939, referred to Simcoe’s hiring site as the “slave market.”³⁰

The production of tobacco for marketing is a multi-step process that starts in March and ends in December, with the peak period for labour being the harvest, which typically lasts from early August until mid-September.³¹ In the 1930s, the tobacco harvest featured three main jobs – priming, tying, and curing – which were typically divided along lines of gender, age, and place of origin. Crews of five or six workers would walk through rows of tobacco plants, picking off – “priming” – leaves and placing them in the “boat,” a horse- or tractor-drawn wagon. Priming was a strictly male task. Garner described the work in a short story inspired by his experiences in the fields: “Without a word we walked to our rows and crouched between them, tearing off the sand leaves like destructive ants, and cradling them in the crook of our other arm. We shuffled ahead on our haunches through a world suddenly turned to jungle, along a sandy aisle that promised an ephemeral salvation at the other end of the field.”³² After being primed, the tobacco leaves, piled into the boat, were transported to the tying table. Here the tobacco was prepared for the curing process. Leaves were attached by string to wooden slats. Tying was women’s work, and the farmer’s wife often supervised the table. Most of the tyers were local women and girls, though some were partners or family members of migrant workers.³³ Once securely attached to wooden slats, the tobacco leaves were hung on a series of poles inside the kiln to be cured by the heat of the furnace. Curing was very specialized work, requiring precise monitoring of the heat and humidity inside the kiln. In the 1930s, most curers were temporary workers from the southern US, as only these men were considered sufficiently skilled for the job.³⁴ Curing took between four and seven days, after which the tobacco could be unloaded from the kiln. The leaves were

29. ARFRNC, 1931–1933, reel 40, Microfilm Collection, AO; DTBPP, F 1405-61, B440613, file 9960.1, AO.

30. Hugh Garner, *One Damn Thing after Another* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1973), 35.

31. Barry Smit, Tom Johnston, and Robert Morse, “Labour Turnover on Flue-Cured Tobacco Farms in Southern Ontario,” *Agricultural Administration* 20 (1985): 157.

32. Hugh Garner, “Hunky,” in *A Hugh Garner Omnibus* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978), 673. On the story being inspired by Garner’s experiences working as a primer in 1939, see Garner, *One Damn Thing*, 35–36.

33. Tait, *Tobacco in Canada*, 108–110; *Simcoe Reformer*, 23 August 1937.

34. For a critical analysis of the discursive construction of “expertise” in Ontario tobacco, see McQuarrie, “From Farm to Firm,” 85–93.

then removed from the stems (stripped) and assembled into box-shaped piles (baled), at which point they were ready for sale. Farms generally had one kiln per five or six acres of crop and would fill, empty, and refill kilns on a rotating basis throughout the harvest.³⁵

The work during the tobacco harvest was gruelling and non-stop. Growers and workers would wake up between four and five a.m. in order to empty a kiln of cured tobacco, eating breakfast only upon completion of this task. Meals for harvest workers were generally included in their pay and were usually prepared by the grower's wife. The quality and size of the meals were sometimes a cause for complaint from harvest workers.³⁶ After breakfast, with the sun now risen, primers resumed the task of picking tobacco leaves. Harvesters worked seven days a week for fourteen to fifteen hours a day, for the duration of the six-week harvest.³⁷ This was wet, dirty, and often unhealthy work. As Communist organizer and one-time primer Jack Scott recalled: "Out in the fields the tobacco plants were way above your head, you know. The heavy dew would still be on them, and it was like rainfall.... You'd walk in there in the morning and you'd be soaking wet within five minutes. Soaked to the skin. The sun would come up and beat up the sand and you'd be blown dry within ten minutes. All burnt up."³⁸ The wetness of harvest work, combined with frequent hand lacerations, caused many to contract Green Tobacco Sickness (also called nicotine poisoning or tobacco poisoning), a condition brought on by skin contact with wet tobacco leaves, which have dissolved nicotine on their surface. Symptoms include "vomiting, dizziness, abdominal cramps, breathing difficulty, abnormal temperature, pallor, diarrhoea, chills, fluctuations in blood pressure or heart rate, and increased perspiration and salivation."³⁹ Green Tobacco Sickness was a common workplace hazard among harvest workers in the 1930s, but most sufferers – if they addressed the disease at all – simply took palliative medication and continued to work.⁴⁰

The difficulty and unpleasantness of the job did not dissuade many from seeking work year after year in the harvest. Poor conditions aside, work in the tobacco fields paid more than most other agricultural work and it is not

35. Tait, *Tobacco in Canada*, 103–115.

36. George Fulop, interview, 26 July 1977, 1956 Hungarian Memorial Oral History Project, Simon Fraser Digital Collections, accessed 12 January 2013, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/hungarian:65>; Jack Scott, *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985*, ed. Bryan D. Palmer (St. John's: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988), 52–54; "Voice of the People," *Toronto Star*, 5 August 1937.

37. Tait, *Tobacco in Canada*, 103–115; George Fulop, interview, 26 July 1977.

38. Scott, *A Communist Life*, 54.

39. J. S. McBride et al., "Green Tobacco Sickness," *Tobacco Control* 7, 3 (1998): 294.

40. *Simcoe Reformer*, 24 August 1939; *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 26 August 1939. *Munkás* articles were translated from Hungarian to English by Krisztina Helga Fally, Attila Kis, and Károly Gabor Mathe.

surprising that cash-strapped jobseekers would willingly sign up for it. In Norfolk County, wages on a mixed-crop farm averaged less than one dollar per day plus board from 1935 to 1939.⁴¹ By comparison, primers in the tobacco harvests of 1937 and 1939 were paid between two and four dollars per day plus board, with wages varying based on skill, experience, and negotiation.⁴²

Tobacco Belt Politics: An Infrastructure of Dissent

AS THE DEPRESSION-ERA BUREAUCRATS and leftists noticed, collective organizing among farm workers has been disproportionately rare, relative to their share of the working-class population. During the 1930s, while farm workers represented about 4.5 per cent of the national workforce,⁴³ they were only involved in about 1.3 per cent of strikes or lockouts.⁴⁴ While some have chalked this up to an inherent docility or lack of class-consciousness among the rural proletariat, more astute observers have noted the profound structural barriers that farm workers face if seeking to organize.⁴⁵ Patrick Mooney and Theo Majka provide a useful summary of some of these core challenges. First, an oversupply of agricultural labour, facilitated through government immigration schemes, makes it easy for employers to replace striking or protesting workers. Second, the geographical and productive realities of agriculture, featuring the distribution of farms across large areas and the employment of a small number of wage labourers on each farm, make it logistically challenging for workers to come together and organize collectively. Third, the migratory aspect of much farm labour makes it difficult to sustain long-lasting movements, as many workers are only present for a short time each year, and often do not return to the exact same farm or region each year. Lastly, in part due to these challenges, agriculture has not been an attractive sector for unions and other labour organizations to spend their resources, depriving farm workers of the funds and institutional knowledge that are so crucial in mounting oppositional campaigns.⁴⁶ To these obstacles we can add the often-violent repression

41. My calculation, assuming a six-day workweek, and based on a monthly wage of \$20–\$25 in Norfolk. ARFRNC, 1936–1940, reel 40, Microfilm Collection, AO.

42. *Simcoe Reformer*, 29 July 1937; ARFRNC, 1938, reel 40, Microfilm Collection, AO; *Clarion*, 19 August 1939.

43. My calculation, based on averages from the two census years of 1931 and 1941, using M. C. Urquhart et al., *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), 355 and “Population of working age...,” Table D1-7, Statistics Canada, accessed 21 June 2016, archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/6WGVZVtYq> on 11 February 2015.

44. My calculation, from Finding Aid, Strikes and Lockouts Files (hereafter SLF), AO.

45. On characterizations of the rural working class as inherently conservative, see Seager, “Captain Swing,” 3–5.

46. Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers' and Farm Workers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), xxii–xxiv.

experienced by farm labour activists at the hands of police, under the direction of various levels of government and with the support of growers. The relative isolation and dispersal of farm workers, combined with the diminished presence of oversight entities such as the media and civil liberties organizations in rural areas, has made anti-labour violence a particularly formidable foe in the countryside.⁴⁷

Ontario tobacco workers certainly experienced many of these barriers to collective organization, but compared to other crops, tobacco seemed to be a site of more frequent protest or “disturbances.” Out of eighteen strikes reported in Ontario agriculture during the 1930s in the Strikes and Lockouts Files, the most common were in tobacco (four reported strikes), sugar beets (three reported strikes), and greenhouse workers (three reported strikes).⁴⁸ Many more instances of tobacco worker dissent did not make it into the official government record. Why were strikes and other forms of protest more common in tobacco than in other crops? I would like to propose two interlocking reasons. First, the geography of the Tobacco Belt was particularly conducive to worker organization. Drawing on the field of labour geography, we can understand the geography of capitalism as being a contested site, where both capitalists and workers strive to arrange the landscape to suit their interests. Furthermore, as Andrew Herod argues, “Geography plays a role in structuring workers’ lives, and ... workers and their organizations may play important roles in shaping landscapes as part of their social self-reproduction.”⁴⁹ In the Norfolk region, the clustering of flue-cured tobacco farms in a limited geographic area produced a relatively high concentration of workers during the harvest, compared to other crops. The sector’s hiring patterns helped to compound this phenomenon, as growers typically hired workers out of the main tobacco towns, compelling jobseekers to congregate in these places a few days before the start of the harvest in order to secure work. This configuration of the landscape served growers by facilitating the recruitment of labourers. Conversely, workers were able to refashion this spatial arrangement to their own advantage. The public parks and downtown streets of Delhi, Simcoe, and Tillsonburg, packed with prospective tobacco workers in the days before the harvest, were the perfect places to overcome the geographic diffusion that had

