

## Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the “Third Period”: The Workers’ Unity League, 1929-1935

John Manley

Volume 5, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031078ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031078ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Manley, J. (1994). Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the “Third Period”: The Workers’ Unity League, 1929-1935. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 5(1), 167–194. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031078ar>

### Article abstract

In compliance with the Third Period “line” of the Communist International (Comintern), the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) launched The Workers’ Unity League (WUL) as a centre of “revolutionary” or “red” unionism in December 1929. Until it was “liquidated” during the winter of 1935-6, the WUL had a significance in Canada’s Depression labour struggles far outweighing its maximum membership of between 30,000 and 40,000; a significance, moreover, that has yet to be fully acknowledged or analysed. This article seeks to look beyond the conventional view that presents the CPC as a Comintern cipher and the WUL (when it is considered at all) as a “sectarian”, “adventurist”, “ultra-left” organisation with no real interest in building stable labour unions. While there is no doubt that the two most crucial decisions concerning the WUL — to create it and to liquidate it — were taken in Moscow, neither the Comintern nor the CPC leadership in Toronto was in a position to supervise the implementation of the Third Period line on the ground. Within the broad parameters of the line, local organisers tended to operate as “good trade unionists” rather than “good bolsheviks”, using every available opportunity to modify and adapt tactics to local realities. They used their room for manoeuvre to considerable effect, especially during the economic and political upturn of 1933-34, when the WUL led a majority of all strikes and established union bases in a host of hitherto unorganised or weakly organised industries. At the height of its power, however, the WUL knew that it had barely dented the essential mass production industries — auto, steel, rubber, farm machinery. This fact, coupled with the experience of defeat in several key strikes, forced the party to reconsider the WUL’s future. Whether the WUL could have survived as part of a national union centre remains open to question. Indisputably, the Comintern terminated that option in 1935.

# Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the “Third Period”: The Workers’ Unity League, 1929-1935

JOHN MANLEY

## *Résumé*

*In compliance with the Third Period “line” of the Communist International (Comintern), the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) launched The Workers’ Unity League (WUL) as a centre of “revolutionary” or “red” unionism in December 1929. Until it was “liquidated” during the winter of 1935-6, the WUL had a significance in Canada’s Depression labour struggles far outweighing its maximum membership of between 30,000 and 40,000; a significance, moreover, that has yet to be fully acknowledged or analysed. This article seeks to look beyond the conventional view that presents the CPC as a Comintern cipher and the WUL (when it is considered at all) as a “sectarian,” “adventurist,” “ultra-left” organisation with no real interest in building stable labour unions. While there is no doubt that the two most crucial decisions concerning the WUL — to create it and to liquidate it — were taken in Moscow, neither the Comintern nor the CPC leadership in Toronto was in a position to supervise the implementation of the Third Period line on the ground. Within the broad parameters of the line, local organisers tended to operate as “good trade unionists” rather than “good bolsheviks,” using every available opportunity to modify and adapt tactics to local realities. They used their room for manoeuvre to considerable effect, especially during the economic and political upturn of 1933-34, when the WUL led a majority of all strikes and established union bases in a host of hitherto unorganised or weakly organised industries. At the height of its power, however, the WUL knew that it had barely dented the essential mass production industries — auto, steel, rubber, farm machinery. This fact, coupled with the experience of defeat in several key strikes, forced the party to reconsider the WUL’s future. Whether the WUL could have survived as part of a national union centre remains open to question. Indisputably, the Comintern terminated that option in 1935.*

\* \* \* \*

---

This final draft has been influenced by comments from my University of Central Lancashire colleagues, Rex Pope and Keith Vernon, participants in the original CHA session, especially my commentator Greg Kealey, and by the paper’s anonymous readers who collectively demanded that the length be cut. Thanks to all of them.

*En décembre 1929, en vertu des directives de la III<sup>e</sup> Internationale (Komintern), le Parti communiste du Canada (PCC) mit sur pied la Ligue d'unité ouvrière (LUO), pour servir de base à la diffusion du syndicalisme révolutionnaire. Avant d'être «liquidée», au cours de l'hiver 1935-1936, la Ligue a exercé sur les luttes ouvrières du pays une influence qui dépassa de beaucoup le nombre de ses membres (un maximum de 30 000 ou 40 000 individus). Sa signification est encore mal reconnue et mal comprise. Cette communication tente d'aller au delà de l'image conventionnelle du PCC comme une courroie de transmission du Komintern et de la LUO, quand on daigne s'y attarder, comme une organisation sectaire, aventureuse, ultra gauchiste et sans aucun intérêt pour la construction de syndicats ouvriers solides. Il ne fait aucun doute que les décisions les plus importantes concernant la Ligue furent prises à Moscou, celles de sa création et de son élimination, mais il n'en demeure pas moins que ni le Komintern ni la direction du PCC à Toronto n'étaient à même de superviser l'application de la ligne de la III<sup>e</sup> Internationale sur le terrain. C'est ainsi que, tout en acceptant les larges paramètres de la ligne, les organisateurs locaux purent travailler en «bons syndicalistes» plutôt qu'en «bons bolcheviks», en profitant de toutes les chances possibles pour adapter leurs tactiques aux réalités environnantes. Ils ont utilisé cette marge de manoeuvre avec un succès considérable, particulièrement au cours des soulèvements politiques des années 1933 et 1934. La Ligue d'unité ouvrière fut alors au centre de la majorité de l'ensemble des grèves du pays et elle établit des bases syndicales dans un ensemble de secteurs industriels auparavant mal ou peu organisés. Au sommet de son pouvoir, la Ligue savait pourtant qu'elle avait à peine entamé le secteur de la production de masse, que ce soit l'automobile, l'acier, le caoutchouc ou encore la machinerie agricole. Cette situation, à laquelle il faut ajouter la défaite de quelques grèves cruciales, a forcé le parti à repenser l'avenir de la Ligue. Elle aurait peut-être pu survivre, pour devenir une partie d'une centrale nationale. Mais en 1935, indiscutablement, le Komintern mit fin à cette alternative.*

The Workers' Unity League (WUL) played a prominent role in Canada's Great Depression labour struggles: as Irving Abella and David Miller have noted, "what strikes there were were almost always organized and led by the Workers' Unity League." Yet despite Abella's suggestion that in 1935 the WUL could have formed the core of a progressive, national union movement, it has generally fared poorly in Canadian labour historiography, perhaps because of its roots in the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in its "Stalinist" heyday. Yet the absence of a detailed study has not deterred historians from making sweeping generalizations that question whether, for all its activity, it actually achieved anything. Ian Angus's Trotskyist analysis sees nothing positive in the record of red unionism, while from a social democratic perspective Desmond Morton asserts that the "familiar outcome" of its efforts was "violence, martyrdom and misery." John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager have qualified some of the negative stereotype without offering an alternative generalization, but the WUL's fate may nevertheless be marginalization: the authors of what deserves to become an influential textbook recently

achieved an impressive feat of minimalism by devoting a thrifty eight words to “the Workers’ Unity League, a communist inspired union organization.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper starts from the premise that the WUL deserves a more detailed and sympathetic critique. It also questions one of the staples of cold War” historiography: the all-determining voice of the Communist International (Comintern). During the Comintern era every national Communist Party operated within a world movement orchestrated by the Comintern’s Executive Committee (ECCI) in Moscow. In theory, all were of equal status; in reality, they usually deferred to the ECCI and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). By the time Joseph Stalin established his hegemony in 1928-29, the Comintern was in a position to choose leaders who would implement “the line” without demur. Resistance, as Palmiro Togliatti noted, would result in “some kid out of the Lenin School” being placed in control. Nevertheless, presenting “each national communist party as if it were just a puppet whose limbs were manipulated by strings pulled in Moscow” undervalues the importance of the party’s relationship to its “national balance of forces” and “national political culture”. Even when Comintern authority was at its strongest, as in the “Third Period” (1928-35), the ECCI rarely spoke with a single, clear voice. This left room for parties to exercise a degree of control over the implementation of the line.<sup>2</sup>

The Third Period line marked a sharp break with the united front tactics employed by the CPC since its formation in 1921, tactics which the party identified as the quintessence of Leninism. Between 1921 and 1928, CPC members operated exclusively within the mainstream labour movement, primarily in the international craft unions affiliated to the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) of Canada and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In 1924-25, however, the Comintern’s trade union auxiliary, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) created the first potential breach in the united front by giving the party the additional task of organizing new industrial unions in Canada’s unorganized mass production plants. The TLC was unprepared to support such a drive, forcing the CPC to contract a semi-formal alliance with the All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL), a dissident group of national unions and international union breakaways formed in 1926. When the first news of Moscow’s “left turn,” calling for

- 
1. Irving Abella and David Miller (eds.), *The Canadian Worker in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto, 1978), 260; Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1973); Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal, 1981), chs.14, 15; Desmond Morton with Terry Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (Ottawa, 1980), 144; John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada 1929-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto, 1985), ch. 10; Alvin Finkel and Margaret Conrad with Veronica Strong-Boag, *History of the Canadian Peoples. Volume II. 1867 to the Present* (Toronto, 1993), 372.
  2. Togliatti, quoted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London, 1978), 50; Perry Anderson, “Communist Party History,” in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), 145-56; E.H. Carr, *The Twilight of Comintern 1930-1935* (Basingstoke and London, 1982), *passim*.

communists to assume a more independent organizing role, filtered through early in 1928, party leaders believed they could make the change in concert with the ACCL. They launched the “new line” in a number of joint initiatives, notably in the auto industry.<sup>3</sup>

