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TEXTILE WORKERS AND TEXTILE STRIKES IN CORNWALL, SHERBROOKE,
AND ST. GREGOIRE DE MONTMORENCY 1936 - 1939

by Ralph Ellis

A thesis presented to the School of Graduate Studies and
Research at the University of Ottawa in partial fulfillment
for the Masters degree in History

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UNIVERSITÉ D'OTTAWA
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

Dedication

To my uncle Johnny and my aunts Honey and Tuty, millhands
and strikers in Cornwall

Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter I: The Cornwall Experience 1936	5
Chapter II: Organizing Canadian Cottons	30
Chapter III: The Quebec Experience 1936-1939	50
Conclusion	116
Bibliography	125

Introduction

Industrial unionism was spreading through North America mass production industries during the 1930s. Part of this trend in Canada was the attempt by workers in the primary textile industry to unionize their plants. Large and notable strikes took place at Courtaulds, Canadian Cottons, Wabasso Cotton, Dominion Woolens and Worsted and Dominion Textile among others.¹ Between 1936 and 1939, rayon and cotton workers in Cornwall won victories over Courtaulds and Canadian Cottons that rank with the best of any Canadian mass production industry settlements prior to World War II. In Quebec during the same period, a series of local textile conflicts was capped by the 1937 province-wide Dominion Textile strike. The workers here achieved less as the cotton giant was able to break the back of the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile by the spring of 1938. This thesis will examine the textile workers, unions and their strikes in three towns: Cornwall, Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency.

The literature on workers in Canada has tended to divide into two broadly defined categories of institutional and social histories.² This thesis aims to combine these areas via a community study approach. The textile unions' growth, leadership, tactics and, sometimes, political activities form the core of the narrative. However, these events are analysed within the context of the communities in which they happened.

The textile strikes of the 1930s, in particular, the 1937 Dominion Textile strike, provide fine opportunities to make such an attempt. Many institutional pieces exist on the Dominion Textile strike, the major leaders, the implications of the strike for Catholic unionism and the Union Nationale government, et cetera.³ What does not appear is any sense of the local context prior to the strike, how the community affected the outcome or the perceptions of the workers themselves. The textile strikes were not fought solely on the picket line. Alliances were sought within the towns and the struggle over local power represents part of the environment in which the workers operated. In addition, only by a detailed observation of the milieu can even a restricted picture of the workers' own attitudes emerge. A community oriented study, therefore, would seem to be the best method to penetrate these aspects of the workers' lives.

Cornwall, Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency were chosen because their experiences were likely to answer questions central to the study of textile unionism. All were mill towns, to varying degrees. The case of a textile company being the major employer in a town was fairly typical in the industry.⁴ This situation carried repercussions for municipal politics and the support offered to strikers by other residents. The corporate structure of the companies differed. Courtaulds possessed a near monopoly of viscose rayon production in Canada with all of its production facilities centralized in one town. Canadian Cottons had mills in three municipalities and was a large but not the foremost corporation in the cotton industry. That honour rested with Dominion Textile which dominated cotton manufacturing with an array of plants

spread throughout Quebec. These circumstances frequently determined the way in which a company responded to a union or a strike. Women made up a significant percentage of the workforce at all of the mills, took part in the strikes and, in different places, became part of or were excluded from the leadership. The events in Sherbrooke, Montmorency and Cornwall help answer the questions of whether women were as militant as the men and why the female millhands would or would not participate in the union beyond the rank and file level.⁵

Along with the aforementioned themes, two points arising from this thesis seem especially important for the future interpretation of Canadian industrial unionism. The workers at these three towns challenged the textile companies before the United Textile Workers of America or Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile had established an effective presence. The unions, rather than organizing the workers, took over and directed a rising militancy. Historians writing on the United States industrial union experience have frequently noted the vigorous shop floor militancy that fueled that body's expansion.⁶ What needs to be distinguished in the Canadian context is how much did shop floor militancy contribute to the industrial union drive. A limited study such as this cannot fully answer that question yet the issue should be discussed. Some of the Quebec millhands, in contrast to their Cornwall counterparts, accepted interventions by local elites in their early strikes that delayed unionization. These actions suggest that ideological or cultural differences among the workers affected their struggles. One should not leap to conclusions about "conservative" Quebec workers.⁷ However, attention has to be paid to the potential influence of distinctive environments.

Footnotes

- 1 See for example Roland Renner, "The Development of Unions in the Canadian Primary Textile Industry," M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 1977.
- 2 Gregory S. Kealey, "Labour and Working Class History in Canada: Prospects in the 1980s," Labour/Le Travailleur (Spring, 1981), pp. 92-94.
- 3 Gilles Groulx, "Le syndicalisme dans l'industrie textile du Quebec," M.A. Thesis, Universite de Montreal, 1954; Jacques Rouillard, Histoire de la CSN 1921-1981 (Montreal, 1981); Alfred Charpentier, Les Memoires d'Alfred Charpentier (Quebec, 1971); Alfred Charpentier, "L'ideologie de la CTCC, une response a Louis-Marie Tremblay," Relations Industrielles (1976), pp. 132-139; Alfred Charpentier, "La conscience syndicale lors des greves du textile en 1937 et de l'amante 1949," Labour/Le Travailleur (1978), pp. 197-220; Jean Paul Hetu, Lutte des travailleurs du textile au Quebec (Montreal, 1979); Jean-Paul Lefebvre, "Le textile 1937," in En Greve ed. by Jean-Paul Lefebvre (Montreal, 1963), pp. 23-57.
- 4 Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1932, p. 121 provides a breakdown of the pertinent figures.
- 5 For an overview of these two questions, see Wayne Roberts, Honest Womenhood: Feminism, Feminity and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women 1893-1914 (Toronto, 1976); Julie White, Women and Unions (Ottawa, 1980).
- 6 For the ties between industrial unionism and militancy see Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail (New York, 1977), pp. 96-174; Daniel Nelson, "Origins of the Sit-Down Era: Worker Militancy and Innovation in the Rubber Industry 1934-1938," Labor History (Spring, 1982), pp. 198-225; Stanley Aronowitz, False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness (New York, 1973); Joyce Shaw Peterson, "Auto Workers and Their Work 1900-1933," Labor History (Spring, 1982), pp. 213-236.
- 7 Jacques Rouillard, "Le militantisme des travailleurs au Quebec et en Ontario, niveau de syndicalisation et mouvement de greve (1900-1980)," Revue d'Histoire de l'Amerique Francaise (Septembre, 1983), pp. 201-226.

Chapter I: The Cornwall Experience 1936

In 1936, an apparently dormant volcano erupted in the small French-English community of Cornwall.¹ This eastern Ontario mill town experienced a strike, from 11 August to 4 September, at one of its two major employers, Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd., a rayon company. The disturbance paralleled other labour explosions of the 1930s. The residents of the town witnessed picket line violence, accusations of communism, governmental attempts at mediation, and turmoil in both political and personal community bonds. Unlike textile strikes elsewhere, the workers won decisively. The town's rayon millhands and cotton workers then joined together in one union to achieve a second victory, at Canadian Cottons, Cornwall's second largest employer. This drama unfolded in a series of bitter strikes from July 1937 to March 1938. In the process, Cornwall workers won union recognition, some wage increases and a union shop agreement. This was as much as any group of mass production workers was able to achieve prior to the war.