47. As will be seen below, this was certainly the case in Ontario tobacco, but these have been common experiences for farm labour activists in many different times and places. See, for example, Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Don Mitchell, “Labor’s Geography: Capital, Violence, Guest Workers and the Post-World War II Landscape,” *Antipode* 43, 2 (March 2011): 563–595; Frank Bardacke, *Trampling out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (New York: Verso, 2011); and Gillian McGillivray, *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, & State Formation in Cuba, 1868–1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

48. Finding Aid, SLF, AO.

49. Andrew Herod, *Labor Geographies: Workers and Landscapes of Capitalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 5.

inhibited much farm labour organizing, and indeed workers did frequently get together to coordinate demands for higher wages and better conditions.⁵⁰

A second factor in the heightened level of organization in the Tobacco Belt was the building of an “infrastructure of dissent” by tobacco workers, share growers, and smallholders in the 1930s. Sociologist Alan Sears defines the infrastructure of dissent as:

... the means through which activists develop political communities capable of learning, communicating and mobilizing together. This process of collective capacity-building takes a variety of forms, ranging from informal neighbourhood and workplace networks to formal organizations and structured learning settings. The infrastructure of dissent is a crucial feature of popular mobilization, providing the basic connections that underlie even apparently spontaneous protest actions.⁵¹

Sears developed his concept of the infrastructure of dissent by examining the “mass insurgency” of the 1930s and 1940s in Canada, the United States, and Western Europe, and asking what conditions allowed for the building and sustaining of counter-hegemonic movements in this period. His prime case study is Windsor’s Drouillard Road, “the main street of Ford City,” whose community played a crucial role in launching and supporting the dramatic 1945 Ford strike, which involved 10,000 workers over a 99-day period and featured massive street demonstrations and the threat of a national general strike. The arbitration that settled the strike produced the Rand Formula, a crucial component of collective bargaining rights in Canada down to the present. Drouillard Road and its surrounding areas were the location not only of Ford plants, but also of the homes of factory workers and their families. The neighbourhood was “bound together by the rhythm of the workplace.” Taverns and ethnic halls dotted the street, providing spaces both for formal meetings and for the forging of informal bonds of community. All these features were important in the development of the infrastructure of dissent, and in the community’s support for the 1945 strike.⁵²

50. The other two strike-prone agricultural sectors – sugar beets and greenhouses – shared some important similarities with tobacco. Sugar beets featured a similar concentration of farms within restricted geographic areas and large annual influxes of harvest workers. Greenhouses bear more resemblance to factories than farms in many ways, most notably for the present argument, by bringing workers together into one place. See Thompson and Seager, “Workers, Growers and Monopolists”; Seager, “Captain Swing”; Census of Agriculture, Census of Canada, 1921, 52–59. For a fine labour geography study on struggles over “transient” camps in 1960s–70s Ontario tobacco, see Emily Reid-Musson, “Historicizing Precarity: A Labour Geography of ‘Transient’ Migrant Workers in Ontario Tobacco,” *Geoforum* 56 (2014): 161–171.

51. Sears, *The Next New Left*, 2.

52. While Sears uses Drouillard Road to explore the development of an infrastructure of dissent in detail, the concept is intended to be quite flexible and he applies it to a variety of contexts, from the Jewish left in Toronto, to the People’s Co-op in Winnipeg, to the mining communities of Crowsnest Pass, Alberta. Sears, *The Next New Left*, 5, 16, 29–45.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, immigrant communities in the Norfolk region – and in particular, Hungarian Canadians – constructed their own infrastructure of dissent. Community organizations, growers' associations, newspapers, and informal networks provided a foundation for the fostering of critiques of the social and economic order, the development of strategies to challenge inequitable conditions, and the deployment of these strategies in grassroots struggles. While the region's infrastructure of dissent allowed for a greater degree of protest compared to other agricultural zones, it also contained significant limitations, many of which align closely with the barriers to collective action outlined by Mooney and Majka. Indeed, compared to Drouillard Road, the infrastructure of dissent in the Tobacco Belt was considerably more fragile, only capable of supporting much smaller and more fleeting campaigns for social and economic justice. But just as Sears finds in the Drouillard Road community some answers as to why the insurgency of the Ford strike was possible, so too do the networks, organizations, and media of the 1930s Tobacco Belt help us to better understand why these agricultural workers and small growers were able to overcome some of the obstacles that have curtailed activism in capitalist agriculture.

Like Drouillard Road, the Tobacco Belt was “bound together by the rhythm of the workplace,” though unlike Ford City, the “workplace” represented not a single employer, but a crop sector. Tobacco, like the auto industry in Windsor, infiltrated all aspects of life in the region, particularly in the main tobacco town of Delhi. This was reflected not just in the economic dominance of tobacco in the local economy, but also in its symbolic weight in local celebrations like the 1939 Tobacco Festival.⁵³ While ethnic halls for the main constituents of the tobacco sector would not be built in Delhi until the 1940s,⁵⁴ an array of shops, taverns, social clubs, and political organizations provided spaces for the building of community ties, as well as for the development of counter-hegemonic capacity. Although these sites and groups were often divided along ethnic lines, this was not always the case. Of the two major ethnic groups, Belgians' meeting places tended to be more social than political in nature, while Communist organizations thrived in the Hungarian community.⁵⁵ But the participation of both groups in struggles in the tobacco sector suggests

53. *Simcoe Reformer*, 18 May 1939; *Simcoe Reformer*, 29 May 1939; *Simcoe Reformer*, 19 June 1939.

54. This is not surprising, given that large numbers of Belgians, Hungarians, Poles, and ethnic Germans (the four groups who built halls in the 1940s) did not arrive in the region until the 1930s.

55. Gathering places for Belgians included various shops catering to Belgians, a dance parlour, and an illicit tavern in the home of a young compatriot woman. Sports such as bicycle racing and wrestling were popular among various ethnic communities and provided opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. *Simcoe Reformer*, 18 December 1930; *Simcoe Reformer*, 1 January 1931; Joan Magee, *The Belgians in Ontario: A History* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1987), 93; *Simcoe Reformer*, 8 June 1939; *Simcoe Reformer*, 3 June 1935.

that both types of meeting places contributed to the development of the infrastructure of dissent, just as taverns and ethnic halls did on Drouillard Road.

Hungarian Canadians were the most important builders of the infrastructure of dissent in the Tobacco Belt, and their role in this project was marked by a strong support for Communist organizations and newspapers. Many were members of or attended events organized by the Canadian Hungarian Mutual Benefit Federation or the Hungarian Workers' Clubs, both Communist Party-affiliated organizations. These community-based groups provided aid to Hungarian Canadians in need and organized social, cultural, and political events in the area. In 1934–35, the first branch of the Benefit Federation in the Tobacco Belt was founded in the village of Vanessa. A quotidian feature of the community's social network provided crucial assistance for its formation: the Hungarian bread deliveryman distributed leaflets along his route announcing the federation's first meeting.⁵⁶ Hungarian Workers' Clubs appear to have existed off and on in Delhi throughout the 1930s. In 1938, a new Workers' Club was founded in Tillsonburg, while efforts were being made to start clubs in the "Old Tobacco Belt" towns of Kingsville and Harrow.⁵⁷ The Hungarian-language Communist newspaper published in Toronto, *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, also gained a healthy readership in the Norfolk region. RCMP Security Bulletins reported on *Munkás* subscription drives in the region in 1934 and 1935, when the Delhi Workers' Club distinguished itself for its success in signing up new readers.⁵⁸ At the Communist Party Convention of 1937, it was reported that a third of *Munkás*' subscribers were living on farms throughout Canada, further evidence that radical ideas were not merely circulating in urban, industrial settings.⁵⁹ Hungarian Communist organizations were not entirely sectarian. For example, until 1949, the only Hungarian organizations in the tobacco region were Communist-affiliated, and Hungarian Canadians of all political stripes attended events sponsored by these groups.⁶⁰ *Munkás* published favourable articles about a local priest who assisted the jobless during the 1939 harvest, and printed ads from the Norfolk Realtors Bureau advertising tobacco farms for sale.⁶¹

Communism also found expression in the Hungarian community outside of formal organizations or newspapers, in the form of non-institutional

56. Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians*, 157–165.

57. Gregory S. Kealey and Reginald Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1993), 25 September 1935, no. 774, 499–500; 1 November 1938, no. 904, 325–327.

58. Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins*, 25 September 1935, no. 774, 499–500.

59. Kealey and Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins*, 27 October 1937, no. 874, 430.

60. Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians*, 164–165.

61. *Munkás*, 10 August 1939; 30 September 1939.

gatherings. In 1934, for example, *Munkás* reported that 250 workers met in the Delhi area, raised a red hammer and sickle flag on a tree, and heard a speech by a worker named Sproha, who advised the assembled that “to get out of the economic crisis, we have to organize.” He also urged them to join with the “one-sixth of the world” already united under the Communist flag. A few days later, an agent from the village council asked the workers to take down the flag. A compromise was reached where the workers could leave the flag up, so long as they flew a Canadian flag next to it. According to the *Munkás* writer, this was evidence that “the capitalists are afraid of us.... They are afraid of the workers,” and were especially spooked to see the workers organizing under the red flag.⁶² In an oral history interview conducted in 1972, a (non-Communist) Hungarian tobacco farmer recalled the importance of Communism in Norfolk’s Hungarian community. The farmer recounted that Canadian government representatives in the 1950s assumed all older Hungarians were Communists: “Because, they remembered in the 30s, when the Depression was so bad and people were out of work, they flew the red flag and when Reverend R. came out here they almost stoned him.... In Hamilton, in Toronto, they had Communist newspapers at the time we came down here. They had picnics. There was a Communist peasant man and they held their meetings at his place.”⁶³

While Hungarians were undoubtedly the driving force behind the construction of an infrastructure of dissent in the Tobacco Belt, they were by no means its only contributors. Belgians, for example, participated in Hungarian Communist events such as the Benefit Federation picnics, and they were a significant force in the 1937 small grower campaign to raise tobacco prices.⁶⁴ Belgians and Hungarians also launched parallel campaigns in 1938 to achieve greater ethnic representation in the Marketing Association.⁶⁵ It is quite possible that some Belgians carried on a tradition of left-wing politics that they traced back to Europe, and which shaped their day-to-day politics. Joan Magee reports that at a 1929 singing competition at the Belgian dance parlour in Delhi, Edmond Cartier won second place with a song about the 1907 strike in Wetteren, Belgium, in which the socialist-led millworkers were victorious.⁶⁶ Whether or not a tradition of leftism informed other immigrant communities’ politics is difficult to determine, but like the Belgians, many other ethnocultural groups attended the Benefit Federation picnics organized by

62. *Munkás*, 24 August 1934. Article discovered via Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians*, 223.