If the new line was initially perceived as a continuation (under new conditions) of longstanding communist commitments to Canadian trade union autonomy, organization of the unorganized and industrial unionism, it rapidly acquired a momentum that drove the CPC into isolation. “Dual unionism” gave the TLC the pretext it needed to start a purge of the left, symbolized by CPC General Secretary Jack MacDonald’s expulsion from the September 1928 TLC Convention. This action had the effect of driving the ACCL to the right. Keen to dispel the perception that it was the “All-Red Congress,” President Aaron Mosher ejected two of the three unions in which communists were most heavily entrenched, the Auto Workers’ Industrial Union (AWIU) and the Lumber Workers’ Industrial Union (LWIU). These measures in turn facilitated the party’s reception of the fully-articulated — and much more alarming — Third Period analysis. The purely economic analysis was just about acceptable: postwar capitalism had now entered its Third Period, in which its “internal and external contradictions” (rationalization, overproduction crises, mass unemployment, inter-imperialist rivalries over markets) would ripen into a global political crisis. The political analysis, however, was harder to swallow: it called for national communist parties to prepare far independent revolutionary leadership by struggling both to wrest the reformist trade unions away from the reformist bureaucracy and to form “revolutionary” unions and union centres. Furthermore, it further argued that *bourgeois* democracy would undergo “fascization” and, most controversially, that social democracy would inexorably follow suit, operating as a “social fascist” ally of the *bourgeoisie* in the struggle of “class against class”. “Social” fascism was as great an enemy as fascism itself.<sup>4</sup>

Although the CPC rapidly absorbed the new line, its precise trade union implications remained uncertain. Lenin School student Sam Carr returned from Moscow in spring 1929 with the news that the creation of a rival “red” centre was a question only of timing. Prompted by developments in the American party, the Canadian party convention in June accepted the Third Period analysis and declared its main industrial objective to be “the building of a revolutionary Canadian center based upon industrial unions and linked up with the world revolutionary trade union movement by affiliation to the RILU.” Nevertheless, no time scale was set, and RILU Secretary A.S. Lozovsky’s summary of the Tenth ECCI Plenum (July 1929) strengthened the hand of party members who doubted

- 
3. No satisfactory account of the the CPC’s industrial politics during the 1920s has been published. See the author’s “Communism and the Canadian Working Class during the Great Depression: The Workers’ Unity League, 1930-1936,” (Dalhousie University, 1984), chs. 1-2.
  4. Canada, National Archives (henceforth NAC), MG 281 103, Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Papers, Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), Executive Council, Minutes, 8 September 1928 (microfilm); CLC Papers, Vol.164, ACCL, memo re “Some Suggested Alterations and Additions,” 30 December 1927; TLC, *Report of Proceedings of the 44th Annual Convention*, Toronto, 1928, p 13-20;.

whether the necessary conditions for the formation of individual red unions — never mind a new centre — were present in Canada. There was no “high tide of strikes”; the “political struggle” was not “very acute”; “considerable sections of the proletariat” had not “already grasped the social fascist character of the reformist trade union bureaucracy;” and, as the fate of the fledgling red unions indicated, few were “actively supporting the formation” of new unions. By the year’s end, however, the RILU was insisting that the CPC make the break. The party somewhat reluctantly complied.<sup>5</sup>

According to Tim Buck, residual skepticism about the new line was dispelled by the Wall Street “Crash”.<sup>6</sup> Already, his new “leftist” leadership had underlined its loyalty to the new line in responding to a walk-out at Hamilton’s National Steel Car Company. One of very few contemporary manifestations of “mass radicalization,” the strike had indeed been provoked by the combination of rationalization, more intensified work, deteriorating safety standards and wage cuts which, according to the Third Period prospectus, would engender rising class struggle. Though not a WUL strike (as Tom Ewan’s autobiography claims), it represented the first manifestation of the relatively brief “sectarian” phase of the new line. It was a purely communist affair from the outset: Young Communist League (YCL) cadre Harvey Murphy led it, backed up by regular visits from national party leaders; strike relief was party-organized and largely dependent on party contributions; and tactics followed the formula of militant “mass struggle” deemed appropriate for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in a developing revolutionary situation, including provocative verbal abuse of Hamilton’s labour establishment.<sup>7</sup>

These tactics had predictable consequences. Initial sympathy shown by a section of the Hamilton Trades and Labour Council (HTLC) and the city council’s minority labour group evaporated. When a strikers’ delegation appealed for the HTLC’s assistance, they were turned down flat for their “nerve . . . [and] effrontery.” The strikers thus had to rely on party resources and on appeals to the general public, but unfortunately for them the party was then mired in the struggle over “bolshevization.” With Ukrainians and Finns

- 
5. Ontario, Provincial Archives (henceforth PAO), CPC Papers, 12D 0075 ff., Tim Buck, “Report on Plenum of the CEC of the Workers’ (Communist) Party of America,” December 1928; *ibid.*, 8C 0257 ff., “Report of the Sixth National Convention of the Communist Party of Canada,” 31 May-7 June 1929; *ibid.*, 8C 0210, CPC Political Committee, Minutes, 13 December 1929; *ibid.*, 10C 1810, 1813-14, CPC National Trade Department, Minutes, 25 December 1929; Sam Carr, “Why So Many Failures in the Industrial Work,” *The Worker*, 4 May 1929; Lozovsky, quoted in Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents*. Vol. III, (London, 1965), 52-64. For a concise but incisive account of the coming of the “new line” in the CPUSA, see Edward Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, 1994), 238-45.
  6. Phyllis Clarke and William Beeching (eds.), *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck* (Toronto, 1977), 148.
  7. The following account of the strike is based mainly on NAC, Department of Labour Records, Strikes and Lockouts Files, Vol. 343, file 87, and material in the PAO, CPC Papers. Particularly useful is the Young Communist League’s “Report on Hamilton Steel Car Strike,” submitted to Polburo, YCL of Canada, 14 November 1929, IOC 2295ff.

in particular displaying hostility to calls for the more complete integration of the party's semi-autonomous "language fractions" into the red union struggle, on this occasion the Finnish Organization of Canada — usually *the* most reliable source of material solidarity — ignored the party's frantic appeals. The general public also found communist appeals resistible. Failure to mobilize a serious relief effort proved crucial. Unable to win quickly, the party could not prevent a gradual drift back to work (although remarkably 300 of 1200 strikers remained solid for the full six weeks), and its claim that the strike had actually been a victory — on the grounds that it had forced the company to raise wages in other departments — made it "the laughing stock of the international labour movement in Hamilton."

Party leaders tried to convince themselves that while *this* strike may have failed, its very existence vindicated the Third Period analysis; and since defeat was due to remediable factors — individual tactical errors, inexperience, and the failure of the relief effort — the party remained on course for mass leadership of the revolutionary struggle. Their deepest feelings about the significance of the strike were perhaps more clearly shown by their tardiness in proceeding with the formation of the WUL. Even with the inspiration of Wall Street, the party needed a sharp reminder from the RILU before it decided, in December, on a name for the new organization. Even then, three months **after** the American Communist Party had launched its Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) with a national conference, the CPC remained so shy about publicizing the creation of the WUL that news of its launch only appeared in *The Worker* in March. This article coincided with the first real WUL intervention, an attempt to split the Cape Breton miners from United Mine Workers of America District 26.<sup>8</sup>

Typically, the WUL abandoned all caution, ignoring both the lessons of recent experience and evidence of divided local opinion to launch the Mine Workers' Industrial Union of Nova Scotia (MWIU), hoping quickly to convert success into a *national* union embracing District 26, the MWUC in Alberta and metal miners in Northern Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia. The breakthrough never happened. Blind to the fact that Cape Breton was no longer the "Little Moscow" it had been in the early 1920s, new WUL National Secretary Tom Ewan travelled to Sydney determined to force through the creation of a new "red" union that would stand "squarely on a programme of relentless struggle and working class UNITY against all the enemies of the working class". At the MWIU's founding convention he worked in concert with local Young Communist League militant Murdock Clarke against the more cautious counsels of Cape Breton's veteran party leader, J.B. McLachlan. "Old Jim" supported a breakaway, but felt that Ewan's and Clarke's flaunting of the MWIU's "revolutionary" credentials would spoil the chances of an effective split by alienating non-party dissidents. Clarke and Ewan

---

8. Tom Ewan, "The Tasks Confronting the Canadian Trade Unionists," *The Worker*, 15 March 1930. The earliest public references to the WUL appeared in *Nova Scotia Miner (NSM)*, 15 February 1930; *Western Miner (WM)*, 20 February 1930.

refused to heed McLachlan's advice and used a party majority among the delegates at the "outlaw" convention to create the MWIU as the WUL's first affiliate.<sup>9</sup> Clarke predicted that the red union would soon sweep away the degenerate "company" union, but within three months the MWIU was in the gutter. Not one UMWA local defected: individual supporters were victimized; Clarke and District Organizer Jim Barker were forced to leave the province; and J.B. McLachlan effectively left the party.<sup>10</sup>

The WUL stagnated throughout 1930. The Trotskyist purge in 1929 had already deprived it of several promising younger cadres, and the assault on the "Lovestoneite Right" in 1929-30 drove out such experienced trade unionists as Jack MacDonald, Michael Buhay, J.B. Salsberg, and John Stokaluk. Some of their replacements, the Scot James Litterick for example, were able and experienced, but others were often incompetent. Many were unseasoned YCL cadres whose ideological soundness did not always equip them for "mass work". The party's top-down conception of democratic centralism did not encourage initiative. One experienced organizer wrote Ewan seeking a manual with "some simple directions and guide for the members as to how to form a shop group, taking cognizance of the shop spies, the Black-list system, the backwardness of the workers, the national prejudice of the Native born workers and British born, and all the other obstacles stacked against us." When Ewan represented the WUL at the Fifth RILU Congress in Moscow in August 1930, he received a reminder that, when in doubt, orthodoxy was the best policy. At a meeting with Otto Kuusinen, Chairman of the Comintern's Colonial Commission, he made the mistake of "continually harping on the [WUL's] lack of forces." The Finn promptly silenced him with the message that "IN EVERY INSTANCE THE WORKERS WILL SUPPLY THE FORCES." He returned from Moscow with a tendency to give Comintern literature runic significance.<sup>11</sup>

---

9. In 1928 the party made its first unsuccessful attempt to detach District 26 from the UMWA. See John Manley, "Preaching the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-1935," *Labour/Le Travail* (henceforth *L/LT*) 30 (Fall 1992): 95-100. PAO, GPC Papers, 4A 2539-40, Provisional Executive Committee WUL to Miners' Conference, Sub-District No 1, UMWA, undated [c. February 1930]; Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, UMWA District No 6 Records (microfilm), *Minutes of District Convention Convened by Sub District No. 1*, UMWA, Sydney, 15-16 March 1930.