In Cornwall, or at least at the Courtaulds plant, the workers began this trek through a surge of shop floor militancy. The union did not enter the town to organize them. The millhands initiated the conflict, and soon opted for conducting their struggle under a union banner. This experience contrasts with that of the Quebec workers at Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency who, while equally militant, appealed at first to traditional elites for aid. Only after disappointment with this route had set in, did these

Quebec workers swing strongly to unionism.

By almost any definition, Cornwall was a mill town. In 1934, seventy-five per cent of all the town's industrial employment was in the textile industry.² Over a quarter of the eleven thousand people in the town worked for three textile companies: Powdrell and Alexander, a small curtain factory, Canadian Cottons and Courtaulds.³ When dependents are taken into account, one cannot escape the conclusion that the textile industry touched all aspects of local life. Politicians, local merchants and other townspeople would, of course, have to judge whether their loyalties should rest with the workers who were their neighbours or the industry necessary for the town's economy.

Women were quite important in these struggles. In 1936 they occupied 796 of the 1,753 positions (45.5 per cent) at Courtaulds and 319 of 1,401 jobs (22.8 per cent) at Canadian Cottons.⁴ The militant actions of these female millhands on the picket line undercut ideas that women were inherently more difficult to organize than men. The twin arguments that women, being sojourners in the work force from adolescence to marriage, did not see their interests linked to the other factory workers or that women were rendered docile by some societal "feminine psychology" do not seem useful here.⁵ More difficult to unravel are the attitudes towards women among the male union leaders or the women's place in that leadership.

The corporate structure of Courtaulds and Canadian Cottons also influenced the course of events. A few producers dominated

most divisions of the 1930s textile industry and reinforced their position with competition restricting agreements. If the artificial silk companies did not employ the common price fixing agreements used in other fields, it is only because they were not necessary. In 1935, Courtaulds and Canadian Celanese controlled 92.7 per cent of the Canadian market.⁶ Moreover, Courtaulds stood as the sole maker of viscose rayon in Canada, a product not directly competitive with Canadian Celanese's lines and protected by steep tariff barriers. Courtaulds remained profitable throughout the Depression and, somewhat atypically, had all of its production facilities concentrated in one town.

Canadian Cottons operated in an oligopolistic rather than monopolistic market yet it too remained profitable. Several producers were active with a relatively small number dominating. Canadian Cottons accounted for 17.7 per cent of all sales in 1935 of cotton yarn and cloth, second only to the giant Dominion Textile Company.⁷ The company owned three mills in New Brunswick, one in Hamilton and three in Cornwall. The differences between Canadian Cottons and Courtaulds led to variations in the degree of resistance to unions and tactics to fight them.

As a labour intensive industry, a shift in wage levels could seriously affect profits; therefore, employer hostility to the unionization of their mills was deeply ingrained. Outside of starving the workers back, the usual method of defense, employers in the 1930s often engaged in a public relations offensive.

The company could trot out the communist or foreign agitator bogeyman to perform for the press. Over the course of a strike, the unions and the management would enter a rhetorical dance over these images. The public perception then could affect the outcome through the granting or withholding of financial and political aid.

The town of Cornwall had long experience with textile mills and, on occasion, textile unions. Separately owned textile factories were constructed in the town immediately after Confederation. The Cornwall Manufacturing Company constructed a woolen mill in 1868. Two cotton mills, the Stormont Cotton Manufacturing Company and Canada Cotton Manufacturing Company, were built in the late 1870s.⁸ Together they launched Cornwall into the mainstream of Canadian industrialization. The town's proximity to the St. Lawrence River encouraged this development. By 1892 Canadian Coloured Cottons (later named Canadian Cottons) acquired both Cornwall cotton mills as well as individual Ontario plants in Hamilton, Merritton and Dundas along with another in Milltown, New Brunswick. Before the end of the century, though, the company dismantled the Dundas operation and sent its equipment to Cornwall. As well, the company absorbed the old woolen mill, the Cornwall Manufacturing Company in 1903.

Courtaulds, a British firm, was a recent arrival on the Cornwall scene. Courtaulds built a viscose rayon plant after securing a tariff on its product in 1923.⁹ The company had decided to erect a branch plant rather than supply the Canadian market by exports

in order to protect itself from European competitors.¹⁰ Cornwall was chosen as the site because of its location relative to other textile centres and the St. Lawrence River.¹¹

The introduction of a major new firm engendered startling expansion. The town's population which had only increased by 715 between 1901 and 1921, burgeoned to the extent of 6,698 new residents between 1921 and 1941. Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, Canadian Cottons employment ranged from 1,300 to 1,400 workers, so a significant part of the credit for the jump has to be attributed to Courtaulds which catapulted from 976 to 1,753 workers between 1930 and 1936.¹² Powdrell and Alexander, a new company, arrived in 1932. It manufactured cotton and rayon curtains and created 240 new jobs by 1934.¹³ Both Courtaulds and Canadian Cottons did well in the depression. The new Conservative government tariffs in 1930 bestowed a virtual monopoly on Courtaulds. By 1932, it spun 80 per cent of all viscose rayon manufactured in Canada.¹⁴ Reflecting this dominant position, the British subsidiary completed large scale expansions in 1931, 1934 and 1938. Compared to this investment consultant's dream, Canadian Cottons resembled a weak sister. Although the firm operated several mills, it was not Canada's largest producer of cotton yarn, let alone in a monopoly situation. Canadian Cottons, however, had several points to recommend it. The 1930 tariff provided for cottons. Moreover, cotton producers enjoyed a cushion against the depression for, although people stop buying consumer durables such as cars or radios, they still wear clothes.

Only once during the decade, in 1939, did Canadian Cottons suffer an operating loss on its plants.¹⁵ A rather generous dividend policy though did cause a drop in overall reserves.¹⁶

Reliable financial records are not readily available for evaluating Canadian Cottons relative to other textile companies. The Turgeon Royal Commission on the Textile Industry conspicuously complained about Canadian Cottons' methods of judging finances.¹⁷ Still studies indicate that textiles performed better than other manufacturing industries and consistently returned profits in difficult times.¹⁸

Textile companies expressed a fondness for small town life. Wages were lower than in the larger cities; control over the local labour market was greater and the deference usually shown by local politicians to the area's major employer was more pronounced.¹⁹ Political and social protest, however, arose in Cornwall concerning the less palatable aspects of cotton mills. A Conservative M.P., Colonel Darby Bergin, crusaded for factory legislation in the 1880s.²⁰ This was at about the same time that the Knights of Labour briefly gained prominence in the town.²¹ Any further unionization attempts had to wait for the early 1920s when the United Textile Workers of America Local #1382 unsuccessfully attempted to penetrate the cotton mills.²²

Courtaulds workers in the 1930s, like their predecessors in textiles, continued to be dissatisfied. Although artificial silk workers, especially males, were better paid on average than millhands

in other sections of the textile industry, textiles themselves paid notoriously low wages.²³ Moreover, wage rates within the plant varied widely, depending on one's age, sex or occupation. In 1936, wages ranged from less than six dollars to fifty dollars weekly for males and from less than six dollars to eighteen dollars weekly for females.²⁴ Most of the textile workers were not "well" paid. As Arthur Laverty, the president of the Courtaulds union commented, "I think the reason these men have asked for an increase in wages is for the good old fashioned reason that they can scarcely live on what they are making."²⁵

Workers in various departments had their own particular grievances. For example, the spinning of viscose rayon creates hydrogen sulphide. Without adequate ventilation at the mill, this gas irritated the spinners' eyes, at times making it impossible to complete their shifts. One member of the department, Harold McKissock, complained, "You cannot sleep, you cannot eat, you cannot do anything...It just seems like if you throw salt in your eyes..."²⁶

Carbon bisulphide, meanwhile, created additional problems. This chemical produced blisters or a rash, an irritation exacerbated by the company's refusal to supply gloves. Moreover, the vapours of carbon bisulphide even in low concentrations cause visual and nervous disturbances. Although some workers became acclimatized to these conditions, many remained especially sensitive to the fumes and could not work in the spinning department.