63. Dégh, *People in the Tobacco Belt*, 249–250.

64. *Simcoe Reformer*, 4 November 1937.

65. *Simcoe Reformer*, 4 November 1938.

66. Magee, *The Belgians in Ontario*, 93; on the Wetteren strike see Carl Strikwerda, *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-Century Belgium* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 298.

the Hungarian Communists: Slovaks, Anglos, and Germans, according to one newspaper report; “13 or 14 different races” according to another.⁶⁷

The array of cultural and political organizations, informal networks, and newspapers which contributed to Norfolk’s infrastructure of dissent can be productively compared with sites of Depression-era agrarian struggle elsewhere in North America, in particular the citrus and sugar beet zone of Oxnard, California discussed by Frank P. Barajas and the cotton economy of rural Alabama described by Robin D.G. Kelley.⁶⁸ In Oxnard, a large Mexican community, for whom agriculture represented the major source of employment, supported farm worker strikes in 1933 and 1941 through both mutual aid societies and informal community networks.⁶⁹ The size of both the community and the industry were much larger than their Norfolk counterparts, but the importance of social networks and cultural and political organizations in fostering agrarian dissent is readily apparent in both places. Community ties also underpinned the campaigns for socioeconomic justice in Alabama’s cotton territories, though unlike in Oxnard and Norfolk, the ranks of dissidents were dominated not by immigrants but by African American Communists. Whereas Ontario’s Tobacco Belt scarcely registered with the central organs of the Communist Party of Canada, Alabama represented the centre of the American Communists’ efforts in the South, and sharecroppers and cotton pickers were a crucial segment of Party members and activists.⁷⁰ Rural dissidents in both Oxnard and Alabama had the support of Communist-backed unions: most importantly the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union and Share Croppers’ Union, respectively. This access to institutional support and resources set the American communities apart from their Ontario counterpart and indicates a considerable weakness in the Norfolk region’s infrastructure of dissent.⁷¹

67. *Munkás*, 8 August 1939; *Simcoe Reformer*, 5 September 1939.

68. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Frank P. Barajas, *Curious Unions: Mexican American Workers and Resistance in Oxnard, California, 1898–1961* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

69. Barajas, *Curious Unions*, 81, 149, 161, 173.

70. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 34–56, 92–116.

71. Dissidents in Ontario tobacco did not receive much support from political parties either. Tobacco Belt immigrants’ small population as a proportion of the overall counties, combined with the fact that as recent immigrants their community members were only gradually becoming naturalized over the course of the 1930s, meant that they carried little electoral weight. The CCF was almost a non-entity in the area, only sometimes running candidates in Tobacco Belt ridings, while the Communist Party never ran candidates in the region in this period. That said, small growers were consistently able to secure audiences with both federal and provincial representatives, and their concerns over the behaviour of the Marketing Association and the tobacco companies appear to have been taken quite seriously, though governments were constrained in their abilities to respond to such complaints. *Simcoe Reformer*, 7 October 1937; *Globe and Mail*, 21 June 1934; see pages for the federal ridings of Norfolk, Oxford, and Elgin at “History of Federal Ridings Since 1867,” *Parliament of Canada*,

The infrastructure of dissent in the Tobacco Belt did not develop in isolation, but was formed in the context of a growing radical politics at the local, national, and international levels, taking shape as people became increasingly critical of the capitalist order that had produced the poverty and instability of the Great Depression. The immigrant groups that developed networks and organizations to oppose the status quo were also not regionally isolated, but connected to national and international networks of co-nationals, which also helped shape their politics. To cite just one example, *Munkás* was an important conduit of information not just for tobacco workers and growers, but also for the Hungarian sugar beet workers in Alberta, whose union and strikes were detailed by John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager.⁷² The Beet Workers Industrial Union placed an ad in the Toronto-published paper in 1937 alerting members and the broader Hungarian population of a change to their office address.⁷³ Given this press coverage and the close links between Hungarians in Alberta and Ontario (indeed, many Hungarian-Ontarians had moved east from the prairies),⁷⁴ it is not difficult to imagine that Hungarians organizing in the tobacco economy would not have seen themselves as engaging in an isolated struggle in a single crop. Rather, they were part of a broader network of Hungarians and other proletarians fighting for better conditions in both agricultural and industrial sectors across Canada and around the world.

Manifestations of Dissent

POLITICAL ACTION IN THE TOBACCO BELT, while shaped by leftist thought and ethnic identities, was generally concerned with the day-to-day existence of workers and small growers at the point of production, on the farm. Tobacco working people both contributed to the development of the infrastructure of dissent with workplace concerns in mind, and also directed the knowledge, experiences, contacts, and resources of the infrastructure towards struggles to improve their working conditions. Manifestations of the infrastructure of dissent in tobacco ranged from informal gatherings of workers, to “spontaneous” acts of resistance in the workplace, to more coordinated efforts to organize collectively, on the part of both workers and growers.

Tobacco workers often gathered informally to discuss their conditions and ways to improve them. This type of conversation was an important part of the infrastructure of dissent, which, as Sears argues, “provides spaces for activist learning, analysis that challenges dominant ideas, [and] collective memory to

accessed 17 June 2016, <http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/About/Parliament/FederalRidingsHistory/hfer.asp?Language=E&Search=T>.

72. Thompson and Seager, “Workers, Growers and Monopolists.”

73. *Munkás*, 11 November 1937.

74. DTBPP, F 1405-61, B440614, files 9961.1, 9961.2, AO.

draw resources from past struggles.”⁷⁵ In 1933, a tobacco worker, identified only by the initials S.M., penned an article in *Munkás* that described the precarious conditions faced by labourers over the winter, but also the collective solutions that down-on-their-luck workers employed to try to better their lot. Three months after the end of the harvest, the author wrote, many tobacco workers were struggling to make ends meet. S.M. was part of a group of five or six families living in the same area; some had resorted to building a mud hut for shelter. “Nobody knows what will happen to us, how we will survive the winter.” Some members of the group had found winter work on tobacco farms for a mere ten dollars a month plus board, but most were not so lucky and had to turn to begging or asking the local authorities for assistance. Despite the hardship, the residents were organizing a Workers’ Club, which evoking Sears, provided a space for both “activist learning” and organization. According to S.M., in the Workers’ Club, “the workers are studying while having fun.” The author also called for the organization of tobacco workers into unions.⁷⁶ Informal gatherings of tobacco workers, then, helped contribute to the development of more coordinated responses to adverse employment conditions.

While engaged on harvest crews, tobacco workers faced with conditions or wages they deemed unacceptable often joined together to demand improvements. These single-farm moments of resistance were not part of a broader campaign, nor did they bear the stamp of any organization. Rather they were spontaneous acts of worker self-activity, but we should not confuse “spontaneous” with “emerging from nowhere,” and instead should remember Sears’ point that “even apparently spontaneous protest actions” happen atop the foundation of an infrastructure of dissent.⁷⁷ These moments of dissent sometimes made their way into the press or the government’s Strikes and Lockouts files. In 1935, wage labourers and share growers near Leamington (in the “Old Tobacco Belt”) found a brief moment of leverage when a late tomato harvest created a labour shortage. They took the opportunity to demand higher wages and were successful in winning them.⁷⁸ In 1937, the *Clarion* reported on a group of six tobacco primers in Norfolk County who decided to protest their low wages. After breakfast one day, they returned to their hay-beds in the barn and went back to sleep with the message “Wake me if you will pay \$3.50 a day” written on their shoes. The farmer woke them up and agreed to the 50-cent increase.⁷⁹ In 1938, the St. Thomas *Times-Journal* reported a dispute between five tobacco workers (four Ukrainians and one Russian) and a grower,

75. Sears, *The Next New Left*, 1–2.

76. *Munkás*, 5 January 1933. Article discovered via Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians*, 223, 284n57.

77. Sears, *The Next New Left*, 2, 9.

78. Strike 134 (1935), SLF, Microfilm Collection, A.O.

79. Strike 254 (1937), SLF, Microfilm Collection, A.O.

the hired men accusing the grower of tampering with their personal belongings. The farmer fired the workers and drove them to Tillsonburg, despite having hired them in Delhi. The men refused to leave the car until they were brought back to Delhi. The grower summoned Tillsonburg's chief of police, who escorted the men to the police station where he asked them whether they were Communists. According to the *Times-Journal*, "One denied that he was, three said nothing, and the Russian later became angry and said he was a Communist." The police chief ordered the workers to leave town, but apparently was not too concerned because before they left he introduced them to a labour-seeking tobacco grower. They informed the farmer that they would not work for less than four dollars a day plus board.⁸⁰ There were many more instances of spontaneous worker self-activity during the 1939 harvest, which will be covered in detail later on.