10. PAO, CPC Papers, 1A 0234-36, Acting General Secretary [Ewan] to Jim Barker, 13 June 1930; *ibid*, 10C 2133-38, 10C 2139, unsigned and undated reports on "The Situation in Nova Scotia and Report of Left Wing Activities." The latter refers to the anonymous "reactionary chairman" at the founding convention, i.e. J.B. McLachlan. It was symptomatic of the febrile atmosphere prevailing in the party that McLachlan could be thus characterised

11. *The Militant*, 1 February 1929. The CPC Papers (PAO) contain voluminous material on expulsions and the extirpation of the "right danger." See, for example, 1A 0741-42, Tim Buck, "Statement of the Political Committee of the CPC on the Expulsion of Salsberg," undated [November/December 1929]; 1A 0768, "Statement on the Expulsion of John Stokaluk from the Communist Party of Canada," 16 March 1930. On Ewan's meeting with Kuusinen, see *ibid*, 3A 1710, Tom Ewan to Ben Winter, 30 January 1931. On the appeal for "some simple directions" see *ibid*, 4A 2385-86, George Drayton to Ewan, 11 April 1931



Ewan's pessimism was fully justified. Most Canadian workers felt that ever-rising unemployment gave them little option but to accept whatever management threw at them, including plant closures, rationalization, deskilling, speed-up, intensified supervision, and wage cuts. If rising real wages brought improved living standards to those lucky enough to be in regular employment, everywhere there was insecurity. Workers could do little more than file away their grievances.<sup>12</sup>

Demoralization almost inevitably seeped into the party. No one took over responsibility for the WUL in Ewan's absence, and in the ensuing months he complained bitterly of a lack of support, especially from some of the YCLers who had been groomed for leadership at the Lenin School. Although he was able to extract renewed hope from the phenomenal success of the unemployed campaign led by the WUL-affiliated National Unemployed Workers' Association (NUWA) during the spring of 1931, "storming the factories" proved more exacting. By mid-1931 the WUL's trade union membership stood at less than 7000, with barely a thousand in unions organized since January 1930 [see fig. 1]. The (much delayed) party plenum in February 1931 agreed that lack of forces was a severe obstacle, only to conclude predictably that the WUL's biggest problem was incompetence in applying the line. Nevertheless, the plenum, with RILU sanction, declared that the balance between political agitation and economic issues had to be reset in the latter's favour: "the united front from below" meant letting political lessons flow out of industrial struggle.<sup>13</sup>

Real experience had contributed to this "right" turn. As early as October 1930 an internal analysis of the MWIU fiasco admitted to "abject defeat" and predicted similar results if the party repeated the mistake of insensitively "jumping in and laying down a strict bolshevik rule" over local feelings. With similar realism, a young worker at Dominion Textiles in Montreal pointed out that his workmates found the WUL's demands laughably extravagant.<sup>14</sup> In the recurring tension between "pure" political positions and actual working class consciousness, the party leadership teetered back and forth. Weeks after lambasting Fred Rose and David Chalmers for "hiding the face of the party" during a textile strike in rural Quebec, Tom Ewan was scolding communist railway workers in Winnipeg for including a party membership application in their shop paper! "Never mind

- 
12. House of Commons Special Committee on Price Spreads and Mass Buying, *Evidence and Proceedings*, 1 March 1934, p 173-98; Robert Storey, "Unionization Versus Corporate welfare: The Dofasco Way," *LJLT*, 12 (Autumn 1982): 15; W. Peter Archibald, "Distress Dissent and Alienation: Hamilton Workers in the Great Depression," *Urban History Review*, 21 (October 1992): 3-32.
  13. PAO, CPC: Papers, 3A 1940-41, Sam Carr to Ewan, 8 July 1931; *ibid*, 10C 1807-10, "The Base of the Economic Struggles Must Be the Factory and the Trade Union," undated [c. March 1931]; University of Toronto, Robert Kenny Collection, Box 2, Ewan to Carr, 12 July 1931; "Economic Struggle and the Revolutionary Unions," *The Worker*, 3 January 1931.
  14. PAO, CPC Papers, 10C 2142, Thomas Rankin, "Tasks of the CPC and the Workers' unity League in the Organization of the Canadian Miners' Union," 6 October 1930; letter to the editor, *Young Worker*, 2 January 1931.

"Join the CP"," Ewan ordered. "When we get the Shopmen following us as a union we will have a base for our party." Party leaders were often ambivalent towards the autonomous demands of rank and file workers. Ewan described seniority as a device to protect "the old scabby birds . . . while the industrial coop is being cleaned out," but an article in the *Party Organizer* advocated a more sensitive approach to an issue of wide concern to older, skilled workers. While Malcolm Bruce and Harvey Murphy condemned work-sharing as a "quack" remedy for the problems of the Alberta miners and insisted that the correct revolutionary position was to struggle for noncontributory unemployment insurance and a guaranteed weekly wage, other organizers used the issue as a basis for strike action.<sup>15</sup>

Even at the sectarian peak of the Third Period, communists usually placed flexibility above revolutionary purity. Local organizers began to study the working class with as much care as they studied Comintern directives. Responding to local rather than international pressure, in one notable instance the party defied the Comintern over policy in the Alberta coal industry and rejected the RILU's continued advocacy of the policy that had failed in Cape Breton. Rather than try to "smash" the MWUC, it used "united front from below" tactics to pull it into the WUL.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, organizers learned how to temper shop gate agitation with patience and discretion. They tried to reach young workers by providing social and sports clubs as "transitional" trade union forms. They discovered that shop papers were most effective when they focused on workers' immediate interests rather than "generalities with which [the workers] are not concerned." Most of their approaches encountered "nothing but fear," but sometimes "out of a lot of hard work they'd maybe get two or three workers in the plant." This bare

- 
15. PAO, CPC Papers, 3A 1882-83, *The Shopmen's Hammer*, May 1931; *ibid.*, 3A 1884-85, Ewan to S. Black, 2 June 1931; *ibid.*, 3A 1892, Ewan to Winter, 8 June 1931; *ibid.*, 3A 1939, Michael Biniowsky to Ewan, 7 July 1931; *ibid.*, 2A 0922-26, Fred Rose, "Report of the Cowansville Strike [2-10 March 1931]"; *ibid.*, 2A 0908, Ewan to A Rosenberg, 19 March 1931; Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 21 April 1931, 769-70; *Canadian Miner*, 30 January 1932; Allen Seager, "The Mine Workers' Union of Canada, 1925-1936," (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1977), 142; Harvey Murphy, "The Stagger System — A Quack Remedy for Unemployment," *The Worker*, 7 November 1931; M. Forkin, "Face to The Shop!," *Party Organizer*, April 1931; Arne Johnson, "Shingle Workers of B.C. Show Fight," *Lumber Worker*, September 1932.
16. Arthur S. Homer to Tim Buck, undated [c. May 1930], reprinted in *Agents of Revolution: A History of the Workers' Unity League, Setting Forth Its Origins and Aims* (Toronto undated [February 1934]); *Western Miner*, 6 March, 18 April, 8 May 1930; Seager, "The MWUC," 106-7; PAO, CPC Papers, 1A 0765, "Statement of CPC members of Coleman and Blairmore on the Trade Union Policy in the Mining Industry in District No. 8," 14 March 1930; NAC, MG 28 IV 4, CPC Papers, Box 8, folder 7, Jack Davis [Sam Carr] to Tim Buck, 27 May 1930; Buck to Davis, 3 August 1930; Stewart Smith to Buck, 17 June 1931

handful of contacts often constituted the first “shop group” from which plant unions later emerged.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, for all the WUL’s unseen activity, its most distinctive feature was a willingness to strike. As Tom Ewan explained, although the WUL did not advocate unwinnable offensive strikes, faced with “any action of victimization on the part of the boss . . . [our] one policy [is] . . . Strike.” In fact, WUL strike policy was rarely so reflexive. Although it was a Leninist premise that class consciousness emerged from collective struggle, the main inspiration behind WUL strikes was usually capitalist hostility rather than a Leninist agenda. While employers rarely granted even minimal concessions without struggle (and could normally rely on state support when strikes occurred), the WUL usually entered labour disputes without a strike fund: its strikes were usually militant and involved the mobilization of every available working class “force.” Ethnic organizations were particularly important, not least in the relief effort, and the red unions took pride in their efforts to practise proletarian internationalism by treating such isolated groups as Francophones, East Asians and “Orientals” as full members of the working class, a fact which probably helped the WUL recruit semi-skilled and unskilled ethnic workers. Women were similarly treated. Although employed primarily in traditional “auxiliary” functions, gathering relief and running the strike kitchens, they (and often their children too) were encouraged to experience every aspect of the struggle on the front line. Another key force was the unemployed movement. The CPC used its authority among the unemployed not just to dissuade them from scabbing, but also to induce many to join the picket lines — where they often added a particularly militant edge. Although fear of strikebreaking must have been a constraint on struggle, on many occasions unemployed solidarity strengthened strikers’ morale.<sup>18</sup>