The spinners became quite angry over the situation. Frank Love, one of the organizers of the Courtaulds union, recalled that

he had to remind the spinners during the August 1936 strike to ask for a wage increase for themselves and not just focus on better ventilation and working conditions.²⁷

Other complaints at Courtaulds paralleled the litany of injustices common to the textile industry as a whole. The company set production quotas so high for women in the reeling room that work had to begin one half hour before schedule in order for the women to avoid pay reductions.²⁸ In effect, Courtaulds received a half hour of unpaid labour each day from the reeling room employees. These women were not alone; all departments faced periodic speed-ups.²⁹ Changes in working conditions concerned the women as much as wages. During 1936 contract negotiations, the women on the negotiating committee turned down part of a wage increase offer in order to get a work reduction.³⁰

Job security did not exist at the mill. Foremen could dismiss employees and decide on promotions without appeal. Apparently some foremen abused this power considerably. On occasion, one foreman would run a lottery; participation was compulsory, unemployment being the consequence of refusal.³¹

Building the Courtaulds Union

The preconditions for unionization already existed; organizational skills and experience were harder to come by. Few millhands had any experience with unions and in this case the initial impetus came from an outsider. One employee, after quitting because of the working conditions at Courtaulds, turned to a local electrician,

Frank Love, for assistance in organizing the plant. Love, a Communist Party of Canada member, had previously helped organize an electricians' union in Ottawa.³² Sometime in June 1936, the two planned a secret meeting for about a half dozen millhands. The rayon mill grapevine insured a large turnout of workers. It was felt that enough workers were present to elect union officers. Arthur Laverty, a Courtaulds employee for five years with limited experience of mining, iron and steel unions in Great Britain, stepped forward to become president.

The rayon workers soon found themselves employing Frank Love. Once news leaked out about the creation of a union, the textile mills convinced Gallinger Electric Sales to fire Love. Ironically, this probably assisted the union's growth; Love could now devote all his time to organizing. A sign emblazon with "Rayon Workers Industrial Union" now stood in a rented store near the mill. Men, especially the spinners, signed up quickly. Women were more hesitant. Small gatherings held to discuss these grievances helped overcome the women's reluctance and many also joined the new union.

At this point a tremendous publicity coup fell into the union's lap. Frank Love had asked Mamie Lavigne, the union vice president, and another woman to pick an argument in the reeling room over the workload, and thus dramatize grievances there. Much to Love's chagrin, these women pulled the department's power switch. Work stopped and the company fired four women.³³ The 191 reeling room women immediately went on strike that day, 31 July 1936. The stoppage lasted forty-five minutes. After the union discussed the

matter with the company, it agreed to rehire the women, following a one week suspension. When the strike occurred, the Rayon Workers Industrial Union had signed up fifty to sixty per cent of the workforce. The sudden "victory" facilitated recruitment even further.³⁴

Having been forced to open discussion with the union, Courtaulds decided to go on the offensive. The company ordered the men in the spinning department to stay at their work, threatening dismissal if they talked among themselves about the union. Incensed, the spinners walked out on 11 August and set up picket lines at the plant gates. The union was almost as surprised at the walkout as the company. The local leadership did not want a strike this early.

Frank Love observed:

A strike is always the last resort and it is not a good resort for a new union at all. We had been in fear of a strike being provoked and we had been very cautious about it.³⁵

Two days before the strike, the rayon workers had affiliated with the United Textile Workers of America, becoming UTWA Local #2499. As a result the UTWA assigned Alex Welch, a former Workers Unity League official, to Cornwall, thus giving the strike one more experienced leader.³⁶

The Cornwall townspeople must have expected fireworks for two thousand turned out, in the first few days, to watch the picket line.³⁷ The spectators did not have to wait long. On 16 August, a provincial police car knocked down one of the strikers, Dorothy Lynch. Previously cordial relations with the police abruptly ended as many of the strikers, including the women, scuffled with the

officers. Accusations followed that the police had been trying to run the gate. No arrests were made in this confrontation. Rumours that rayon shipments were to be sent out of the mill led, two days later, to worker attempts to block the plant gates. Police and strikers again battled. Although women formed the first few rows at the gates, arrests on charges of illegal picketing were limited to sixteen men. Injuries were more equitably distributed as four women were injured in skirmishes. With trouble brewing, the provincial Liberal government dispatched thirty additional officers. The presence of Frank Love and Alex Welch, both known communists, may have sharpened the interest of the provincial government.

Frank Love soon joined the sixteen arrested picketers. He was arrested on 19 August in the courthouse for leading the pickets at the gates. When Love promised to continue his union activities Judge Bergeron declared, "Bail will not be granted if he intends to carry on his illegal tactics."³⁸ When Bergeron's decision was overturned by a higher court, he set bail at four thousand dollars, eight times the maximum amount asked for anyone else arrested on the same charge. Realizing the difficulties in dealing with the police, the union agreed to rayon shipments.

The strike was, meanwhile, drawing increased attention and interest. The CCF and Communist Party of Ontario donated aid and support. The union orchestrated three protest meetings, first on the arrest of Love, then on the refusal to grant bail, and finally to hear Love himself talk. Attendance ranged from three thousand

at the first rally, eight hundred to one thousand at the second and one thousand five hundred at the third, impressive figures for a town of 12,681.

By 25 August, attention had shifted to the company-union negotiations. The local management maintained that no major concessions on wages or union recognition could be considered in the absence of Henry Johnson, the president of Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd. When Johnson finally did arrive, he was prepared to compromise on wages and working conditions but not union recognition. Claiming to fear communist influence, he pressed to have anyone officially connected to the union dropped from the negotiating committee. Relations deteriorated further on the picket line as well. Police arrested nine more pickets on 31 August when they attempted to prevent a street railway car from moving into the plant. The next day three men were arrested for obstructing trucks intent on entering the job site.

Throughout the strike public support grew. The union asked Canadian Cottons workers to picket at Courtaulds. They agreed. The Canada Bread Company allowed strikers to receive bread on credit and a dairy permitted its left-over milk to be distributed to the millhands.³⁹ The union began a door-to-door canvass and local merchants donated articles for a raffle.⁴⁰ Alex Eamer, a township councillor, and Ed Watters, a former town councillor, spoke in favour of the mill workers at a public meeting and at the conclusion of the strike. Lionel Chevrier, the local Liberal M.P., appeared as counsel for

the men charged with illegal picketing.