Tobacco workers' politics of refusal were expressed not just in conversations and walkouts, but also in more formal efforts to form organizations and campaign for better wages and conditions. In 1937 and 1939, Hungarian Communists led campaigns for higher wages for workers, and in 1937 small growers organized to demand higher prices for their crop from the tobacco companies. A central feature of all three organizational efforts was the attempt to create an alliance between workers and small growers in order to secure a greater portion of tobacco profits from companies and large landowners.

The "class question" in agriculture was by no means new, nor particular to tobacco, and in fact was a prickly question for the left in this period. That question was, essentially: who exactly constitutes the agricultural proletariat that must be organized against capital? By some reasoning, small farmers could be viewed as proletarians who just happened to have some capital – as the primary labourers on their farms (along with their family members), they were essentially selling their labour to the buyers of their crops. Yet many of these farmers employed wage labourers, leading some on the left to an analysis of farmers as a petite bourgeoisie.⁸¹ The Communist Party of Canada had an ambiguous answer to the question, attempting to varying degrees to organize both small farmers and agricultural wage labourers, sometimes in alliances. Certainly, the Party made a much greater effort with farmers, through the Farmers' Unity League (FUL), which operated primarily in western Canada. Their efforts with farm labour came in the form of a two-year foray into the world of sugar beet workers, where the Workers' Unity League (WUL) helped found the Beet Workers' Industrial Union, which led strikes in Alberta and (of a lesser magnitude) in Ontario in 1935 and 1936. The Communists turned out

80. Strike 129 (1938), SLF, Microfilm Collection, AO.

81. Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 198–208; Cecilia Danysk, *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880–1930* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995), 9–23.

to have the wrong answer to the class question in both efforts. With the FUL, part of the reason for its failure to compete with the CCF and Social Credit for members was farmers' discomfort with the Communists' language of class warfare – presumably, some of the farmers very keenly felt their “in-between” status as both primary producers and employers.⁸² In the WUL's efforts with Alberta beet workers, the class question turned much more dramatically against the Party. The Beet Workers' Industrial Union attempted to bring small farmers into an alliance with workers, arguing that Rogers Sugar was exploiting both farmers and workers. While the beet workers won some initial gains in their strikes, they were eventually defeated resoundingly by the sugar company, with the assistance of the growers. John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager argue that an alliance with workers was a seriously risky proposition for small growers, while aligning more closely with Rogers Sugar was a safer bet, and this latter route was the one they eventually chose. As Thompson and Seager nicely sum it up: “Ironically, the agitation by the beet workers, designed ostensibly to unite grower and worker, drew the company and the growers closer together.”⁸³ The WUL also organized beet workers in Ontario and attempted to ally with small growers, but the effort was smaller, and there was no such dramatic choosing of sides as there was in Alberta. In fact, the workers' strikes did appear to attract limited support from some growers.⁸⁴

In Ontario tobacco, as in the province's sugar beet fields, the agrarian class question was not nearly as explosive as it was in the West. In fact, there was less of a class question, and more of a class objective: tobacco workers fighting for better conditions consistently preached a message of collaboration between workers and small growers, and made frequent attempts to unite the two groups in their struggles against the tobacco companies and large plantations. Unlike in the sugar beet campaigns, the efforts in tobacco were not marked by the involvement of the WUL or the FUL,⁸⁵ nor were they much shaped by strategic directives from the Communist Party. The shift from the sectarianism of the Third Period to the collaborative anti-fascism of the Popular Front in 1935 did not alter the character of Tobacco Belt organizing in any profound way. Communist organizers in Canadian agriculture had sought to construct grower-worker alliances before the advent of the Popular Front, and the Norfolk region's Hungarian Communists welcomed non-Communists to their events even during the Third Period.⁸⁶ Instead of being

82. Avakumović, *The Communist Party in Canada*, 84.

83. Thompson and Seager, “Workers, Growers and Monopolists,” 174.

84. Seager, “Captain Swing,” 3–5; Strike 72 (1935) and Strike 52 (1936), SLF, Microfilm Collection, AO.

85. Both organizations disbanded in 1936. Avakumović, *The Communist Party in Canada*, 85, 132.

86. The 1935 sugar beet strikes in both Ontario and Alberta, both of which featured efforts at uniting worker and grower, launched before the declaration of the Popular Front policy at the

driven by the Party line, efforts at worker-grower cooperation in the Tobacco Belt were primarily motivated by grassroots political analysis, on the part of activists both Communist and not.⁸⁷ Despite their efforts, tobacco workers were unsuccessful in forming a strong, united producers' bloc. Small tobacco growers displayed a tepid interest in allying with workers, but the latter put a far greater effort into building the relationship than the former, with the result that workers were much more involved in struggles that primarily benefited small growers than the growers were in inverse situations. So while the story of grower-worker relations was not as dramatic as in Alberta sugar beets (and indeed neither were the instances of worker protest), the end result was essentially the same: growers did not risk their necks to support the struggles of workers. When push came to shove, they protected their own interests, choosing not to broaden the struggle and risk losing the position they did have.⁸⁸

The first major attempt to organize tobacco labour across the sector was in 1937, when in the days leading up to the harvest, a "small group of Hungarians" passed out handbills urging jobseekers to hold out for between \$3.50 and \$4 per day instead of the going wage rate of \$3. The group appears to have had some initial successes. Two separate growers reported being unable to contract workers at offered wages of \$3 and \$3.50 respectively. Workers on at least one farm struck, securing a 50-cent increase in pay from the grower, who increased

Seventh Comintern Congress of July–August 1935. Seager, "Captain Swing," 3–5; Thompson and Seager, "Workers, Growers and Monopolists," 160–164; John Manley, "Communists Love Canada!": The Communist Party of Canada, the 'People' and the Popular Front, 1933–1939," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36, 4 (Winter 2002): 59–60. On pre-Popular Front ecumenical gatherings, see Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians*, 165, 272n82–83.

87. These findings are consistent with other studies which have found that Communist activists, while striving for conformance with Party objectives, still very much directed their organizational work towards local concerns. See, for example, Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, xiii–xiv, 175; Culligan, "The Practical Turn," 3; Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–35* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 1–8.

88. Rural dissidents in Alabama and California also wrestled with variations on the "class question," but in each place the context and hence answers to the question were quite different. Alabama Communists debated how exactly to organize small farmers, sharecroppers, and farm workers – divided by race and class – under the same banner. However, class mobility in Alabama agriculture was almost entirely limited to downward mobility and sharecroppers did not typically hire wage labourers, meaning there were not complexities of the same variety as in Ontario tobacco, with wage workers on the pathway to farm ownership. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 34–56, 159–175. In Oxnard, compared to Ontario tobacco, capitalist agriculture attained considerably larger economies of scale and a much starker level of proletarianization, meaning that, like in Alabama, farm workers had little opportunity to become farm owners. A closer parallel to Ontario's class question in Oxnard were the complex relationships between wage workers and labour contractors, who typically contracted workers from their own ethnic communities. The dynamics played out in a similar fashion: in 1903, when changes in employers' hiring practices threatened the livelihoods of both contractors and workers, the two groups united in struggle, winning significant concessions. In 1933, when workers went on strike but contractors' interests were not affected, the latter did not support the labourers' struggles. Barajas, *Curious Unions*, 134–138, 152–153.

their pay rather than risk losing part of the crop. The organizers were helped in their cause by a short labour supply, thought to be caused in part by increased industrial production in Hamilton, which cut into the usual number of workers from that city who would seek work in the harvest.⁸⁹ The early yet seemingly minor successes were apparently enough to scare tobacco farmers, and a swift, coordinated, and hard-fisted reaction by growers, the provincial government, and the mainstream press ensued. These efforts may not have been needed to quell the tide of resistance, as the labour shortage appeared to be short-lived; in the subsequent days, more and more jobseekers streamed into the Tobacco Belt. But the establishment took no chances with this campaign, and actively sought to undermine organizers and encourage an influx of labour to the region which would destroy what little leverage workers had.

Farmers took to the press in an attempt to dampen any hopes workers might have had of achieving a higher wage. E.C. Scythes, president of the 23-farm Vittoria Plantations, told the *Simcoe Reformer*: "If those men who are holding out for exorbitant wages continue to do so, they are most likely to be left without work, and their places filled by young Canadians." The Marketing Association also let it be known that they were engaged in meetings with US officials to arrange for additional labour to come north.⁹⁰

Premier Mitch Hepburn and the provincial government did its part to contain the threat before it could gain momentum. As reports of the organizational efforts emerged, the chairman of the Marketing Association, Archie Leitch, called upon a large plantation owner and a couple other farm owners, and together they met with Hepburn to discuss the situation. The growers had a friend in Hepburn, who was quoted in the next day's papers decrying the work of "foreign agitators." The premier threatened to quash any tobacco strikes with the provincial police and import replacement workers from western Canada, where drought had dried up harvest work. True to his word, a few days later, Hepburn spoke at a conference of the provincial Ministers of Agricultural from across the country, asking the ministers to help supply 4,000 extra workers to the Tobacco Belt, even as local police and employment officials stressed to reporters that no extra workers were needed. If anything, officials cautioned, there was already an oversupply of labour in the district. Hepburn also assigned additional provincial police to the district.⁹¹

The mainstream press was firmly on the side of growers and the state. Editorials and letters to the editor used the events as evidence that the jobless did not in fact want to work, blaming them for their own plight. They also repeated

89. *Globe and Mail*, 26 July 1937; *Globe and Mail*, 29 July 1937; *Globe and Mail*, 24 July 1937; *Toronto Star*, 28 July 1937; *Toronto Star*, 30 July 1937; *Simcoe Reformer*, 26 July 1937.

90. *Simcoe Reformer*, 29 July 1937.

91. *Globe and Mail*, 26 July 1937; *Globe and Mail*, 29 July 1937; *Globe and Mail*, 24 July 1937; *Toronto Star*, 28 July 1937; *Toronto Star*, 30 July 1937; *Globe and Mail*, 30 July 1937; *Globe and Mail*, 12 August 1937.