---

17. Paul Phillips, “Experiences in the Textile Field,” *Young Worker*, 19 May 1931; M.S. [Mitchi Sago?], “Some Lessons in Shop Work,” *ibid*, 5 January 1932; Multi-Cultural History Society of Ontario, interview with Jack Scott; Bryan Palmer (ed.), *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers’ Movement 1922-1985* (St. John’s, 1988), 20-21; Peter Hunter, *Which Side Are You On Boys: Canadian Life on the Left* (Toronto, 1988), p 105-06; “French Unit Established,” *Young Worker*, 20 October 1931

18. Ewan’s advice was prompted by the failure of Winnipeg Packing House Workers’ Industrial League to strike when Swift Canadian dismissed three Winnipeg workers suspected of union membership. See various reports and correspondence in PAO, CPC Papers, 3A 1747-1892. For strike tactics, see the following selection: Cowansville silk workers, PAO, CPC Papers, 2A 0922-26, Fred Rose, “Report of the Cowansville Strike”; Princeton Miners, Ben Swankey and Jean Evans Shiels, “*Work and Wages*”: *A Semi-Documentary Account of The Life and Times of Arthur H. (Slim) Evans, 1890-1944* (Vancouver, 1977), pp.39-46; St. Boniface foundry workers, Winnipeg, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Attorney-General’s Papers, file 43; PAO, CPC Papers, 10C 1830, 1835, WUL Winnipeg District Council, *Minutes* 11 April, 2 May 1931; NAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts Files, Vol. 348, strike 71; *Manitoba Free Press*, 14, 15, 18, 19 September 1931; “Settlement of Strike of Foundry Employees at St. Boniface, Manitoba,” *Labour Gazette*, 31 (October 1931): 1068; Maillardville shingle mill workers, Manley, “The Workers’ Unity League,” 209-15. On ethnicity and gender, see Gillian Creese, “Organizing Against Racism in the Workplace: Chinese Workers in Vancouver Before

For all that WUL strikes tended to be militant, organizers like Glen Lamont (B.C. lumber mill workers) Michael Biniowsky (St. Boniface moulders), Arthur Evans (Princeton coal miners) and Fred Rose (Cowansville textile workers) operated as "good trade unionists" rather than as "good bolsheviks." Eschewing reckless militancy, they broke every rule of revolutionary unionism in the pursuit of economic success. *The Worker* could only deal with Biniowsky's conduct of the St. Boniface strike by ignoring his methods. Even at Estevan, the strike which offers strongest support to the WUL's adventurist stereotype, WUL organizers Sam Scarlett and Martin Forkin tried unsuccessfully to win the strikers' support for a compromise settlement before the tragic denouement.<sup>19</sup>

If the WUL often managed to construct what it termed "real" unity, unity "in struggle," its local achievements only threw into more depressing relief the leadership's morally inexcusable and tactically inept assaults on "social fascists". The WUL's early life, played out against a backdrop of ever-intensifying state repression that culminated with the August 1931 arrest (and eventual imprisonment) of the "Kingston Eight," revealed the political costs of sectarianism. The leadership remained publicly unrepentant, and Buck issued a general letter to the membership claiming that the arrests proved that the party was a "definite power and a challenge" to the state. But this assertion could not explain the absence of serious working class protest. Ironically, the new semi-underground leadership that emerged in 1932 remained even more in thrall to the Comintern. Since the latter was unprepared to admit that the Third Period line may have weakened the working class movement, the WUL's August 1932 convention restated support for the Third Period, declared the reformist unions beyond redemption and issued a new pamphlet, *Workers' Unity League: Policy-Tactics-Structure-Demands* reiterating its affiliation to the RILU.<sup>20</sup>

---

the Second World War," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 19 (1987): 35-40 and Meg Luxton, *More Than A Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto, 1980), 217-18. For an example of a strike in which the WUL clearly was following political imperatives, see NAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts Files, Vol. 346, strike 3; Vol. 347, strike 14. These cover the Toronto dressmakers' strikes of early 1931, when the red Industrial Union of Needle Trades' Workers was locked in combat with the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union. I would argue that location was crucial: the closer to the party centre, the harder it was to modify political control.

19. *The Worker*, 26 September 1931; NAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts Files, Vol. 348, strike 70, M.J. Campbell, "Memo re Coal Miners' Strike, Estevan and Bienfait, Saskatchewan," Ottawa, 2 October 1931.
20. University of Toronto (UT), Robert Kenny Collection, Tim Buck Correspondence, Buck to All District and Language Fraction Bureaux, 19 August 1931; "Those Strongly Vocal Persons," editorial, *Labor Statesman*, 11 September 1931; *Workers' Unity*, August-September 1932; *Workers' Unity League, Workers' Unity League: Policies-Tactics-Structure-Demands* (Toronto, 1932), 43.

By the time Hitler's successes panicked the Comintern into reviewing its tactics, however, a reorientation was already under way on the ground. By the end of 1932 the WUL had recalled the pamphlet and announced that its relationship with the RILU was no longer "organic" but "fraternal." In December garment workers' leader Joe Gershan admitted that, while the left would, of course, be "assured of victory" if it followed "a correct program, a clear, firm line and [showed] fighting courage and determination," the way forward for the WUL was to expunge "indifference as to whether demands are won or lost" and if possible, produce material gains from every struggle. This, of course, was precisely what local organizers were already doing.<sup>21</sup>

In this atmosphere, with the ECCI still hesitant and divided, it only needed a hint of change for an Alex Gauld to surface. Never happy with the new line but unable to break with the party, this Montreal plumber had buried himself in his AFL union. He returned to prominence with a combative article in the March 1933 issue of *Worker's Unity* pointing out that many decent rank and file workers saw communists as "splitters . . . noisy disrupters." Gauld argued that the only way for the WUL to establish its right to speak for the masses was by struggling for "real lifelike demands, corresponding to the needs of the situation." When Charles Sims returned from the Lenin School to lead the WUL early in 1933, his message that the core of socialism was to be found in "actual everyday struggles," whether they arose in reformist or revolutionary unions, only endorsed established Canadian practice.<sup>22</sup>

## II

According to its late 1932 submission to the federal Department of Labour, the WUL's three largest unions together held 12,500 members: 7,000 in the LWIU, 3,000 in the MWUC and 2,500 in the IUNTW. Total membership was probably no more than 15,000. Yet given the continuing decline in the membership of the reformist unions (TLC membership fell by 25 per cent, from 141,000 to 105,000, between 1929 and 1932) any growth was an achievement. In terms of personnel and experience, the WUL entered 1933 healthier than ever. It had contacts in a wide range of industries and was beginning to build a clutch of capable organizers. Whether they were younger militants recruited through the unemployed movement or older, experienced trade unionists (including returnees like Salsberg and Stokaluk), they were drawn towards the party because, for all its faults, it alone seemed to offer a "fighting lead." When veteran Wobbly Sam Scarlett joined in 1931, he stated that the CPC was the only home for any serious class fighter.<sup>23</sup>

- 
21. Tom MacEwen, *The Forge Glows Red* (Toronto, 1974), Appendix II, 47; J. Gershan, "Workers' Unity League To Hold Important Conference," *The Worker*, 17 December 1932.
  22. Alex Gauld, "How We MUST Work in the REFORMIST Trade Unions," *Workers' Unity*, March 1933 (original emphasis); Charles Sims, "The Daily Struggles and Socialism," *Workers' Unity*, May 1933. Around this time, the CPC published a pamphlet by Lozovsky, *The Workers' Economic Struggles and the Fight for Workers' Rule* (Montreal, 1933), which shamelessly disinterred Lenin's *Left Wing Communism*, an unmentionable text since 1928.
  23. UT, Kenny Collection, Sam Scarlett to CPC Central Executive Committee, 31 July 1931.

The organizing context was now more favourable. A strong economic upturn began in the spring and early summer of 1933, and virtually every branch of Canadian industry had begun to revive by the end of the year. Canadian workers showed their readiness for change by helping remove Conservative administrations in four provincial elections (Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario) held between August 1933 and June 1934; in every instance the Liberals were the beneficiaries. If the still underground CPC, in its variety of aliases, made few gains, it was a different story on the industrial front. Both 1933 and 1934 saw substantial increases in strike activity, with more strikers in non-coal mining industry in 1934 than in any year since 1920 and most striker days since 1921 [figs 2, 3]. The WUL led just over 50 per cent of these strikes, embracing 50 per cent of all strikers and 71 per cent of striker days. Almost 75 per cent of all strikes brought improvements in wages and/or conditions.<sup>24</sup>

Although the WUL laid exaggerated claim to the entire credit for this upsurge, even disputing the existence of an economic upturn, it is unlikely that the unorganized would have fought or won so often without its support and leadership. It was most successful in light industry and in small workshops where its personal contact methods could penetrate quickly and an ensuing strike would not exhaust resources: garment, textiles (particularly knit wear), shoe and leather, furniture and, to a lesser extent, meat-packing and auto components. Conversely, it made little obvious headway in the "basic" or "war" industries, such as steel, automobiles, electrical goods, agricultural implements, and larger textile plants. Where organizing one or two shop groups in a smallish plant could often prove an effective catalyst to action, similar achievement in factories with work-forces numbering in several hundreds, or thousands, was a different matter. Taking on General Electric, Ford, or Stelco was an intimidating prospect. They were more capable of containing rank and file aspirations by voluntarily raising wages or by using spies and informants to weed out sympathizers. In large plants, moreover, an unforeseen consequence of slow-but-sure organizing methods was an over-cautious "organizational perspective" that sometimes caused decline through inactivity. Another limiting factor was the tendency for organization in mass production plants to emerge from groups of skilled workers with craft union backgrounds. The core group of mainly British and ex-Amalgamated members at Stelco's "Hot" Mill may have been typical. While not unsympathetic to industrial unionism, they remained unconvinced that the WUL offered anything they could not achieve by themselves. Metal mining was the only "war" industry in which the WUL led significant strikes, but its experiences here revealed the most decisive constraint on its organizing efforts: the integrated response of capital and the state. Semi-clandestine activity often remained the only possibility.<sup>25</sup>

---

24. On the 1933 recovery, see Gilbert Jackson and Lawrence Jacobs, "A New Index of Business Conditions in Canada," *Monetary Times*, 92 (17 February 1934): 4, 14-15.