Not all the townspeople, however, backed the textile workers. The town council used the municipal police for plant security at Courtaulds despite the fact that the plant was built outside the town limits and consequently paid no municipal taxes. The local press also claimed that Courtaulds employed special constables dressed in town police uniforms.⁴¹ A Catholic priest denounced the rayon union from the pulpit, an action which caused several of his congregation to walk out during the sermon.⁴² Manifestations of anti-union opinions, though, tended to be in the minority.

Despite popular support and internal solidarity, the textile workers could not maintain the strike forever. The company had demanded the dropping of all union officials from the negotiating committee and for the representation of a rival company union headed by Paul Riviere. Although, in a moment of bluster, it claimed to have as many as one thousand members, the union did not regard Riviere's movement as a serious threat.⁴³ Only a handful of workers had crossed the picket line, the membership staying strongly with the union. In order to get an agreement, however, they had to concede on Courtaulds' first demand. Arthur Laverty and Alex Welch removed themselves from the negotiations. Still, all those who signed the final agreement were union members.

The 4 September contract didn't contain a union recognition clause. Nevertheless, the Courtaulds employees had won almost all of their wage and working

condition demands. Among the concessions were across the board pay raises, a grievance procedure, seniority for promotions, payment for shifts lost due to sore eyes in spinning as well as lower limits on production levels in the reeling room and spinning department. The rayon workers had won an unprecedented victory among Canadian mass production workers. They even had been able to engineer this result without long term preparation or significant financial backing from the UTWA whose only real contribution was the assigning of Alex Welch to the strike.

A very basic precondition for a strike is that the workers be willing to confront the employer and continue their struggle in the face of considerable hardship. For whatever reason - poor working conditions, the speed up, shared workplace complaints - the Cornwall millhands demonstrated a vigorous shop floor militancy and solidarity. The United Textile Workers of America did not enter the town to organize the local. The workers there organized themselves. Even when "outside" help was sought, workers turned to an experienced organizer within the community. Only after the decision to affiliate with the UTWA did Alex Welch arrive in Cornwall. Throughout the struggle at Courtaulds, the rayon workers relied upon their own resources with little aid coming from the UTWA.

The economic situation of the country and at Courtaulds was also a key factor in the workers' victory. The year 1936 witnessed a general economic upturn in most industrial fields including textiles.⁴⁴ Naturally employers would prefer to be operating in such a time and

recruiting strikebreakers might be more difficult. Courtaulds, as mentioned earlier, had been profitable in the 1930s with a virtual monopoly of the Canadian viscose rayon market. One aspect of this situation was that the company could use its accumulated profits to ride out a long strike secure in the knowledge that no other corporation was in a position to cut into its market. All the production facilities, however, were located in one town and this balanced the advantages of monopoly. The Rayon Workers Industrial Union needed to operate only in Cornwall, avoiding the difficulties of coordinated action among several towns. Moreover, production could not be shifted to other plants. While Courtaulds did not have to worry about another company usurping its market, no profits whatever were generated during a strike.

Courtaulds was also vulnerable on a technical level to a strike.⁴⁵ Viscose assumes the density of soft wood when left stationary. Cleaning miles of pipes filled with hardened viscose delayed the reopening of the plant for several weeks, adding to the expense of the strike. For this reason, the rayon mill had to judge carefully the cost of alienating its employees to the point where they would strike. The company could not constantly renege on a contract to whittle away the union. Even a short dispute could seriously inflate costs.

The Cornwall rayon workers also had the advantage of higher pay than their counterparts in various other branches of the industry. Textiles did not pay well compared to other industrial occupations,

yet male rayon workers received more money than other male textile workers. Female rayon workers stayed close to par with women in other divisions of the industry.⁴⁶ Consequently, men at Courtaulds could afford union dues and could save more easily than workers in cotton, woolens or real silk.

The influence of a mill town can play a role in the settling of strikes. Labour considerations engendered a fondness of small town life among textile companies. In 1930, 255 of a total 416 mills operated in towns under fifty thousand in population with 114 of these 255 in towns below five thousand people.⁴⁷ The negative features of mill towns for unions have often been enumerated. The industry can effectively control the local labour market and blacklist active union members because the workers do not have alternative employment.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the company often uses its economic influence to pressure local merchants and municipal governments.

In Cornwall, however, the choice of a small town backfired for Courtaulds. The experience of other types of mill towns shows that an entire town can become embroiled in the dispute through the connections of friends and relatives or merchants who need the workers as customers.⁴⁹ Such was the situation in Cornwall. Community spirit helped the rayon union to raise money. The workers also benefited from the fact that Cornwall was not a "classic" single enterprise community or company town with only one employer. The continued operation of Canadian Cottons and other town businesses ensured that there was money around to be donated.

The political stage was another potential area of conflict.

Municipal government can be fashioned into a weapon by local workers. Local police can restrain strikebreakers on the pretext of preventing violence, rather than protect them as they cross picket lines. If the federal and provincial governments do send in security forces without the consent of the town council, the move will generate considerable local resentment and sometimes very negative press comment. Furthermore, the municipality can organize relief for the strikers.

The workers' political influence in 1936 faced early limitations. The town council, at least initially, was hostile and only a few minor political-figures backed the strikers. A shift occurred though as the strike progressed. Rallies against the arrest of Frank Love attracted exceptionally large numbers. Lionel Chevrier, the Liberal member of parliament, while invisible for most of the strike, had the political acumen to see where the wind was blowing. After the strike had finished, he appeared as legal counsel for the men charged with illegal picketing. Other politicians at the municipal and provincial levels would mimic this new found love for the textile workers during the cotton mill strikes of 1937-1938.

Arguments that women textile workers were difficult to unionize by virtue of a lack of militancy, social conditioning or only being temporary workers until marriage can be discounted in the Cornwall experience. The first strike on 31 July 1936 had been carried out by the reeling room women. In August women made themselves quite conspicuous on the picket line.⁵⁰ Moreover, the female millhands held

leadership positions within the union. On 25 August, three women travelled to Toronto to raise funds there. Kathleen Gray and Florence Currier sat on the union negotiating committee and in the four member union executive, Mamie Lavigne served as vice president with Anne McMillan as recording secretary.⁵¹ Finally, despite being paid less and hence having less potential material resources to fall back upon, the women never broke ranks during the strike.

The strategies exhibited by both sides during the strike seemed fairly typical for the 1930s. Courtaulds sought at first to wait the union out, refusing to conduct serious negotiations until the arrival of Henry Johnson, the corporation president. Once discussion began in earnest, the goal was to forestall union recognition at all costs. Henry Johnson summed up his position quite succinctly:

I have never had to deal with a union here before, never heard of such a thing and I am not going to be led by a lot of such folks as if I might just have a rope around my neck and be led like a lamb to the slaughter.⁵²

The demands that the negotiating committee drop all union officials from its ranks and include members of the newly formed company union grew naturally out of this attitude of complete hostility to unions. Although the Courtaulds workers gave in on the first point, their solidarity was sufficient that the company could not force concessions on the second.⁵³ Only a handful of workers had entered the mill during the strike so the union could not seriously accept the company union's grossly exaggerated claims of support.

The company attempted to obtain as much police aid as possible.