Hepburn's labelling of organizers as "foreign agitators."⁹² A *Globe and Mail* editorial provides a typical example of these sentiments: "Surely it cannot be that Ontario is short of farm labor. If so it is a sad reflection of hundreds of able-bodied men on relief who profess eagerness to work, and a further indication that abuse of relief funds is far from ended.... Jeopardizing the harvesting of any crop would be an act of vandalism. Still, agitators are prepared to take advantage of any condition, no matter what the cost to innocent sufferers."⁹³

The workers behind the organizational efforts, and their closest ally in the press *Munkás*, were appalled by the crackdown. For one, *Munkás* noted the "thousands" of jobseekers who were sleeping outside, hoping to be hired on to harvest crews, and blasted Hepburn for his "reckless statements" about the need for labour in the Belt.⁹⁴ The paper also disagreed with the portrayal of the organizing campaign in the mainstream press, and was especially irate about the suggestion that the activists were working against the best interests of growers. In fact, the paper claimed, the \$3.50 wage rate was actually arrived at in consultation with growers, the amount representing a mutually beneficial arrangement for workers and farmers. The article alleged that a rogue group of workers had created a second flyer demanding \$4.50 a day. *Munkás* was upset at the premier and the press for driving a wedge in between workers and growers, but it also slammed the organizers who it accused of creating this second flyer. The paper frequently called upon workers and growers to band together, and expected both sides to compromise on their interests for the sake of greater solidarity and strength.⁹⁵

Later in 1937, a movement of small growers coalesced, demanding higher prices for their crops than those offered by the Marketing Association. Though the Association – also referred to as the Simcoe organization, for its base of operations – was unmistakably successful in ensuring the continuing boom of flue-cured tobacco, it was also a controversial organization, accused of supporting the interests of the tobacco companies and large landowners at the expense of smaller farmers. *Munkás* frequently accused the Association of being merely the puppet of the Imperial Tobacco Company, writing that the setting of prices by the Association made the process "look more democratic,"

92. In a study of farm worker strikes in 1930s California, historical geographer Don Mitchell argues convincingly that the labelling of union organizers as "outside agitators" serves both to delegitimize migrant workers based on their lack of local ties, and conversely to legitimize locally-entrenched growers who lay sole claim on the rights of local belonging and respectability. See Mitchell, "The Scales of Justice: Localist Ideology, Large-Scale Production and Agricultural Labor's Geography of Resistance in 1930s California," in Andrew Herod, ed., *Organizing the Landscape: Geographical Perspectives on Labor Unionism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 160–162.

93. *Globe and Mail*, 29 July 1937.

94. *Munkás*, 7 August 1937.

95. *Munkás*, 7 August 1937.

but really Imperial was in control.⁹⁶ But it was not just the fiery Communist newspaper that slammed the Association. Growers shared *Munkás'* critiques and in fact often went further in their denunciations. Some examples can be found in a batch of letters sent by growers to the provincial Minister of Agriculture, Patrick M. Dewan, in 1939. Though written after the campaigns of 1937, the letters reflect concerns of farmers which were common throughout the 1930s and subsequent decades. The letter-writing growers alleged that the Association withheld membership from small farmers in order to push them into selling their farms. Members of the Association and friends of board directors were given preferential acreage allotment, allowing them to buy non-tobacco farms, receive tobacco acreage allotments, and re-sell the farms for a substantial profit. Growers also claimed that banks and insurance companies were reluctant to extend the same services and rates to non-Association members as to members, further extending the Simcoe organization's monopolistic reach. Some complained that the Association scared growers into agreeing to sell them their surplus crop, and then paid below the market rate per pound. Dewan's response to growers is telling in that instead of dismissing their claims, he appears sympathetic, writing in a 1939 letter to a small grower, "Certainly it has been a monopoly, and the question in my mind is whether or not it has been pretty much a combine." In a 1940 letter to another grower regarding the Association's coercive tactics, he wrote that, while he had still not seen conclusive evidence, he was "of the opinion that the growers were very strongly encouraged to have their tobacco processed under the direction of the Marketing Association."⁹⁷ Alternative cooperatives to the Simcoe organization existed – for example, the Intercounty Tobacco Growers Limited – and these were touted during times of dissatisfaction with the Association, but leaving for a rival group was not necessarily an attractive option for growers, since they did not have the same close-knit ties with the tobacco companies and banks as the Association. In fact, the Simcoe organization was often quite aggressive in pressuring Intercounty growers to leave the alternative association and come into the mainstream fold.⁹⁸

The decade's biggest moment of conflict between the board of the Marketing Association and its smallholding members took place in 1937. The campaign of growers for higher prices seems to have been at least in part an outgrowth of the workers' organizational efforts earlier in the year, and from the beginning, workers were deeply involved in the farmers' efforts. A series of growers'

96. *Munkás*, 14 August 1937; 19 August 1937; 7 August 1937; 2 November 1937.

97. John H. Teall to Patrick M. Dewan, 16 January 1939; Jack Sawyer to Dewan, 16 February 1939; Dewan to John H. Teall, 21 January 1939; W.E. MacDonald to Dewan, 20 June 1939; Dewan to J.E. Carter, 18 September 1940; all letters in Patrick Michael Dewan fonds (hereafter PMDF), box 2, file "Tobacco #2," AO.

98. MacDonald to Dewan, 20 June 1939, PMDF, box 2, file "Tobacco #2," AO; See McQuarrie, "From Farm to Firm," 252–257 for more examples of opposition to the Association.

meetings were held beginning in August of that year, just two weeks after the workers' campaign had fizzled out. At this initial meeting, workers and growers discussed the need to work together for higher crop prices for farmers, allowing for higher wages for workers. The group resolved to form a joint committee to pursue the issue. E. Holwell of the United Farmers of Ontario was invited to speak at the meeting, and pointed out that low prices from Imperial hurt both growers and workers, repeating the message of cooperation.⁹⁹ By mid-September it became clear that farmers were going to be offered significantly lower prices than had been expected – 23–26 cents per pound instead of the anticipated 35–40 cents.¹⁰⁰ The meeting organizers put an ad in the *Simcoe Reformer* – “Good Crops Merit Good Prices” – and on 15 September about 250 growers and workers convened in Delhi. Both the meeting's chair, Nerky (a Hungarian whose first name was not printed), and its main speaker, Carl Hichin, were tobacco workers. In his remarks, Hichin, a Communist activist who had been involved in various campaigns in the Norfolk region in previous years,¹⁰¹ again repeated the need for worker-farmer cooperation. The assembled agreed to demand 40–45 cents per pound for their crop.¹⁰² Over the next month and a half, growers and workers continued to meet, and Holwell led a joint delegation to present their concerns to Norfolk's Member for Provincial Parliament, Eric Cross, who was sympathetic to the group but promised only to have parliament “study the issue.”¹⁰³

When the Association finally announced the crop price in late October, it did not even come close to meeting the assembly's demands, setting the rate per pound at 24.5 cents. This sparked a flurry of four mass meetings between 3 and 10 November, and participation skyrocketed. From 250 attendees at the September and October meetings, attendance jumped to 1,200 at the 3 November meeting in Simcoe. According to the *Reformer*, a majority of attendees were “foreign born,” and a number of angry speeches were made in English, Hungarian, and “Belgian” (presumably Flemish). Holwell chaired the meeting and by this time was firmly established as a key leader in the movement, being named to a five-person committee to interview members of the Association and a fifteen-member delegation to meet with the provincial Minister of

99. Unfortunately, a thorough search for more information about who E. Holwell was and how he came to participate in the 1937 growers' movement proved fruitless. *Munkás*, 14 August 1937.

100. It appears growers had expected higher prices due to the quality of their crop and the low stocks of manufacturers as a result of reduced production in 1936. Buyers on the other hand felt that they had paid too dearly for tobacco in 1936 and sought to restore a more favourable price. *Munkás*, 14 September 1937; *Simcoe Reformer*, 1 November 1937.

101. *Simcoe Reformer*, 9 February 1939.

102. *Simcoe Reformer*, 13 September 1937; *Simcoe Reformer*, 16 September 1937; *Simcoe Reformer*, 8 November 1937.

103. *Simcoe Reformer*, 18 October 1937; *Munkás*, 2 November 1937.

Agriculture, Patrick M. Dewan, which also included a female worker with a Hungarian surname, Elizabeth Csiszar. The growers again lowered their price demand however, this time to 34.5 cents.¹⁰⁴

The next meeting on 6 November was “again principally foreign” in attendance. Hichin, according to the *Reformer*, “assured the growers that the tobacco labourers are behind the movement one hundred per cent,” while Holwell claimed that 90 per cent of farmers were on board and that the Association was starting to weaken. Despite the signs of strength, the meeting witnessed the first real indications of fissure among the group. A fierce debate erupted over whether share growers should be included in the group meeting with Dewan, or whether only farm owners should be allowed to attend. Farmer Martin Stirtzinger led the owners-only argument, but by meeting’s end, he had lost his bid, and it was agreed that the entire committee of fifteen owners, share growers, workers, and Holwell would meet with Dewan.¹⁰⁵ The owners however, did not honour the outcome of the vote, and the next day refused to allow the share growers and workers a place at the meeting table, cutting the committee from fifteen to six. Over the next two mass meetings, on 9 and 10 November, this undemocratic decision was the cause of great uproar, and the crowd booed Stirtzinger off the stage when he tried to give his report of the meeting with Dewan, telling the assembled that there was nothing more they could do. After the room had quieted down, Stirtzinger stepped back to the podium to tender his resignation from the committee. Holwell, ever the consensus-builder, attempted to patch up the differences, saying that he harboured no ill will towards the new, smaller committee, and told the gathering that they too should throw their support behind the delegation, no matter what form it took. He also tried to boost the strikers’ morale: “The Imperial Tobacco Co. controls 70 per cent of the tobacco industry in Canada and they say there is a market for the tobacco, that is, if the growers knuckle down to them. But what are they going to do if you do not sell your tobacco? ... If you people are as determined as ever in your stand there is no doubt that the increase in the price will be forthcoming.”¹⁰⁶

Despite Holwell’s optimism, the growers’ movement had already reached its limits. Dissension in the ranks was one problem; another was the campaign of fear led by the Imperial Tobacco Company and the Marketing Association, with the *Reformer* serving happily as the mouthpiece for both. The paper often printed the viewpoints of both entities, even allotting front-page space for extended statements, and these served to ensure growers that resistance was futile: prices were determined by processes far out of their control, and the best they could do was to accept the offered rates and not rock the boat. Chairman Leitch issued a statement in the *Reformer* notable for its condescension and

104. *Simcoe Reformer*, 4 November 1937; *Munkás*, 6 November 1937.