25. Communist Party of Canada, *The Way to Socialism: The Program of the Working People in the Struggle Against Hunger, War and Fascism*, manifesto and principal resolutions adopted by the Seventh Conventlon of the Communist Party of Canada, Toronto, 23-28 July 1934 (Montreal, 1935); "Towards a Thorough-going Clarification of the Situation and Our Tasks," *Communist Review*, March 1934; Ann Walters, "Lessons of the Mercury Mills Strike," *Young*

As success brought it into contact with a wider working class constituency, the WUL found that to recruit and retain new members it had to accommodate their ideas, sensitivities and aspirations. Even newly organizing workers had clear ideas of how unions should operate. Many were initially attracted by the WUL's low dues, but they liked to see them collected systematically and used for union purposes rather than the general needs of the left. They expected union charters to be "just as handsome as any granted by the reformist unions," were put off by union literature stuffed with revolutionary jargon, and disapproved of the tendency for normal union services to be replaced by "a series of big mass meetings" when strikes were in the offing. In short, they expected union business to be conducted in a "business-like professional" manner.<sup>26</sup>

The WUL responded by narrowing the gap with the reformist unions. The IUNTW, for example, was still more willing than its rivals to organize new groups of workers, but in other respects it was hardly distinctive. In 1930 it had replaced traditional occupationally based locals with a new "revolutionary" system of inclusive shop groups. In 1932, however, it returned to the old system, establishing separate "clubs" for dress pressers and cutters — male occupations with residual craft traditions — and even consented to the creation of a separate Montreal Dress Cutters' Union (MDCU). Socially, the red union offered comparable services: an industrial union "Athletic Club," "Stag Nights" for the male cutters, weekly educationals on trade union problems, and, for the Toronto membership, "Moonlight Excursions" on Lake Ontario, complete with orchestra and dancing. Most significantly, its industrial practice became increasingly moderate. Joe Gershman settled the January 1934 Toronto dress strike with a comment — that the settlement would be good for "the industry" — which would have been denounced as "collaborationist" even in the 1920s.<sup>27</sup>

WUL leaders still insisted that the red unions were qualitatively distinctive. "We are not," a Toronto organizer claimed, "economists" or reformists who simply look upon the daily struggle or the immediate demands as the sole object of struggle." Building the red

---

Worker, 21 August 1933; Walters, "Some Experiences in Concentration Work," *Young Worker*, 25 June 1934; Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 290-9, 440.

26. *Voice of the Fisherman*, 18 September 1934; William Madison, interviews with WUL members, *The Worker*, 25 August 1934; Julia Collins, article in *ibid*, 26 August 1933; T.C. Sims, *Strike Strategy and Tactics*, Report to the National Executive Board, Workers' Unity League, 4-5 September 1934, 3, 14, 17, 30-33; CPC Central Executive Committee, Agit-Prop Commission, *Workers' Leaflet Manual* (1934), 3-4, 10-11; "Make the 'Union Papers' — Union Papers," *Communist Review*, November 1934; "This Question of a Charter," *B.C. Lumber Worker*, 24 November 1934.
27. For the IUNTW's associational life, see *The Worker*, 30 December 1933, 11 June 1935; *Unity*, May 1935. For the 1934 dressmakers' strike, see NAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts Files, Vol. 359, strike 9. The IUNTW's Trotskyist faction argued from this juncture that since there was no essential difference between the "revolutionary" union and the ILGWU, the WUL would best serve the interests of the class by returning to the larger union. See "The Dressmakers' Strike," *The Vanguard*, February 1934; "The Need for Honesty with the Workers," *ibid*, September 1934.

unions ideally meant simultaneously building the party; recruiting the best industrial cadres would push the class struggle towards its "highest and fullest expression." To this end, in 1933 the party began its first systematic programme of Marxist education through its National Training School as well as provincial and local Workers' Schools, and within months claimed to have enrolled "several thousand" workers in beginners' courses. Trained or not, cadres rarely found it easy to elucidate political lessons or build the party during strikes. More often they found themselves defensively *reacting* to the introduction of political questions by fading quietly into the background or by disavowing any political agenda. Eventually, they made a virtue of this necessity by meeting the ubiquitous "red bogey" with actions and arguments to show that they were simply "sincere and honest" trade unionists.<sup>28</sup>

Rank-and-file workers were often impressed by the sincerity of communist organizers, especially the second-level full-timers who lived without apparent regard for material reward or personal danger. One who easily fit the "sincere and honest" ideal was Fred Collins. Already in his 30s when he joined the party, Collins was "a real militant . . . a real, good, solid person." He had organizing flair, a strong physical and vocal presence, and the ability to communicate effectively with British-Canadian workers. During the 1933 Stratford furniture strike (that, more than any other single event, established the WUL as a national presence) his ability to win and keep the support of the town's "home brew types," mainly railway shop craftsmen, challenged the myth that radical unionism was only attractive to "foreigners." Although not all of Stratford's Anglo-Canadians welcomed the WUL (one group of patriots took particular and prolonged exception to Collins' Jewish partner, Izzy Minster), the red union enjoyed lasting community support, and Collins' political observations on the undermining of the strike, whether by the military or a mischievous, anti-communist intervention by TLC President Tom Moore, carried real resonance. His attack on Moore for providing "the finest example of labour traitorism that Canada has ever seen" seized the moral high ground by positively defending labour unity. Collins helped guarantee that the outcome of the Stratford strike was not "violence, martyrdom and misery," but an increasingly confident local working class, grateful for what the union had achieved, prepared to

---

28. D. Miner, "Our Tasks in the WUL March Campaign," *The Builder*, March 1933; J. Warren, "Communists and the Trade Union Movement," *The Worker*, 17 November 1934; *Young Worker*, 16 October 1933; Moe Klein, "Consolidation of Restaurant Union," *ibid*, 11 June 1934; Jim Warner, "Towards a Mass Party!," Report to the CPC Central Committee, 8 December 1934, in *The Communists Fight for Working Class Unity* (Montreal, 1935), 45; Sims, *Strike Strategy and Tactics*. Jack Scott offers a bleak assessment of the quality of party education in Palmer (ed.), *A Worker's Life*, 49-51



contest and win local municipal control, and sufficiently class conscious to reject working class anti-semitism.<sup>29</sup>

Many of the 1933-34 strikes which began as rank and file initiatives became WUL strikes because of the WUL's speed of response (and perhaps because "spontaneity" may sometimes have been structured by a degree of organization). The WUL was prepared to assume the leadership of spontaneous strikes or to proceed with strikes after apparently minimal organization or to build organization over the long term. An example of the first approach was the Hespeler textile workers' strike in December 1933. Stratford illustrates the second approach, and the British Columbia waterfront, the third.<sup>30</sup> In 1931 the GPC had a single member working on the Vancouver docks; by the end of 1933 the left's "progressive slate" had a majority on the executive of the Vancouver & District Waterfront Workers' Association (VDWWA). To achieve this end, communists immersed themselves in the longshoremen's material concerns, displaying their knowledge in their rank and file paper *The Heavy Lift*, manoeuvred around the British Columbia Shipping Federation's control over the VDWWA (created as a company union during the 1923 strike), and held back from premature action — despite a strong desire to pull the Lower Mainland out in solidarity with the 1934 San Francisco long shore strike. By early 1935 there was a communist core group of 175 among an organized long shore and seafaring work force of over 2,000, operating under the umbrella of the Longshore and Water Transport Workers' of Canada (LWTWC).<sup>31</sup>

At its peak in the summer of 1934, the WUL probably had about 30,000 members<sup>32</sup> and its growth, though hardly meteoric, was being watched with concern. One adversary