It hired special constables dressed in municipal police uniforms and tried to create an atmosphere conducive to the stationing of provincial police. Here Frank Love and Alex Welch's communist connections proved helpful. In any case, the Ontario government of Mitchell Hepburn responded strongly to the strike and the picket line violence of the first few days by sending a large contingent of police to Cornwall.

The presence of the police had relatively little impact on the outcome of the strike. The union strategy, formed out of the early confusion of the 31 July and 11 August walkouts, was to avoid confrontations and present a moderate image. At first, no objections were raised to rayon shipments from the plant. This broke down, however, when the company shipped amounts larger than those agreed upon. After a few conflicts with the police over the intimidation of drivers, the union backed down, thereby limiting the number of members arrested and denying the provincial government an excuse for even more police intervention. Similarly, union leaders attempted to restrain their supporters when they got out of hand at the company gates or the strikers' trials.

Avoiding confrontations with the police that the union could not win and efforts to distance itself from the communist charge insured broader community support and did not give the police an excuse for excesses. Certainly, without picket line conflicts or strikebreakers to escort through the line, the police were effectively neutralized during the strike. Although Frank Love was unexpectedly arrested, Arthur

Lavery and Alex Welch were by then in a position to lead the strike. Unless the government decided to arrest the entire union executive or instigate an unprovoked attack on the picketers, actions difficult to justify legally and publicly, the police could do little more than maintain a visible presence at the plant gates.

In spite of vigorous employer, provincial government and police opposition, the rayon workers won a clear victory in the fields of wages and working conditions. Although union recognition was not granted de jure, grievance procedures and seniority insured the union a de facto role. De jure recognition would be conceded in the following year.⁵⁴ After the August 1936 strike, the union began a series of job actions to force the company to rehire the workers who had been fired and to rebuild membership which had dropped off somewhat.⁵⁵ The union threatened a full scale strike in December 1936 if the company did not return thirty-three former employees to their jobs.⁵⁶ Ellis Blair, a former union official at the time, recalls that Courtaulds became so frustrated with minor stoppages and the threat of a larger strike that the management decided to concede union recognition in the next agreement.⁵⁷ The September 1937 contract did not require another strike.⁵⁸ In front of the Royal Commission on the Textile Industry, the Courtaulds president, Henry Johnson, had characterized the union people as amateurish to explain his reasons for not granting union recognition in 1936.⁵⁹ In an unusually sarcastic remark for a Royal Commission report, commissioner W.F.A. Turgeon wrote, "...it is pleasing to be able to record that, in the ensuing twelve months, the company had found the union leaders so gained in experience that in September 1937, the

company entered into an agreement with the Rayon Workers Industrial
Union."⁶⁰

Footnotes

- 1 In 1931, out of an 11,126 population, 5,320 were of British origin and 4,846 were of French origin. Canada, Census of Canada 1931, Volume II, p. 424.
- 2 Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1935, p. 110.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 110-111.
- 4 Standard-Freeholder, 2 August 1936; Public Archives of Canada (hereafter cited PAC) RG 33/20, Vol. 20, Royal Commission on the Textile Industry (hereafter cited RCTI); Exhibit No. 739, Statements of Average Hourly Earnings, February 1936, Canadian Cottons.
- 5 Roland Renner, "The Development of Unions in the Canadian Primary Textile Industry," M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 1977, pp. 16-19; Wayne Roberts, Honest Womenhood: Feminism, Femininity and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women 1893-1914 (Toronto, 1976), pp. 1-5, 47-53; Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "'Weaving it Together': Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," Labour/Le Travailleur (Spring 1981), pp. 113-126; Julie White, Women and Unions (Ottawa, 1980), pp. 29-51; see also Lynda Yanz and Linda Briskin (eds.), Resources for Feminist Research, Vol. X, No. 2.
- 6 Canada, Royal Commission on the Textile Industry Report (hereafter cited RCTI Report) (Ottawa, 1938), p. 110.
- 7 Ibid., p. 51.
- 8 Elinor Kyte Senior, From Royal Township to Industrial City: Cornwall 1784-1984 (Belleville, 1983), pp. 226-233.
- 9 Renner, "Development of Unions," p. 33.
- 10 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 19, RCTI: Exhibit No. 729, An Interview with Henry Johnson, President of Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd., p. 6.
- 11 Courtaulds, Yesterday...Today and Tomorrow: Fifty Years of Progress (Cornwall, 1975), p. 2.
- 12 Rough and sometimes inaccurate employment figures for Canadian Cottons are available in the directory of the Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada each year during the 1930s; RCTI Report, p. 304 (Courtaulds is the only artificial silk producers in Ontario); Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1935, pp. 110-111.

- 13 Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1935, pp. 110-111.
- 14 Ibid., 1932, pp. 22-23.
- 15 Canadian Cottons Annual Report, 1939.
- 16 Years when dividend payments forced a loss are 1932, 1933, 1936 and 1938. This could have happened in 1930 and 1931 as well but the method of compilation makes this difficult to determine, Canadian Cottons Annual Reports, 1929-1940.
- 17 Ibid., 1937.
- 18 RCTI Report, pp. 117-125; Renner, "Development of Unions," pp. 38-39.
- 19 Renner, "Development of Unions," p. 57; Tom Naylor, The History of Canadian Business 1867-1914: Volume II Industrial Development (Toronto, 1975), pp. 133-137.
- 20 Desmond Morton and Terry Copp, Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour (Ottawa, 1980), pp. 42-44.
- 21 Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labour in Ontario 1880-1900 (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 62, 63, 77, 88, 244, 323, 334, 335, 358, 359.
- 22 Canada Department of Labour, Report on Labour Organization in Canada 1920 (Ottawa, 1921), p. 192; 1921 (Ottawa, 1922), p. 188.
- 23 RCTI Report, pp. 279-284. The average weekly wage for males in Courtaulds was \$20.32 and, for females, \$12.60.
- 24 Ibid., p. 300.
- 25 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 20, RCTI: Exhibit No. 730, Report of Negotiations Between Employees and Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd., August and September, 1936, p. 20.
- 26 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 5, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, p. 10236; see also Public Archives of Ontario (hereafter cited PAO), RG 7 Series II - 1, Vol. 17, Office of the Deputy Minister General Subject Files, F.M.R. Bulmer to James F. Marsh, 28 September 1936.
- 27 Ibid.; Frank Love Interview.
- 28 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 5, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, p. 9986.
- 29 Ibid., p. 9958.

- 30 Ellis Blair Interview.
- 31 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 20, RCTI: Exhibit No. 730, Report of Negotiations Between Employees and Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd., August and September, 1936, p. 13; Interview with Ethel Morris.
- 32 This and other accounts of the early history of the union come mainly from Frank Love.
- 33 PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 377, strike no. 94.
- 34 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 5, RCTI: Transcripts of Hearings, pp. 9937, 10004.
- 35 Ibid., p. 10006.
- 36 See Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years: A History of the American Workers 1933-1941 (Boston, 1970), pp. 352-399; Walter Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 3-75; Irving Abella, Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour (Toronto, 1973), p. 35.
- 37 For the events of the strike see PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 377, strike no. 96.
- 38 Ibid. See the clipping from the Ottawa Evening Journal, 19 August 1936.
- 39 Frank Love Interview.
- 40 PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 377, strike no. 96.
- 41 Standard-Freeholder, 26 August 1936.
- 42 Frank Love Interview.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 F.H. Leacy (ed.), Historical Statistics of Canada, 2nd ed. (Ottawa, 1983). See charts R241-246, R275-280, R292-297, R320-325, R354-359, R433-438.
- 45 Industrial Canada, April 1937, p. 40.
- 46 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 47, RCTI: Exhibit Nos. 1287, 1288 and 1289, Principle Industries Arranged According to Average Weekly Wages of Wage Earners, 1934.
- 47 Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1932, p. 121.