105. *Simcoe Reformer*, 8 November 1937.

106. *Simcoe Reformer*, 11 November 1937.

xenophobic leanings: “Because of the great increase in numbers, and profound change in racial and language origins of the flue-cured tobacco growers of the Norfolk area in the [last] four years... it is understandable that the nervous, jittery atmosphere inevitable at the actual time of marketing this year’s crop, should produce misunderstandings and misconceptions of the purposes and powers of the Marketing Association.” Leitch took care to explain the complex evaluation of market factors that went into setting the average tobacco price, summing up that: “Lack of knowledge and understanding of these important matters leads to absurd and fantastic conclusions and decisions which cause irreparable disaster for growers.” He continued by declaring that “the intelligence of a child would grasp” that the offer of 24.5 cents per pound was to the farmers’ ultimate benefit, all things considered.¹⁰⁷ In the next issue of the *Reformer*, Imperial president Gray Miller waded into the conversation, with a statement that was also read on radio stations broadcasting from Brantford, Chatham, and London two days prior. The article’s front-page headline is telling: “‘Strike’ is Threat to Industry, Head of Imperial Tobacco Company Broadcasts; Stocks Ample.” Miller informed growers that Imperial had sufficient stocks of tobacco, and access to product in the US, assuring the holdouts that they needed Imperial more than Imperial needed them. Like Leitch, Miller took a paternalistic tone, combining a call for quasi-familial unity with a thinly veiled threat of discipline: “I, personally, have always taken the greatest interest in the development of the raising of flue-cured tobacco in Ontario, and cannot help but feel that the present situation, if continued, will give your industry a setback.”¹⁰⁸

Whether or not the fear mongering worked, the desired effect was achieved. Almost immediately after the 10 November meeting of growers, when Stirtzinger was shouted down, farmers were offered a slightly higher price and began selling their crop in droves. By 13 November, only ten crops remained unsold. Though the movement dried up quickly, the hold-outs did get a higher price for their crop – with many getting between one and six cents more per pound than the original offered price. The dispute had been the greatest flashpoint of contention in the Tobacco Belt up to this point, and as such prompted reflections on both sides about its meaning and legacy. Holwell, in a letter published in *Munkás* on behalf of the leadership committee, tried to raise growers’ spirits, declaring that the efforts had not been a total failure, since a modest price increase had been attained. He criticized the lack of power afforded to small growers under the Marketing Association, arguing: “We need a new tobacco growers’ association, an association which elects its own representatives democratically.” Such an organization would be able to compel the government to take action to curtail the unchecked powers of the

107. *Simcoe Reformer*, 8 November 1937.

108. *Simcoe Reformer*, 11 November 1937.

tobacco companies and large plantations.¹⁰⁹ An editorial in *Munkás* echoed the call for a new, more democratic association, stressing the need for such a body to incorporate the interests of both farmers and workers. Cooperation between the two groups had in fact been one of the bright spots of the movement: “Workers... were a huge help in the war fought against the common enemy.” They helped promote meetings, “and did everything for the growers’ success. They also knew that if the growers are going to win, it’s a win for the workers as well.”¹¹⁰

On the establishment side, Association secretary J.K. Perrett, when asked about the strike about a week after its collapse, “laid the blame for this at the door of outside agitators.... The dispute, he said, had for a time threatened amicable relations between growers and buyers as well as jeopardizing a promising export market.”¹¹¹ Perrett, of course, was partially correct. The leadership of Holwell, an outsider, was crucial to the little success that the movement did have. But the efforts of smallholders, share growers, and workers to increase their share of tobacco profits was not simply a case of a doe-eyed community being whipped into a frenzy by a mysterious, magnetic outsider. Instead, the 1937 campaign was built atop an infrastructure of dissent, a variety of organizations, relationships, and conversations within which farmers and workers alike analyzed their position within society, discussed ways of improving it, and took action to make it happen. Perrett’s second point was much more accurate – the dispute did indeed threaten “amicable relations,” as growers and their worker allies became increasingly aware of, and rejected, a system that exploited them to the benefit of the tobacco companies and large landholders. In the years after 1937, growers continued agitating for a fairer deal from tobacco companies and for a more democratic Marketing Association. In 1938, for example, Belgian and Hungarian growers successfully lobbied for increased representation for members of their respective ethnic groups on the Association’s board of directors.¹¹² Though limited information is available on this campaign, it is not much of a stretch to imagine that connections forged during the struggles of 1937 helped the growers’ efforts the following year.

1939: The Summer of Dissent

IF 1937 REPRESENTED THE HEIGHT of small grower mobilization in the Depression-era Tobacco Belt, then the greatest moment of worker resistance was the harvest of 1939, which saw the region’s proletarian political culture meet the “politics of indignation” of the unemployed “transients” of the Great

109. *Munkás*, 27 November 1937.

110. *Munkás*, 23 November 1937.

111. *Simcoe Reformer*, 18 November 1937; *Munkás*, 23 November 1937.

112. *Simcoe Reformer*, 3 November 1938; *Simcoe Reformer*, 27 July 1939.

Depression, who arrived by the thousands late that summer, looking for work in the fields. Jobseekers came to the Norfolk region every summer, but in 1939 the influx was without precedent. Newspaper advertisements and handbills had circulated across the country,¹¹³ proclaiming thousands of jobs available in the tobacco harvest, and for many desperate, out-of-work people this was enough to get them on a train or on the road, destination: Delhi. As many as 10,000 jobseekers arrived in Delhi in late July and early August from as far west as Alberta and as far east as Nova Scotia, overwhelming local authorities and prompting panicked newspaper headlines like this one: “Tobacco Fields of Norfolk Filled with Shattered Hopes of Great Army of Jobless... Sleep Anywhere, But Mostly in Open ... Crowd Mostly Orderly But Agitators Busy.”¹¹⁴ Delhi’s population of just over 2,000 was more than quintupled by the influx.¹¹⁵ There were not nearly as many jobs as people, and compounding the problem was the fact that the harvest was a week late, meaning that the jobless could expect to spend at least that much time sleeping in parks and commandeered barns before a lucky few were hired on to farms. In the same year of the publication of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, the story was all-too-familiar: mostly single men, but also couples and families, following rumour after rumour in pursuit of gainful employment, coming up empty at seemingly every turn.¹¹⁶ Delhi’s red carpet was not exactly rolled out for the incoming transients, who were alternately portrayed as criminals (thieves of vegetables from gardens, cigarettes from convenience stores, and sometimes even cars), sexual threats to local women, dangerous “foreign agitators,” and harbingers of disease.¹¹⁷ While some residents made remarkable efforts to feed and house the jobseekers, the reception was mostly hostile.¹¹⁸ Many observers recognized the potential danger to the Tobacco Belt’s social and economic order: “The situation is charged with dynamite,” said Delhi’s Chief of Police Ernest Platt.¹¹⁹ The ever-poetic Toronto *Telegram* called it “the greenest field for Communist and militant union agitators, a perfect set-up for a riot.”¹²⁰

113. It was never determined who was behind this advertising campaign, and the question was widely speculated on in the press. See, for example: *Clarion*, 5 August 1939; *Clarion*, 19 August 1939; *London Free Press*, 2 August 1939; *Simcoe Reformer*, 24 August 1939.

114. *London Free Press*, 2 August 1939.

115. “Table 10: Population by Census Subdivisions, 1871–1941,” Census of Canada, 1941, 108.

116. *Clarion*, 19 August 1939; *London Free Press*, 2 August 1939; *Toronto Telegram*, 5 August 1939; *Simcoe Reformer*, 3 August 1939; *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939; *Clarion*, 12 August 1939, magazine section.

117. *London Free Press*, 1 August 1939; *London Free Press*, 8 August 1939, evening ed.; *London Free Press*, 9 August 1939, evening ed.; *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939.

118. *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939; *Toronto Telegram*, 9 August 1939.

119. *London Free Press*, 1 August 1939.

120. *Toronto Telegram*, 2 August 1939.

The *Telegram* was not far off the mark, and the harvest of 1939 turned out to be a wellspring of worker protest, through both formal organizational efforts and spontaneous incidents of worker self-activity. Both types of resistance, though, should be seen in the context of the Tobacco Belt's infrastructure of dissent, which received an extra burst of energy from the influx of unemployed "transients," many of whom expressed what we might call, borrowing from David Thompson, a "politics of indignation."¹²¹ As with the organizational efforts of 1937, this one too attempted to unite farmers and workers, presenting an interesting point of comparison with the growers' movement of 1937.