- 
29. Hunter, *Which Side Are You On Boys*, 47-8, 54-6; University of British Columbia Archives, interview with Alex Fergusson, NAC, Michael Fenwick Papers, vol. 2, interview with Michael Fenwick; Multi-Cultural History Society of Ontario, interview with Jack Scott; Palmer (ed.), *A Communist Life*, 26; "Soldier of Labor, Veteran Fighter. Such is F. Collins," *Daily Clarion*, 21 November 1936. See also Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns* (Toronto, 1991), 214-18.
  30. The best account of the Stratford strike is Nancy Stunden, "The Stratford Strikes of 1933," (M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1975). See also, James Leach, "The Workers' Unity League and the Stratford Furniture Workers: The Anatomy of a Strike," *Ontario History*, 59 (June 1967): 39-48, and Desmond Morton, "Aid to the Civil Power: The Stratford Strikes of 1933," in Irving Abella (ed.), *On Strike*, 79-91. On Hespeler, see NAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts Files, Vol. 358, strike 1
  31. PAO, CPC Papers, 4A 2422, Drayton to Ewan, 22 May 1931; International Longshoremen and Warehouse men's Union Local 500 Pensioners, *Man Along the Shore! The Story of the Vancouver Waterfront* (Vancouver, 1975); *Heavy Lift*, 5 January, 23 February, 26 April, 11 May, 7 June, 11 September 1934; City of Vancouver Archives, British Columbia Shipping Federation Papers, Vol.14, file 3,E. Thompson to Major Crombie, 27 November 1934; Vol.42, file 2, memo on "Labour Situation at Vancouver," 23 May 1935; NAC, Canadian Labour Congress Papers, Vol.152, W.T. Burford to E. Thompson, 7 May 1934; Vol.103, Burford to M.M. McLean, 31 May 1935.
  32. Absolutely reliable WUL membership figures are unavailable. At different times party sources

felt that, thanks to the WUL's work during the first year of the upturn, the CPC had made "greater strides and obtained more followers . . . than in any previous three years." Industrialists like lumber magnate and MP G.B. Nicholson, demanded that it be outlawed. Denouncing the WUL as an "outlaw organization financed from outside this country — from Soviet Russia in fact," he argued that the continuation of industrial recovery depended on its suppression. The changing political mood, however, meant that consent for fresh state action had to be renegotiated. Federal Labour Minister W.A. Gordon started the process with a Canadian Radio Corporation broadcast on 2 February. Without actually mentioning the WUL, Gordon's extended plug for the Dominion Conciliation Service ("detached without prejudice or bias") as the ideal organization to calm the storms of industrial conflict was intended to counter its threat. The Toronto *Labor Leader* reprinted the speech in full, underlining that its target was "ill-advised labour struggles fomented by the Workers' Unity League in the Province of Ontario." A few days later, Attorney-General Hugh Guthrie contributed a Commons speech full of allusions to the "more or less communistic" WUL and CLDL. As in 1931, however, the sharpest attack came from Guthrie's Ontario counterpart, W.H. Price, who on 16 February handed over to the press copies of a pamphlet culled from materials seized during the 1931 arrests. *Agents of Revolution* claimed to show that "the WUL was organized on the instructions of officials in Moscow, that its plan of action in the minutest detail was, and no doubt still is, dictated from Moscow, and that in fact it subsists principally to carry out the instructions of its masters, and is much more concerned with Russian praise than with Canadian welfare . . . The Workers' Unity League is but an agent of revolution — one of the Communist "steps to power." Price stated that he wished to inform the people of Ontario, "and particularly the labor unions," that "continuous strife, unrest and destruction of property" were the WUL's stock in trade. One week later, Gordon informed the Commons, simply, that it was impossible to deal with the WUL.<sup>33</sup>

Employers quickly exploited the new propaganda weapon. Within days of its appearance they were using it to block WUL organizing drives in the furniture, auto components and shoe industries. Its greatest impact, however, came not in Ontario, but in Manitoba. Copies were already in the hands of the Manitoba Attorney-General's office when the Flin Flon miners and smelters walked out in June. Attorney-General W.J. Major sent one to the company-dominated town council, predicting that it would prove interesting. The council hurriedly reproduced the pamphlet as a circular and flooded the town with it. With Provincial Premier John Bracken contributing a series of interviews emphasizing the "political" character of the strike, the Flin Flon

---

have estimates ranging between 26,000 and 39,000. *The Annual Report on Labour Organizations in Canada 1934* (Ottawa, 1935) gave a figure of 24,086, but this did not include the LWIU, which probably had around 12,000 members at its peak.

33. "Communism in Canada," *Labor Leader*, 22 June 1934; House of Commons, *Debates*, 26 March 1934, 1832-38; "Harmony in Canadian History," *Labor Leader*, 16 February 1934; House of Commons, *Debates*, 14, 23 February 1934, 577-78, 872; *Agents of Revolution: A History of the Workers' Unity League Setting Forth its Origins and Aims* (Toronto, undated [1934]); *Toronto Globe*, 17, 19 February 1934; *Winnipeg Free Press*, 19 February 1934.

Anti-Communist League emerged, carrying the endorsements of the town's three largest fraternal organizations, the Masons, Knights of Columbus and Canadian Legion. The red-baiting campaign gradually wore down the strikers' impressive solidarity. As the *Winnipeg Tribune* concluded: "[The company] has won by showing the strikers the communistic motive underlying the agitation which led to the strike."<sup>34</sup>

The pamphlet, however, had no magical qualities. On several occasions the WUL overcame it. Organization and consolidation of the Furniture and Woodworkers' Industrial Union continued at Kitchener-Waterloo, while the Shoe and Leather Workers' Industrial Union (SLWIU) made significant inroads across southern Ontario. During a strike in Brampton, union organizer Ken Scott successfully rebutted the anticommunist message at mass meetings. He retained the mainly British Canadian strikers' support through to a successful conclusion (and in the interim managed to organize two other workplaces, a wholesale flower growers and a knitting mill). Nationally, the pamphlet's shock value quickly diminished.<sup>35</sup>

Only two individual unions openly accepted Price's invitation to challenge the WUL. The first was the ACCL's Canadian Bushmen's Union (CBU), but it was so manifestly a bosses' organization, funded by the northern Ontario lumber operators to block the LWIU, that it could never achieve any degree of popular support. A similar relationship developed between the Ontario Restaurant Owners' Association (OHRA) and the flagging Hotel and Restaurant Employees' and Beverage Dispensers' International Alliance (HREBDIA) when the former exchanged recognition for strikebreakers to block the WUL's attempts to organize Toronto's larger hotels and restaurants, the WUL retaliated by signing up bartenders, and the result was a stand-off.<sup>36</sup>

---

34. For the background to the Flin Flon strike, see "Interview with Mitch Sago," in Abella and Miller (eds.), *The Canadian Worker in the Twentieth Century*, 278-79 and Robert Robson, "Strike in the Single Enterprise Community, Flin Flon, Manitoba - 1934," *L/LT*, 12 (Autumn 1983): 63-86. There was more at stake in this strike than the simple issue of unionization at Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting. In the previous year, the Winnipeg bourgeoisie had seen the WUL make troubling inroads into various industrial sectors. Flin Flon represented an opportunity to turn back its advance. See NAC, R.B. Bennett Papers (microfilm), 93791-94, Ralph Webb to W.A. Gordon, 21, 22 March 1934; "Anniversary Banquet Held by Workers of needle Trades Union," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 20 March 1934; "The Strike at Flin Flon," *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, 10 July 1934.

35. *The Worker*, 21, 28 July, 4 August 1934; *Toronto Daily Star*, 13 August 1934.

36. On the Canadian Bushmen's Union, see *Toronto Globe*, 13 February 1934; *Winnipeg Free Press*, 7 March 1934; House of Commons, *Debates*, 26, 27 March 1934, 1832-38; George Salverson, "Canada Comes to the Timber Camps," *Canadian Unionist*, (7 March 1934): 172-73; NAC, R.B. Bennett Papers, 93720, George Salverson to R.B. Bennett, 5 March 1934; *ibid*, 96810-54, CBU, bulletin No 4, 15 February 1934; *ibid*, 9685S-56, CBU, *Constitution*, undated; M.J. Fenwick, report in *The Worker*, 10 November 1934; Ian Radforth, *Bush Workers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario 1900-1980* (Toronto, 1987), 131-32. CCBU boss Salverson became founding president of the Port Arthur CCF Club. See *The Worker*, 9 February 1935. On the restaurant struggle, see NAC, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts Files,

More significantly, the TLC quietly began chartering federal labour unions. Two of the thirteen chartered in 1934, a furniture local in Stratford and a Cleaners' and Dyers' local in Toronto, directly opposed WUL unions. Against this there was the case of the Boot and Shoe Workers' International Union. Several Ontario shoe manufacturers tried to negotiate "sweetheart" deals with its Toronto business agent James Daly but he gave them no encouragement because, as he told the Toronto District Labour Council, the WUL's efforts in some notoriously anti-union plants deserved every support. He warned "headquarters or anyone else" that any attempt to sell-out the red union would see "every member of our union . . . in the Workers' Unity League."<sup>37</sup>

### III

The WUL was in an ambiguous position when its National Executive Board met in Toronto in September 1934. It was leading strikes throughout the Dominion but was losing the most important ones: B.C. loggers, Flin Flon and Noranda metal miners, Montreal dressmakers, and Winnipeg cloak makers. Moreover, in one key respect the WUL was scarcely better placed than it had been in 1930. During the four-month-long loggers' strike on Vancouver Island early in 1934, some strikers complained about limited WUL financial support. The LWIU responded by reiterating the message that with the WUL simultaneously leading strikes of loggers (Kapuskasing), coal miners (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick), shoe workers (Kitchener), and auto workers (Windsor), it fell to the working class in any single area to support the strikers. Despite the WUL's growing legitimacy, it was not yet in a position to command or expect instant solidarity.<sup>38</sup>

The experience of defeat imparted a distinct sombreness to Charles Sims' keynote address to the WUL National Executive Board (NEB) in 1934. His speech contrasted sharply with resolutions adopted two months earlier at the underground party's Seventh National Convention. Where it had confirmed social fascism as the main enemy, called for the WUL to underline its links to the party in all its industrial work, and asserted that the red unions' ultimate task was to prepare "the labouring masses for . . . the decisive battles to overthrow the capitalist dictatorship," Sims emphasized defensive needs and described "left sectarianism" as the biggest obstacle to continued WUL growth. Significantly addressing delegates throughout as "fellow workers," he praised the communists' unparalleled contributions to the WUL but denied party domination. Moreover, where the party had dismissed proposed provincial "industrial standards" legislation as a proto-fascist attack on independent labour unions, Sims urged the WUL to relate to those Canadian workers who viewed this legislation as an aid to organization. While endorsing continued WUL participation in the political struggles for state unemployment insurance, against fascism, and for the release of the CPC leadership, he called for them to be presented as "part of the struggle of *all labor unions* to maintain

---

Vol. 362, strike 34 (104); Klein, "Consolidation of the Restaurant Union"; *The Worker*, 28 July, 22 August, 5 September 1934; *Toronto Daily Star*, 20 August 1934.