- 48 Renner, "Development of Unions," p. 57.
 - 49 See David Alexander Frank, "Cape Breton Coal Miners 1917-1926," Ph.D. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1980 for a discussion of municipal political action in coal towns.
 - 50 PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 377, strike no. 96. See Montreal Star, 22 August 1936.
 - 51 Standard-Freeholder, 2, 4 September 1936; PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 377, strike no. 96.
 - 52 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 19, RCTI: Exhibit No. 729, An Interview with Henry Johnson, President of Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd., p. 71.
 - 53 Ellis Blair Interview. Blair states that it was he that insisted that no non-union people sign the agreement.
 - 54 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 20, RCTI: Exhibit No. 730, Report of Negotiations Between Employees and Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd., August and September, 1936, p. 11.
 - 55 Ellis Blair Interview.
 - 56 PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 377, strike no. 96.
 - 57 Ellis Blair Interview.
 - 58 Canada Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, 1937, pp. 1153-1154.
 - 59 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 19, RCTI: Exhibit No. 729, An Interview with Henry Johnson, President of Courtaulds (Canada) Ltd., p. 18.
 - 60 RCTI Report, p. 187.
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Chapter II: Organizing Canadian Cottons

During 1937 the rayon workers began organizing the employees of Canadian Cottons and Powdrell and Alexander into what was to become one body, the Cornwall Textile Workers Union. While the union at Powdrell and Alexander would fall by the wayside in 1938 without having won a contract, the experience of Canadian Cottons millhands was much more positive. Over the course of 1937 and 1938, they fought a protracted battle for improvements. In the end, they would win as much as the rayon millhands had earlier.

The cotton workers had strong reasons for wanting to take on their employers. In 1936, males and females received average wages of around sixteen and twelve dollars respectively.¹ Cottons supplied some of the less rewarding jobs in an industry notorious for low pay. In 1934, male Ontario cotton workers ranked thirty-seventh in a list of the provinces thirty-nine principle industries arranged by average weekly wages - the lowest position even among textiles. Women cotton workers in Ontario did somewhat better in relation to other women. By average weekly wages, they held in 1934 the sixteenth position in a list of thirty-seven principle industries with three divisions of the textile industry above and three below them.²

The company had many methods for holding down the wages of their workers. Weavers at the Canada mill found their pay drop

approximately three dollars per week as the firm unilaterally altered the base for piece work. Moreover, on complicated work, the weavers could not verify the count of production, at all.³ If someone, however, harboured ambitions for higher pay, this could be accommodated. When carding room worker Leo Cloutier requested a raise, Canadian Cottons fired two other men on his shift, thereby permitting an extension in his hours of labour.⁴ A few workers had to serve apprenticeships, lasting sometimes several months, during which they laboured for free.⁵ Their youth made the apprentices acquiesce in accepting these terms. Some had started work as young as thirteen or fourteen.⁶

Working conditions at the mills angered the workers. Doffers attached rolling pins onto the machines operated by the spinners, but not enough of these rolling pins were available. Hence, these men showed up for work earlier than scheduled and scuffled with one another to get at the pins.⁷ Totally inadequate ventilation, along with irritating noise levels, were problems consistently reported in all cotton plants.⁸ The twenty or so men in the Canada mill's napping room undoubtedly confronted the worst of these conditions. The temperature there rose as high as 138° F when cloth was being dried. The only avenue for fresh air was the occasional open window.⁹ Inadequate ventilation also insured that the women in the cotton mills invariably went home covered with white dust.¹⁰

Arthur Laverty opened negotiations with Canadian Cottons in

a letter on 12 July 1937. He claimed eighty per cent union membership and demanded union recognition, pay raises, time and one-half for overtime, better ventilation and a grievance procedure.¹¹ On 22 July, R.G. Tolmie, the general manager, replied by refusing recognition and pointing to low wage competition from other countries. Tolmie's letter, though, came one day after the strike had begun. The millhands, fearing massive cotton shipments, filed out of the plant thirty-six hours ahead of schedule. Thus, the first of a series of cotton strikes commenced.

Even to the casual observer, several contrasts with the Court-aulds strike were apparent. The union leaders had planned this one. In 1936, they had not controlled the workers but rather had constantly attempted to direct an unruly steed which had just bolted from the barn. Another distinction was the leadership's refusal to have women do picket duty.¹² While the absence of women on the negotiating committee might be due to the fact that women comprised only one-quarter of the workforce, the unwillingness to use them on the picket line reflected a perplexing change in attitude.¹³

The municipal government was much more friendly to the strikers. The mayor, Aaron Horowitz, recognized the flow of public support and proclaimed that, unlike 1936, no municipal police would be used and no provincial police asked for.¹⁴ Although deeply concerned about the communist ties of the union, the mayor may have been partially swayed by an attempt to unseat him in the December 1936 mayoralty election.¹⁵ Without official union sponsorship, a

former councillor, Edmond Watters, ran a pro-labour campaign that fell short of toppling the mayor. Support for labour at this time might head off future challenges.

Mitchell Hepburn, the Ontario premier, announced that provincial police would not be assigned to the town during the Canadian Cottons strike. The premier probably adopted this conciliatory attitude for two reasons. A provincial election was approaching with a local Liberal M.L.A.'s seat on the line. An attack on the textile union would have proved quite embarrassing. As well, just a few days after the start of the July 1937 Canadian Cottons strike, the Cornwall textile workers left the United Textile Workers of America to become a directly chartered local of the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress.¹⁶ This removed any direct or indirect links to the CIO group of unions under suspension by the AFL. Hepburn had been conducting a campaign against CIO union activity in Ontario; therefore, he may have been placated by the UTWA's exit from Cornwall.

The Cornwall textile union had not been the only textile local to sever ties with the UTWA. At the same time, other textile unions in Peterborough, Toronto and Trois Rivieres became directly chartered locals of Canadian Trades and Labour Congress and, in conjunction with the Cornwall local, formed the National Textile Council as a coordinating body. The reasons for this move are not entirely clear. The unions may have wished to avoid anti-CIO sentiment or may have felt that since the UTWA was not contributing materially

to their organizational efforts, they were just as well off outside that organization.¹⁷

During the Canadian Cottons strike, community support continued while political support strengthened. The union resumed its programme of fund raising among the merchants and the general public.¹⁸ The union exploited the mass rally as well. It held three with over two thousand person attendance. The previous year, only three local politicians - Alex Eamer, a township councillor, Edmond Watters, a former town councillor, and Lionel Chevrier, the member of parliament - had endorsed the strike. By 1937, political support was eagerly given. Along with the aforementioned men, Eward Bowen, a township councillor, Elzear Emard, a town councillor, Arthur Tessier, a deputy reeve, Aaron Horowitz, the mayor, and F.B. Brownridge, the member of the legislative assembly, addressed union meetings. The town actually offered relief if the conflict dragged on too long. Edmond Watters accurately described the new alliance when he proclaimed, "You have our member of parliament, the city and township councils, the merchants and the citizens in general behind you."¹⁹

The early negotiations consisted mainly of sabre rattling, the company demanding and the union resisting the removal of Arthur Laverty from the negotiating committee. Laverty's presence involved the issue of union recognition. By the end of July, Laverty offered to withdraw from the negotiating committee, but this did not break the log jam. Finally, both sides agreed to arrange a settlement

through an outside intermediary and then disagreed on what form this should take. The union wanted federal arbitration but the company preferred the provincial Industry and Labour Board.