As in 1937, there was an orchestrated campaign by tobacco workers to get jobseekers to hold out for higher wages. Unlike 1937, the efforts in 1939 went beyond simply handing out flyers, as workers organized a union, held mass meetings, and picketed farms that hired workers below the union wage. The United Tobacco Workers of Canada, Local No. 1, Delhi was formed in the very early days of the influx, sometime in late July. The "provisional committee" of the union was made up of six men, four of whom were from the Tobacco Belt: Nick Kuchinsky, Frank Pastor, Bill Koracz, and Marvin Burke, the last of whom frequently served as chairman at Communist Party meetings in Delhi. The other two were Party members from Toronto: Steve Hill, who had come out of the Hungarian Workers' Clubs; and Jack Scott, who had occupied various prominent roles within the Party and was seen as the central leader of the union. While the union had strong Communist participation among its leadership, it appears to have been a grassroots creation of jobseekers rather than the product of Communist Party directives.¹²² The earliest actions of the local were the handing out of flyers publicizing the wage demands: \$3.50 to \$4 per day for skilled tyers and primers, and \$2.75 to \$3 for handlers (a lower-skilled position generally held by women that was part of the process of preparing the leaves for the kiln). The Hungarian Workers' Clubs coordinated flyering efforts in Tillsonburg, while the union worked Delhi. The local combined its flyering with the picketing of farms that had hired workers at below the

121. Thompson, writing about unemployed resistance and organization before the Depression, generally employs the much stronger term "revolutionary indignation." I am borrowing from him the idea of indignation as a crucial way in which the unemployed express their disgust for and rejection of the socio-economic order which produces their unemployed and poverty, and also as a key step along the way to developing ideas of alternative worlds. I opt for his less-used term "politics of indignation," because while the available sources on the 1939 transients demonstrate ample indignation towards the status quo, they do not indicate a widespread revolutionary politics. See David Thompson, "Working-Class Anguish and Revolutionary Indignation: The Making of Radical and Socialist Unemployment Movements in Canada, 1875–1928," PhD thesis, Queen's University, 2014.

122. This estimation is gleaned both from press reports on the union and from Jack Scott's oral history, in which he characterizes his time working in Ontario agriculture as a period in which he was *not* actively involved in Party work. Scott, *A Communist Life*, 52–53.

union rate.¹²³ The activists' ability to organize among the throngs of jobseekers demonstrates the importance of capitalist tobacco's geography in shaping the experiences of workers, and also the ways in which workers struggled to repurpose that geography for their own ends.

The first reported meeting of the union took place in a park beside the Baptist Church on the night of 2 August, with 500 in attendance. Marvin Burke chaired the assembly and speeches were delivered from a tree stump in Hungarian, English, Slovakian, and Ukrainian.¹²⁴ Jack Scott pushed back against suggestions that the unemployed did not want to work, suggesting that the presence of thousands of jobseekers in Delhi was ample evidence to the contrary. "We came here to work, we are staying here to work, and we are going to fight to get fair wages when we do work."¹²⁵ The union leaders reminded attendees of the wage demands and urged them to fill out a union card and join up – they could wait until they secured work before paying dues.¹²⁶

The union rejected the idea that they were "trouble makers" or "agitators" and instead characterized themselves as respectable citizens simply trying to make an honest living. As Scott said in his 2 August speech, "We want to keep order, but we want work. I myself walked 20 miles to find a job. Others have walked still further."¹²⁷ Two days later, the union approached Police Chief Platt and requested rakes and shovels in order to clean up one of the parks where transients had set up camp. Platt refused the request, not wanting to give legitimacy to the temporary settlement, but the workers cleaned it up anyway, laying claim to respectability through this geographic intervention.¹²⁸ Transients too fought for recognition of their respectable status as they expressed indignation at their rotten treatment in the Tobacco Belt: some invoked their belonging in the Canadian polity, while others rejected the labels of "Communists" and "radicals," demonstrating the ideological heterogeneity among the jobseekers, even as they expressed a common refusal of their situation. Said one jobseeker: "This isn't Regina of 1933 and 1934.... We came here to spend our money looking for jobs, and we're not looking for any trouble."¹²⁹ Frank Kubasky, a Czech Canadian who had lived in Canada for fifteen years, told a reporter: "It cost me \$8 to become a Canadian. How is it that I am not as good a Canadian as the people who became citizens merely by being born here? ... We're workers, not bums.... We're not a bunch of Communists

123. *London Free Press*, 1 August 1939; *Globe and Mail*, 1 August 1939; *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939; *Toronto Star*, 1 August 1939.

124. *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939; *Munkás*, 5 August 1939.

125. *Simcoe Reformer*, 3 August 1939.

126. *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939; *Munkás*, 5 August 1939.

127. *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939.

128. *London Free Press*, 4 August 1939.

129. *Toronto Telegram*, 3 August 1939.

either.”¹³⁰ But the refusal of the Communist label did not mean that jobseekers were simply defending the Tobacco Belt’s ruling order. As Kubasky was quoted in a different article: “There have been reports that we are Communists. We are not Communists. But if authorities want to force us out we are ready.”¹³¹ What, exactly, Kubasky and his fellow jobless were ready to do is not apparent. But what is abundantly clear is how transients’ indignation, following David Thompson, contributed to the development of a politics of refusal.

Like the Workers’ Unity League-organized sugar beet harvesters in Alberta and Ontario and the tobacco campaigns before them, the United Tobacco Workers attempted a policy of cooperation with small growers (both owners and share growers), wherein workers and growers would unite and demand higher prices from the tobacco companies, and therefore higher wages for the workers. In the union’s first meeting, both Scott and the “Slavic”-speaking provisional committee member Nick Kuchinsky declared this goal in their remarks. Scott repeated the call in a speech at the Hungarian Mutual Benefit Association picnic on 6 August, as did Steve Hill in an interview with the *Free Press*. It was also a frequent plea in *Munkás*, which reported that both jobseekers and small growers attended the Benefit Association picnic, and expressed hope that it would be a chance for the two groups to form connections.¹³² The calls for grower support appear to have gone nowhere, save perhaps for some friendly conversation over sandwiches at the picnic. The 1939 campaign stands in stark contrast with the growers’ campaign of 1937. Whereas workers undertook a large leadership role in the growers’ efforts, the gesture was not reciprocated two years later. Growers did not appear on union committees, speak at meetings, or support the workers in the press – mainstream or not. So while not as dramatic as the cozying up of Alberta sugar beet growers with Dominion Sugar, the end result in the Tobacco Belt was much the same: workers could be counted on to support small growers, but growers were unreliable allies for workers.

Workers and jobseekers seeking to organize were generally harassed and thwarted by police, with the support of local and provincial authorities. Organizers passing out handbills were taken in by the police for questioning and had their flyers confiscated.¹³³ The police not only helped to quash dissent, but also assisted growers in the hiring process by helping them find labourers, including for the purpose of replacing strikers.¹³⁴ The state, both local and

130. *London Free Press*, 4 August 1939. Striking workers in Oxnard, California also laid claim to citizenship as a way of defending their actions and criticizing their substandard conditions. Barajas, *Curious Unions*, 184–185.

131. *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939.

132. *London Free Press*, 3 August 1939; *Munkás*, 5 August 1939–10 August 1939.

133. *Globe and Mail*, 1 August 1939.

134. Strike 83 (1939), SLF, Microfilm Collection, A0; *Toronto Telegram*, 12 August 1939.

provincial, was also clearly committed to protecting the interests of farmers, and Queen's Park dispatched additional provincial police officers to the region to deal with the influx.¹³⁵ The Reeves of Delhi and Walsingham were much more explicit in their condemnation of the attempts at organizing. The reeve of Walsingham advocated running striking workers out of town in order to prevent the spread of unrest elsewhere in the district, and to create a "sobering effect" on worker militancy.¹³⁶ Delhi's Reeve Wilbur, in the early days of the influx, expressed his policy on dealing with Communist organizers: "I've told the chief ... that the first one of those fellows that shows his nose around here is to be run out of town on the double." The reeve went on to tell the story of how he had handled a Communist organizer in Delhi the previous year. Wilbur claimed that he and the police had taken him to the jail, shown him a cell, and threatened him to ten days imprisonment unless he left town. The activist complied.¹³⁷ Police not only ousted strikers and organizers, but also jobseekers who refused to take offered wages. "When we find any man refusing to work for less than \$3.50 or \$4 a day we take his name and tell him to get out of town," a police officer told the *Star*.¹³⁸ Such coordinated repression on the part of police and local government were experiences common to Depression-era rural dissidents across North America, and represented serious obstacles to successful organization.¹³⁹

Despite these difficulties, the union does appear to have had some measure of success. Scott recalled in his memoir that "out of more than twenty thousand people there weren't more than a hundred that went to work," and that growers soon caved to the pressure and raised wages to within 50 cents of the union's demands.¹⁴⁰ Given the lack of corroboration in the press (including *Munkás*), it is likely that Scott's account was hyperbolic, but certainly some workers did indeed hold out. Two such workers were Vincent Dorton and his wife (whose first name was unfortunately not published), who decided to move on to London rather than work for below the union rate. Mrs. Dorton explained that they were offered a combined six dollars per day. "We didn't take it. The union officials told us we had better not start to work unless we

135. *Toronto Star*, 3 August 1939; *Toronto Star*, 1 August 1939; *Toronto Star*, 4 August 1939.

136. *Toronto Telegram*, 12 August 1939.

137. *Globe and Mail*, 4 August 1939.

138. *Toronto Star*, 1 August 1939; *Munkás*, 26 August 1939.

139. For examples of police repression in Alberta, Alabama, and California see, respectively: Thompson and Seager, "Workers, Growers and Monopolists," 169; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 40–41, 166; and Barajas, *Curious Unions*, 153–155, 173. Violence against organizers in Alabama, characterized by virulent racism, was particularly horrific, as activists were frequently beaten, kidnapped, and murdered.