37. *The Worker*, 22 August 1934.

38. *B.C. Lumber Worker*, 25 April 1934.

their right to existence.” The “two main factors” to be “constantly pushed” by WUL organizers were “the immediate economic demands of the workers’ and “the right of the workers to organize into the *unions of their own choice*.”<sup>39</sup>

When the party Central Committee met in December 1934, it gave another twist to the united front line. Stewart Smith now argued that the masses were forcing reformism (“social fascism” had disappeared) to move to the left, creating the possibility of “a united front from the top.” Some comrades felt that Smith had somehow overlooked the “class against class” thesis’s assertion that reformism was incapable of such a trajectory. Why, they wondered, if the masses were finally becoming revolutionary, should the party choose this moment to abandon the struggle for independent revolutionary leadership? Charged with “right opportunism,” Smith responded by suggesting that his accusers lacked the ability to grasp the essentials of a “mass revolutionary policy.”<sup>40</sup>

Although all who presented the case for the united front did so almost solely in terms of changing domestic circumstances, the international context had become crucial: the consolidation of Nazism, the French Popular Front upsurge and, in September 1934, the USSR’s admission to the League of Nations (Lenin’s “robbers’ den”) effectively called a halt to the Third Period. Towards the end of the year Stalin apparently sanctioned the French party’s rapid move from “united” to “popular front” tactics by declaring it consistent with “the spirit of Leninism.”<sup>41</sup> As yet, however, the implications for trade union work remained unclear. With the CPUSA effectively disbanding the TUUL and sending its members back to the AFL by late 1934, “liquidation” became an option, pressed most vociferously by Lovestoneites and Trotskyists who had always viewed “revolutionary unionism” as un-Leninist. The CPC was not immune from this tendency: at the founding Congress of the Canadian League Against War and Fascism in October 1934, Fred Collins gave concrete expression to the new unity mood by inviting a reformist takeover of the AWIU. This, however, was more a goodwill gesture than a blueprint.<sup>42</sup>

The WUL’s decision not to follow the American path suggests the degree of autonomy individual parties enjoyed. The Canadian and American contexts were not identical. Unlike the AFL, which since 1933 had been forced by rank and file pressure to assume a central (if still reluctant) organizing role in mass production industry, the TLC showed little appreciation of the union-building possibilities presented by the rising level of class struggle in 1933-34. Instead, it provided plenty of evidence that its anti-communism was as strong as ever. In Vancouver, for example, TLC Vice President Percy Bengough welcomed in the new year of 1935 by dissolving — with Tom Moore’s approval — the Shingle Weavers’ Union, expelling its left-wing leadership and imposing

---

39. See *The Way to Socialism* and Sims, *Strike Strategy and Tactics*, 10-12, 19-21 (my emphasis).

40. *The Communists Fight for Working Class Unity*, 12-28.

41. Carr, *Twilight of Comintern*, 145.

42. *Proceedings of the First Canadian Congress Against War and Fascism*, Toronto, 6-7 October 1934, 10; *The Vanguard*, February, July 1934.

an anti-communist loyalty oath on anyone wishing to rejoin a new organization. With its unions still growing, the WUL saw no reason to go begging readmission to the TLC. Still holding to the tradition of Canadian trade union autonomy — a stance that dulled it to the implications of the emerging industrial union tendency in the AFL — the WUL sought to *merge* itself with the TLC, ACCL, and possibly even the National Catholic Syndicates of Quebec in an “all-inclusive Federation of Canadian Labour.”<sup>43</sup>

On at least three grounds, this was an unrealistic scenario. It exaggerated the WUL's weight within the movement; it evaded the problem of reconciling ideological opposites (Catholic and Communist); and it similarly brushed over the TLC's anti-communism. Neither Tom Moore nor Aaron Mosher replied when J.B. McLachlan invited them to discuss the restoration of unity, his invitation prompted by a similar — and similarly treated — invitation from the RILU to the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). The RILU responded by setting out preconditions for unity, which froze the WUL's thinking until the decisive Central Committee Plenum in November 1935: “class struggle” unionism, acceptance of the red unions as equals in unity negotiations, merger not liquidation.<sup>44</sup>

The main trade union unity resolution of the Seventh Comintern Congress (July-August 1935) actually lent support to the CPC position. Typically, it suggested two possibilities. Depending on whether they were “small” or “big” in the context of their national labour movements, red unions could either appeal for admission to the “big reformist trade unions, with demands put forward for the right to defend their views and the reinstatement of expelled members” (small), or seek “amalgamation on an equal footing, on the basis of a platform of struggle against the offensive of capital and a guarantee of trade union democracy” (big). Still thinking in national terms, the WUL believed that it fell into the “big” category. The red unions continued to defend members' interests and extend the struggle into unorganized or weakly organized sectors: steel and metals, domestic service, fruit picking and canning, office and retail work and textiles.<sup>45</sup>

The turning-point came in early November with the Central Committee Plenum and the WUL's Third Dominion Convention. Questions of size were no longer relevant. As Stewart Smith informed the plenum, the priority was the rapid “achievement of the broad people's front.” Just back from the Seventh Congress, Smith emphasized the decisive importance of the trade union question to this process — and abruptly overturned the position the party had defended only days before. The “general all-in amalgamation”

---

43. Report of IUNTW meeting, *Toronto Daily Star*, 12 June 1935; *The Worker*, 17 October 1935; “Bengough — Bulwark of the Bosses,” *B.C. Workers' News*, 25 January 1935; “AFL ‘Democracy,’” *B.C. Lumber Worker*, 19 February 1935; UBC Archives, Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, Minutes, 15 January 1935; NAC, Percy B. Bengough Papers, Vol. 1, Tom Moore to Percy Bengough, 23 June 1935; author's interview with Harold Pritchett.

44. J.B. McLachlan to the Executive Council, TLC, 30 March 1935, in *Unity*, May 1935.

45. CPC, *Canada and the VIIIth World Congress of the Communist International* (Toronto, undated [1936]), 17-18.

option, he declared, was too “mechanical.” Although it would remain a long-term objective, the immediate priority was “to build up the AFL unions into powerful mass organizations,” with Communists operating as “responsible leading trade unionists” rather than “general oppositionists.” At the WUL convention Ewan attempted to placate the anti-liquidationists by promising that every unity programme would insist on Canadian autonomy, industrial unionism and industrial democracy. He also reiterated the claim that the leftward trajectory of the labor bureaucracy was creating new opportunities for unity — which (of course) was all the left had ever wanted — but admitted that this was more obviously true of the United States than of Canada. Indeed, he reverted to the *defensive* case for unity, citing the catastrophic defeat of that summer’s Vancouver dock strike as one more demonstration of the growing integration of capital and state. To block “fascization,” he announced, the WUL was ready to abandon petty jurisdictional claims and admit that its characterization of reformism as a nest of “labour fakirs” and “company unions” had been a “terrible mistake.” It would now become “brotherly and fraternal” towards the entire working class.<sup>46</sup>

It remains open to question whether party leaders were genuinely convinced that the only way forward lay with the emerging Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO) under John L. Lewis. It was a defensible position, albeit one that Moscow clearly helped them adopt. The two November meetings undeniably ushered in a “new Stalinist policy” of “unity at any price.” Although Joe Salsberg, suddenly established as *the* party trade union theoretician, warned against “any slackening in the inner life and in the organizational activities of our own unions,” his main concern was to prevent an *uncontrolled* return to the internationals. The party needed leverage to entrench its authority in the unified unions, and winning official positions now meant more than preserving unshakeable principles. When Salsberg and Ewan urged the WUL rank and file to prove their “sincerity by their activities and deeds,” they effectively gave up the right to make demands about the type of unionism Canada needed. Salsberg wrote article after article showing how craft unionism had failed the semi-skilled and unskilled. Yet when he accepted that “organizational compromises” might be necessary to facilitate the WUL’s admission to the AFL-TLC unions, he was really shelving the industrial union principle. Thus, the red Foodworkers’ union sent members into the bakers’, teamsters’, and hotel and restaurant employees’ internationals and also into federal labour unions of meat cutters and meat packers. WUL furniture locals in Stratford, Kitchener, Hanover, Preston and Elmira joined the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (which also absorbed the LWIU into its newly created, semi-autonomous Lumber and Sawmill Workers’ Unions) while the Toronto local became Local 149 of the Upholsterers’ International Union (UIU). After prolonged negotiations IUNTW members entered all

---

46. CPC, *Towards A Canadian People’s Front*, Proceedings of the ninth Plenum of the Central Committee, CPC, Toronto, November 1935, 31-8, 122, 124-25; Tom Ewan, *Unity Is the Worker’s Lifeline*, report to the Third Dominion Convention, Workers’ Unity League, 9 November 1935.