The Industrial Standards Act passed in Ontario during 1935 and amended in 1936 created the Industry and Labour Board. The act allowed an Industrial Standards Officer to convene a meeting of employers and employees in an industry and/or region that would, in conjunction with the government appointed representatives, decide hours, minimum wages, overtime rates and sometimes job classifications. The resulting agreement would last a minimum of one year. Ostensibly the law was intended to stop the penalization of generous employers who gave their workers raises and then faced competition from other businesses paying lower wages.²⁰ In effect, the act allowed corporations to side-step union recognition. It also meant that the higher paid employees would receive few benefits.

Federal arbitration would have dealt with only the three Canadian Cottons plants in Cornwall and the investigation would have proceeded in a much more detailed fashion. Not just minimum wages would be looked into but the rates for all levels of workers. The arbitration board could also go into the questions of working conditions, grievance procedures, seniority for layoff and promotions as well as union recognition. The report would come much faster if done through the federal process because this board would not have to tour the province to gather information.

The union pushed vigorously for federal arbitration for as long as there was a chance of getting it. They complained of the

delay in awaiting a province wide report, threatening to continue to strike even if the provincial board investigated. On 16 August both sides met with Mitchell Hepburn, the premier, Louis Fine, the province's chief mediator, and Paddy Draper, Canadian Trades and Labour Congress president. The Cornwall Textile Workers Union, convinced that half a loaf was better than none, now accepted provincial arbitration.

The cotton workers returned on 21 August with a mixed bag of a settlement. The questions of wages and overtime had been left to the Ontario Industry and Labour Board to decide; however, the company and the union agreed on some points. The company promised no discrimination, a fair distribution of piece work and a minimum of four hours work for someone called in. At the same time, workers were to elect mill committees to represent them and remedy grievances. Without union recognition or immediate wage concessions, the results of the strike had to be judged unsatisfactory. This disappointment, coupled with Canadian Cottons' aggressive attitude towards the union and the long delay in getting an award from the Industry and Labour Board, provoked a series of strikes over the next eight months.

The first of these disputes, just five days after the return to work, arose out of the firing of a Stormont mill employee, Jack Harris, who complained about a speed up.²¹ Because Harris had been an active unionist, many workers felt this to be discrimination so all three mills initiated a spontaneous strike. Under provincial mediation, Harris was rehired; the grievance committee was set up

to take care of problems and work resumed on 31 August.

Anger over the laggardly pace of the Ontario Industry and Labour Board precipitated the next two strikes. Eleven doffers at the Stormont mill had demanded hourly pay rates rather than piece work and walked out to back up their point.²² The union leadership ended this 11 October strike after just two days. On 23 November, though, Arthur Laverty and the union officers not only did not condemn the nappers in the Canada mill for walking out after an employee was transferred contrary to seniority but, instead, exploited the situation to demand a sitting of the Industry and Labour Board in Cornwall.²³ The Cornwall Textile Workers Union, both among the leadership and the rank and file, had lost patience, holding two mass meetings to pressure the provincial government.

On 3 December, six days after the three cotton mills recommenced production, the Industry and Labour Board met labour representatives, facing invective from them and the crowd at an open meeting. Much to the ire of those present, the board refused to write an immediate, separate report for Cornwall, suggesting rather that Canadian Cottons and the union make another attempt at negotiations based on some tentative job classifications already drawn up.

These negotiations proved futile with no agreement reached by late January 1938 when the Ontario Industry and Labour Board published its own minimum wage and overtime determinations which were subsequently decried as too low by the union.²⁴ One of the orders, that adult males must be paid sixteen dollars for a forty-

eight hour week, led to another spontaneous strike. Canadian Cottons, displaying a perverted logic, argued that certain of the less skilled jobs for males were really "boys" jobs. As no one could expect the company to pay men's rates for "boys" work, Canadian Cottons laid-off experienced workers to replace them with adolescents.²⁵ From 11 to 15 February, starting at the Canada mill's napping department, the three mills spontaneously shut down to protest this practice. The workers also objected to a speed up in the napping room and wage rates, for females, below the minimum set by the Ontario Industry and Labour Board.²⁶ Initially, the workers had copied the CIO tactic of the sit-down strike. Union leaders, however, feared potential police intervention and damage to local support. They persuaded the workers to leave the plant. Eventually, the company and the union agreed to permit the mill committees to resolve the disputed points.

One issue that these committees did not solve was the replacement of men by boys. Such a policy would seriously disrupt the union. It would have had to sign up the new workers as well as fight any new strikes with a younger, less well paid workforce. Moreover, the union would have little claim to workers' loyalties if it could not even prevent arbitrary dismissals. The Cornwall Textile Workers Union had no choice but to officially pull its members out for another strike on 25 March.

The incessant production interruptions over the last eight months finally proved too costly and Canadian Cottons capitulated

on points never conceded earlier. A contract signed on 29 March gave recognition, made union membership compulsory for new employees, and seniority the basis for promotions and lay-offs. Wages, beyond the recommendations of the Ontario Industry and Labour Board, were to be negotiated later. In return for recognition the company demanded that the union affiliate only with the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress and that the membership consist, exclusively, of the mill employees.²⁷ Canadian Cottons' motivation seems evident. It hoped to end cooperation among the Cornwall unions while preventing Arthur Lavery, or other experienced union officials, from entering future negotiations. Undoubtedly, the newly created Cotton Workers Federal Union Local #2 received the better of the deal. The local may have been exclusive to Canadian Cottons but cooperation could not be prevented. Politics drew the workers together. Under the auspices of the Cornwall Trades and Labour Council, the textile workers had in December 1937 run joint campaigns for municipal posts, electing three union supporters as councillors and would repeat this foray into politics again in 1938. Furthermore, Lavery and the other officers of the National Textile Council would never be too far away for consultation.

As in 1936, a consistent strategem adopted by the textile workers was the creation of a moderate image. The Cornwall Textile

Workers Union allowed office workers to cross the picket line, rushed to end the wildcat strikes, quit the UTWA in July 1937 and prevented a sit-down strike in February 1938. While Hepburn, for his own political reasons, did not dispatch the provincial police with their tradition of exacerbating volatile situations, the strikers' approach eliminated excuses for police intervention. The departure from the CIO linked UTWA and the avoidance of a well known CIO tactic, the sit-down strike, demonstrated how international experiences affected the local situation. This American organization carried the stigma of communism and foreign links, both capable of disrupting local support. The leadership was the same as in the 1936 Courtaulds strike so that experience had taught the union heads the difficulties of confrontation with hostile governments as well as the importance of suppressing the rhetorical weapons in the hands of the company.