140. Scott, *A Communist Life*, 53.

were being paid \$8 a day.”¹⁴¹ In late August there were reports of jobseekers in nearby Langton refusing to work for below the \$3.50 rate the union had set.¹⁴²

As a formal institution, the United Tobacco Workers petered out almost as soon as it had got going. Certainly the state repression made their work more difficult, but the more important reason for the decline of the union was the dissipation of jobseekers from Delhi. Despite the panicked cries in the press, the transient situation worked itself out within about a week. As the harvest approached its starting point, farmers took on their usual numbers of employees. Many jobseekers who were not hired in Delhi moved on to other parts of the Tobacco Belt, or left the region entirely. By the time the Delhi village council voted on 8 August to evict transients within a week, most of them had already left on their own accord. The net result was an end to the massive congregations in downtown Delhi, and with them went the union, as its members too either found work or left town. Neither the union nor its leaders were mentioned in the press again after the Benefit Association picnic.¹⁴³

The abrupt decline of union activity by no means spelled the end of the Tobacco Belt’s summer of dissent, as a number of spontaneous strikes and other worker actions continued on farms throughout the month of August. Rather than ending with the union, the sites of struggle simply shifted locations, from the parks and streets of Delhi, to the individual points of production. At least four strikes or work disruptions took place during the harvest. On the morning of 11 August, nine wage labourers on a farm in Langton (about twenty kilometres southwest of Delhi) refused to work unless the grower upped their pay from \$3.50 to \$4 per day. The share grower who operated the farm refused the pay increase and summoned the local police constable, James Pepper, who escorted the strikers out of town. Six of the strikers were from Brantford, one from Toronto, one from Saskatchewan, and one had an unlisted place of origin. They were easily replaced with jobseekers in the area.¹⁴⁴ Two days later, Pepper took to the press to warn of ongoing agitation in the region, citing calls from two growers asking for replacement workers. Pepper warned, “If there is any attempt to strike, the men are here in the village to replace the strikers who will be escorted out of the district immediately.”¹⁴⁵ On 14 August, the *Brantford Expositor* reported on the militancy spreading throughout the region: “Miniature strikes and threats of bigger strikes on the part of tobacco laborers have been causing some uneasiness, but the authorities stated they are

141. *London Free Press*, 4 August 1939, evening ed.

142. *Munkás*, 26 August 1939.

143. *London Free Press*, 9 August 1939, evening ed.; *London Free Press*, 4 August 1939; *London Free Press*, 18 August 1939.

144. Strike 83 (1939), SLF, Microfilm Collection, A0; *Globe and Mail*, 12 August 1939.

145. *Globe and Mail*, 14 August 1939.

fully capable of dealing with it.”¹⁴⁶ The last reported strike, on 25 August, was actually successful, as workers at a farm near Delhi refused to work unless their \$3 wage was upped to \$3.50. The grower complied within an hour.¹⁴⁷ Strikes weren’t the only form of worker self-activity that emerged in the summer of 1939. Scott told an interesting story of Czechoslovakian workers confronting a farmer over his sexual predations towards a female co-worker:

A couple of them came over one night and told Steve and I that they had found a young woman crying. They found out that she was crying because the grower told her that if she didn’t go to bed with him he would fire her. The gang went to the grower and put it on the line: ‘Do you want a woman to go to bed with you or do you want your tobacco picked? You have a choice.’ ‘I want my tobacco picked.’ ‘Well, lay off the woman or your tobacco will not be picked. It will rot in the bloody field.’ That settled that. He never bothered her after that.¹⁴⁸

The summer of struggle in the Tobacco Belt was not limited to the formal activities of the nascent United Tobacco Workers, but was rather a much larger moment of upheaval, of which the union was an important – but not totalizing – component. All of this was, of course, built on the region’s infrastructure of dissent, including its factors of geography and hiring practices, which created the conditions in which worker organization could happen. In 1939, the south-western Ontario radicals were joined by masses of indignant unemployed, paving the way for the Tobacco Belt’s greatest moment of worker dissent.

The timing, however, could not have been worse, as the start of World War II in early September spelled the end of the summer of struggle. Many tobacco workers enlisted, and the wartime economic boom quickly ended the mass migrations of unemployed in search of work. While labour strife continued in the tobacco sector well into the post-war era, it never again reached the tenor of the late 1930s.¹⁴⁹ A picnic organized by the Canadian Hungarian Mutual Benefit Federation in Delhi on 3 September, the day before Labour Day, provides a fitting symbol for the potential of the Tobacco Belt dissent and its rapid conclusion. On this important weekend on the left and labour calendars, the picnic organizers had succeeded in booking the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Tim Buck, to speak to attendees on “The Tobacco Situation.” It is not hard to imagine tobacco activists interpreting the speech as a confirmation of the importance and successes of their struggles, and as indicative of the gathering momentum of their movement. As a *Reformer* editorial complained: “Mass meetings of foreigners, addressed by Communists,

146. *Brantford Expositor*, 14 August 1939.

147. *Munkás*, 26 August 1939.

148. Scott, *A Communist Life*, 53.

149. Minor spontaneous strikes, organizing campaigns, and coordinated wage demands among jobseekers continued into the 1940s and beyond. See, for example: *Simcoe Reformer*, 9 August 1943; *Toronto Telegram*, 2 September 1961; and Reid-Musson, “Historicizing Precarity,” 166.

have become altogether too frequent in the tobacco area in recent months.”¹⁵⁰ However, the commencement of hostilities on 1 September prompted Buck to speak instead about the war and what it meant for Communists in Canada.¹⁵¹ Clearly, the Tobacco Belt’s summer of dissent was over, as the struggles in the fields were quickly overshadowed by the start of a new global war.

Conclusion

THE FLEETING NATURE of Tobacco Belt radicalism and its very modest accomplishments point to significant limitations in the infrastructure of dissent. Some of the crucial weaknesses were factors familiar to students of farm worker activism, including: the geographical diffuseness typical of agriculture, which made sector-wide organizing difficult once workers were employed on farms; the transiency of the workforce, creating a very short window for organization and a high level of workforce turnover year to year; and the lack of sustained involvement from established unions or political parties. Indeed, Jack Scott voiced some of these very concerns when he recalled conditions in the Norfolk region: “There’s no organization. How can you organize people who just flop in there and you’ve only got a six-week period ... [?]”¹⁵² The lack of institutional support from established political parties or unions also set Ontario Tobacco’s infrastructure of dissent apart from those of rural activists in Alabama and California, where the Communist Party and affiliated unions devoted considerable resources towards the struggles of agrarian working peoples. This factor helps to explain the greater stability and accomplishments of the two American movements, though even in these contexts the successes were partial and fleeting.¹⁵³ To the above limitations we can add the stringent and often violent opposition of the state towards worker mobilization. But even in the face of these obstacles, a community of immigrant farm workers and small growers in the Depression-era Tobacco Belt were able to build an infrastructure of dissent, allowing for a degree of political activity which set tobacco apart from other agricultural sectors.

This consideration of working people’s organization and resistance in the Depression-era Tobacco Belt seriously disrupts conceptions of rural workers

150. *Simcoe Reformer*, 7 September 1939.

151. *Simcoe Reformer*, 5 September 1939.

152. Scott, *A Communist Life*, 53.

153. Alabama farm workers and sharecroppers won some small wage increases and improvements in conditions, but, like the Tobacco Belt dissidents, they also saw their movement disintegrate by the start of World War II. California farm workers enjoyed some larger (though still modest) victories, but here too the farm worker movement dissipated in the 1940s and 1950s before being famously revived from the late 1950s into the 1970s, eventually under the banner of the United Farm Workers of America. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 34–56, 159–175; Barajas, *Curious Unions*, 6–11, 131–259.

as inherently docile, and instead encourages a critical appraisal of the conditions under which farm workers have been able to collectively challenge their conditions of employment. The results of the 1930s efforts were not dramatic – a pay raise here, improved representation for immigrant growers there – but during the Great Depression, tobacco workers, share growers, and smallholders were able to coalesce around some basic common issues, challenge the tobacco companies and large plantations, and improve, if only slightly, their material conditions. This example stands in striking contrast to notions of the softening effects of agricultural labour held by the state in this period and evidenced by policies such as the farm placement plan. Contrary to these misconceptions, farm work has no magical properties that – with each thrust of the pitchfork or tear of the tobacco leaf – transform radical urbanites into placid, hard-working entrepreneurs-in-training. Instead, presented with conditions in which some of the common barriers to organization might be overcome, farm workers have been able to take collective action to better their lot, as demonstrated by tobacco working people’s spirited campaigns for a more equitable and democratic sector.

This investigation points towards the importance of developing a historicized understanding of agricultural wage labour in general, and of farm workers’ organizational efforts in particular. Since the 1990s, there has been a sharp increase in studies on migrant agricultural labourers in Canada, which, when they do employ a historical context, generally provide an overview of the postwar interplay between growers’ labour demands and the state’s efforts to satiate them via domestic and international temporary labour programs.¹⁵⁴ Two sociologists have recently examined the history of Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers in search of lessons for farm labour advocates and scholars in Ontario.¹⁵⁵ This is a worthy project indeed, but the findings presented here suggest that there is a great deal to be learned within Canada’s and Ontario’s own largely unexamined history of farm worker organization and militancy. A critical understanding of the past organizational efforts of agricultural workers in Ontario is an essential step towards developing a historically informed analysis of migrant farm labour in the present.

154. See, for example: Vic Satzewich, *Racism and the Incorporation of Foreign Labour: Farm Labour Migration to Canada since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Tanya Basok, *Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002). For an overview of the conditions faced by contemporary migrant farm workers, see Fay Faraday, *Made in Canada: How the Law Constructs Migrant Workers’ Insecurity* (Toronto: George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation, 2012), and “The Status of Migrant Farm Workers in Canada,” (UFCW Canada and the Agriculture Workers Alliance, 2015).

155. Jonah Butovsky and Murray E.G. Smith, “Beyond Social Unionism: Farm Workers in Ontario and Some Lessons from Labour History,” *Labour/Le Travail* 59 (Spring 2007): 69–97.

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