three international garment unions. The WUL even attempted to transfer its shoe and leather locals to the moribund IBSWU.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of the party's short-term objectives, the reunification programme was successful. Although some unions, notably the ILGWU and UMWA District 26, drove hard bargains that left communists temporarily underrepresented, on many occasions WUL locals simply changed their names. Many left wingers gained executive or organizers' posts, among them Henry Segal in the Hotel and Restaurant union, Fred Collins, Leo Sax and Victor Valin in the UIU, Harold Pritchett, Nigel Morgan and Bruce Magnusson in the Lumber and Sawmill Workers, Sam Lapedes in the United Garment Workers and George Anderson and Tommy Church in the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers, which emerged virtually overnight out of WUL pit groups in Kirkland Lake, Timmins and Sudbury. Salsberg meanwhile established himself as the party's first labour statesman. He orchestrated the left caucus in the international movement, which throughout 1936 quietly coaxed the CIO north while pursuing its main objective of winning over the TLC to industrial unionism. When the 1936 TLC Convention revealed the continuing strength of craft conservatism, Salsberg set the party a new ideological task of translating industrial unionism "and the CIO methods of organization [into] Canadian terms." Undeniably, its chances of success were stronger than at any time in its history.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV

A historian of German Communism has aptly remarked that one tends to approach the study of the Third Period with "gritted teeth." Under the influence of Stalin's conception of social democracy and fascism as "not antipodes but twins," the party's already abrasive style became indigestibly provocative. Perhaps the prominence of "unity" in the title of its red union centre suggests a psychological need to justify tactics that challenged the normal meaning of the word. Could Canadian communists, we ask, have swallowed such an approach unless they were bereft of initiative? On closer inspection, however, we find a movement unexpectedly responsive to its context and the moods and needs of its constituency; a movement, moreover, that after devouring itself in the ideological purges of 1928-30 (when membership fell from perhaps 4,000 to 1,300) was capable of growth. Bryan Palmer has suggested that WUL successes came in spite of its sectarianism. It is nevertheless possible that sectarianism may have served a useful purpose. Without its galvanizing self-righteousness, organizers may well have sunk into the surrounding swamp of inertia. Initially thanks to communist leadership of the unemployed movement, revival began before the party abandoned the Third Period. Membership reached 5,500 in mid-1934 and 9,000 by the end of 1935. If we consider also that a majority of the thousands in the Canadian Labour Defence League (which peaked in 1932) and the

---

47. *The Vanguard*, 15 November 1935; J.B. Salsberg, "We unite the Trade Unions," *The Worker*, 21 December 1935; Salsberg, "Toronto Unity Problems," *Unity*, January-February 1936.

48. TLC, *Report of Proceedings of the 52nd Annual Convention*, Montreal, 8-12 September 1936. J.B. Salsberg, articles in the *Daily Clarion*, 8 August, 26 September, 3 October 1936.



unemployed councils were not party members, we can perhaps question whether the record of the Third Period in *Canada* was catastrophic.<sup>49</sup>

In any event, the gap between “received . . . official theory and the raw conditions of daily life in the streets” allowed the party to adapt the Comintern line to Canadian reality. If the complaint is then made that its initiatives were very limited, we should recall Togliatti and note also Eric Hobsbawm’s succinct comment that accommodation to the Stalinist line was “an operational necessity” for any individual who wanted to participate effectively in the national revolutionary movement. This was a severe constraint. So, too, was the supreme virtue among communists of loyalty to the party’s greater collective wisdom. It is significant that the only leading member to resign over the liquidation of the WUL, J.B. McLachlan, did so because he believed its version of the united front was an opportunist deviation from the true Comintern line.<sup>50</sup>

Massive achievements cannot be claimed for the WUL, but what it did achieve cannot be casually dismissed. It was never a “revolutionary” union movement. Even Comintern analysts were careful to assert that revolutionary unions could only arise from exceptional — in fact ideal — historical circumstances; and in such circumstances the WUL would have had to transcend the parameters of trade unionism. In a non-revolutionary situation, as one ex-party member observed in 1935, “pure revolutionary unionism” was an illusion that could only lead to isolation. Although WUL leaders were reluctant to admit it, that was their own conclusion. Real working class consciousness forced them to settle for building an unusually — but not uniquely — militant brand of labour unionism.<sup>51</sup>

Did its style and methods help or hinder? For Desmond Morton, the WUL’s politics simply provided the state with an exceptional pretext for using coercive violence against it. The moral here is that the WUL should have been more moderate, more accommodating to employers, more like the international unions. Ian Angus argues that communists should never have left the internationals in the first place. Yet whether communists would have achieved more inside the reformist unions is debatable, even doubtful. Few gains of any kind were possible before 1933, but independence meant that whenever the

---

49. Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence 1919-1933* (Cambridge, 1983), x-xi, 30; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour 1800-1980* (Toronto and Vancouver, 1982), 212-13.

50. Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists?*; Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, 5; J.B. McLachlan to Tim Buck, 13 June 1936, Appendix One, David Frank and John Manley, “The Sad March to the Right: J.B. McLachlan’s Resignation from the Communist Party of Canada, 1936,” *L/LT*, 30 (Fall 1992): 115-34.

51. Bill Moriarty, “Errors of Dual Unionism,” letter to the editor, *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 July 1935; James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party* (London, 1975), 59; Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough, 1977), 137.

working class moved, communists were free to respond. Usually they were the first — sometimes the only — people to do so. In exploiting rank and file “spontaneity” and actively building class solidarity against the separations of ethnicity, race and gender, their tactics were designed for victory, not heroic defeat. And in the generally more helpful circumstances of 1933-35 they often succeeded. If the WUL’s formal achievements were limited, much the same could be said of the early CIO (which as Irving Abella has shown, benefitted significantly from WUL pioneering.) Even in the early years of apparent non-achievement, communists were earning respect from sections of the working class believed immune to “alien” ideologies. On the ground, if not at the centre, they did not wait for the Comintern’s signal before adopting a more fraternal discourse and practice. Because of that, they had no reason to think that the ECCI’s call for a general return to traditional conceptions of unity precluded a continued role for the WUL. Even after they realized their mistake and performed the inevitable act of self-abnegation, their authority remained stronger than at any time since the formation of the party.<sup>52</sup>

---

52. Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour*.

**Figure 1**  
**Workers' Unity League Trade Union Membership, July 1931**

UNION	MEMBERS
MINE WORKERS' UNION OF CANADA*	3200
LUMBER WORKERS' INDUSTRIAL UNION*	1400
INDUSTRIAL UNION OF NEEDLE TRADES' WORKERS*	1200
METAL MINERS (Ontario)	250
FOOD WORKERS (Winnipeg, Toronto, Port Arthur)	117
DOMESTIC SERVANTS (Toronto, Montreal, S.S. Marie, Windsor, Kirkland Lane, Sudbury)	114
STEELWORKERS (Winnipeg, Hamilton)	99
RAILWAY WORKERS' OPPOSITION	72
MINERS' OPPOSITION (Nova Scotia)	69
BUILDING TRADES' OPPOSITION (Toronto)	49
	6570

Source: PAO-CPP, 3A 2310, Tom Ewan to James Sloan, 30 JULY 1931

\* Unions existing before the WUL's formation

**Figure 2**  
**The Ten Largest Strikes in Non-coal Mining Industry 1933-34**

	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Union Involved</b>	<b>No. of Strikers</b>	<b>No. of Striker Days</b>
<b>1933</b>					
1	Logging	Thunder Bay	LWIU*	1,500	48,000
2	Garment	Toronto	ILGWU	2,000	27,000
3	Furniture	Stratford	FWIU*	600	26,000
4	Garment	Montreal	ILGWU	1,800	20,000
5	Garment	Montreal	ACWA	4,000	20,000
6	Logging	Thunder Bay	LWIU*	1,300	18,000
7	Logging	Rouyn	LWTU*	800	14,000
8	Metal Mining	Anyox	MWUC*	400	14,000
9	Textiles	Hespeler	TWIU*	700	10,000
10	Textiles	Hamilton	TWIU*	600	6,000
<b>1934</b>					
1	Logging	Vancouver I.	LWIU*	2,300	125,000
2	Garment	Montreal	IUNTW*	3,000	45,000
3	Garment	Montreal	ACWA	4,000	40,000
4	Logging	S.S. Marie	LWIU*	900	26,000
5	Metal Mining	Flin Flon	MWUC*	1,073	25,500
6	Logging	Iroquois Falls	LWIU*	680	23,000
7	Garment	Toronto	ILGWU	2,000	22,000
8	Garment	Winnipeg	IUNTW*	400	11,000
9	Garment	Montreal	MDECU**	400	11,000
10	Garment	Guelph	ILGWU	250	10,000

\* WUL Unions

\*\* The Montreal Dress Cutters' Union was an independent, communist-led organization. This was a strike in support of the IUNTW.

Source: **Labour Gazette**

**Figure 3**  
**Strikes Led by the WUL in Non-coal Mining Industries 1934**

<b>Industry</b>	<b>No. of strikes</b>	<b>No. of strikers</b>	<b>No. of Striker Days</b>	<b>Won/Compromise</b>	<b>Lost</b>
Agriculture	1 (0)*	93	93	1	
Logging	16 (1)	5,819	193,208	4	12
Metal Mining	2 (0)	1,373	26,700		2
Fishing	1 (0)	50	250		1
Food Processing	7 (3)	195	528	6	1
Shoe & Leather	18 (2)	2,347	12,372	11	**5
Garment	9 (27)	4,525	76,012	8	1
Textiles ***	5 (2)	91	730	3	2
Furniture	15 (0)	1,774	27,198	11	4
Automobile	4 (0)	333	1,228	4	
Construction	1 (4)	175	600	1	
Service and Other+	10 (4)	484	4,025	9	1

\* Figures in brackets refer to the number of strikes in these industries not led by the WUL

\*\* Two shoe workers' strikes are not designated won/lost since they were one-day sympathy strikes

\*\*\* I have counted all Ontario textiles' strikes as WUL strikes, even though most were short, spontaneous affairs. This is reasonable given the WUL's solitary activity among Ontario textile workers in the previous three years.

+ This category includes rag sorters, cleaners and dyers, car washers, window cleaners and, especially, restaurant workers.

Source: **Labour Gazette**