The choice of arbitration by provincial authorities displayed some of the weaknesses of the cotton workers, whose financial resources were quickly drained by a protracted strike. Canadian Cottons, meanwhile, faced less pressure to settle quickly than Courtaulds did in 1936 because, unlike the rayon firm, Canadian Cottons owned other mills in Hamilton and New Brunswick, which, for a time, were able to handle orders.²⁸ The company preferred the delay of provincial boards and on this issue, the union had to concede.

The company strategy put simply, combined ignoring the union and attempts to break it. The refusal to meet with Arthur Laverty

stemmed from the implied recognition this would have granted the union and the desire not to have an experienced negotiator at the table. The selection of a provincial board over a federal body restricted the scope of the award. Once the workers returned to work, a more aggressive policy was adopted. The 26 August strike originated with firing of a unionist, Jack Harris, protesting a speed up. The 11 February and 25 March conflicts turned on the replacing of adult males by boys. If these were not blatant thrusts to smash the union, the company had indeed been very careless about provoking strikes. In the end, however, the union refused to back down or go away.

Aside from the ability to transfer production, technical aspects of the cotton mills encouraged this union busting effort. The Courtaulds mill could not have afforded repeated strikes because the viscose employed in making rayon, if left to stand, hardens in the pipes.²⁹ Canadian Cottons did not have to deal with the complication of a long, expensive, start up period. After some minor clean up operations, the three mills resumed production in a few minutes.

Canadian Cottons exhibited a quite strong resistance to unionization but its corporate and economic situation gradually undermined its desire to bust the union. Four large firms dominated the cotton yarn market - Dominion Textile, Wabasso Cotton, Hamilton Cotton, and Canadian Cottons - which then exercised a common price fixing agreement.³⁰ A price fixing arrangement, though, does not preclude one company taking away another's customers. Although Canadian Cottons used its non-Cornwall mills to fill orders, the continual and erratic

shutdowns posed a potential, if not already present, threat to its capacity to supply its buyers. Unlike Courtaulds, which had a virtual monopoly of viscose rayon production in Canada, the directors of Canadian Cottons had to concern themselves with maintaining their market share. Moreover, the demand for cotton textiles remained fairly high in 1937 with even the strike-bound Canadian Cottons returning a profit for the fiscal year ending in March 1938.³¹ The expense of innumerable stoppages proved greater than any advantages that might have accrued from breaking the union. When the capitulation finally did come, the company not only granted union recognition, but a virtual union shop as well.

The women at Canadian Cottons, like their counterparts at Courtaulds before, solidly supported the union. The cotton company seemed quite aware of this fact and made plans to combat it. After the conclusion of the August 1937 strike, Canadian Cottons quietly informed a factory inspector that from now on it would hire only unmarried "girls," not older married women.³² By hiring young women who might leave after marriage, the company hoped to acquire a transient work force that would be replaced every few years and, therefore, not develop a strong identification with their fellow workers. If married women made up a large percentage of the female employees in both Canadian Cottons and Courtaulds, this might well help to explain their militancy. As long term workers, they would more easily develop a sense of common interest with the permanent male employees.

The women's place within the unions themselves seems to have changed in 1937 despite their continued militancy. No women participated in the Canadian Cottons negotiating committee. This may be because women only filled about twenty-two per cent of the jobs there as opposed to forty-six per cent at Courtaulds.³³ Interestingly, though, at Courtaulds, women disappeared from the plant wide negotiating committee, sitting instead only on the shop committees in areas like the reeling room where women were the vast majority.³⁴ The rayon union still pressed to equalize wages between men, and women, but leadership positions seem to have been the sole domain of males.³⁵

Before concluding, though, that women were entirely shut out of the leadership, one caveat should be offered. Complete union executive lists 1937-1940 for Courtaulds and Canadian Cottons do not exist. Women, while declining in importance on the negotiating committees, may still have held union executive posts.

The question of community support in a mill town strike does not encounter nearly as many qualifiers. The townspeople clearly supported the strikers. F.B. Brownridge, the M.L.A., wrote to Hepburn that one hundred per cent of public opinion was behind the strikers.³⁶ Ellis Blair, a former union official, suggests that public sympathy for the workers ran higher in 1937 than in 1936 because of the extremely poor pay in the cotton mills.³⁷ Merchants donated articles for union fund raising activities. Three strike rallies and a victory parade drew over two thousand people each.

A post-strike textile workers carnival attracted five thousand.³⁸

Community support probably did not determine the course of events or results of the strikes as much as the economics of the textile plants concerned or the militancy of the workers; nonetheless, the morale and material aid provided by the townspeople helped to keep the strikes solid. Moreover, public support for the workers led to political assistance. Because of fear of the communist links of the union or a wariness growing out of the doubts concerning whether the union would survive, most politicians kept their distance until after the end of the 1936 Courtaulds strike. The situation altered drastically by the time of the 1937 Canadian Cottons dispute. The municipal, provincial and federal representatives spoke at the meetings, endorsing the workers' cause. The local member of parliament, the member of the legislative assembly, the mayor and, it seemed, half the town council appeared on a platform with Arthur Laverty. The Hepburn government kept the provincial police away from a constituency with a Liberal representative during an election year. Ellis Blair reported that Hepburn even provided money for the textile union to hire a lawyer to present a brief to the Royal Commission on Textiles.³⁹ Unlike 1936, the municipality offered relief and withheld local police as security forces.

In 1937 and 1938, the union even went as far as running candidates in municipal elections. Under the banner of the Cornwall Trades and Labour Council, labour candidates captured three of twelve town council seats in 1937. The following year, the unions won two

town council seats and the reeveship. For reasons which are not clear, the Cornwall Trades and Labour Council stopped running candidates in 1939 despite its respectable political record. By that time, though, few local politicians would be openly anti-labour.

The cotton and rayon workers managed to maintain their unions into World War II when the labour shortage would guarantee them a secure bargaining position. In September 1937, the Courtaulds workers won union recognition.⁴⁰ The following year, despite an economic downturn, the millhands achieved the union shop, although they had some difficulty enforcing seniority on layoffs.⁴¹ The company still had not completely accepted the union as its attempts to set up a works council illustrate. Ellis Blair, a former union official, mentions that the union had some worries about this because organization had slipped somewhat among the plant's women.⁴² The works council proposal, nonetheless, was voted down in plant wide elections. The only strike staged from 1937 to 1939 at Courtaulds was a partially successful 1939 wildcat walkout by the men to get an increase to compensate for inflation.⁴³ Canadian Cottons' union records have not survived so it is not possible to describe the post March 1938 course of events in great detail. Nonetheless, while the Catholic unions in Quebec withered at Dominion Textile in the recession of 1938, the Cornwall cotton workers managed to keep their organization together, a not insignificant feat.

Altogether, the history of the Cornwall textile workers from 1936 to 1939 is rather impressive. From the vigorous shop floor

militancy at Courtaulds the millhands won their first victory, a definite breakthrough not matched by any other textile workers in Canada at the time. From there, the union spread to Canadian Cottons and managed to defeat that corporation. The millhands had much to be proud of.

Footnotes

- 1 Canada. Royal Commission on the Textile Industry Report (hereafter cited RCTI Report) (Ottawa, 1938), p. 304, figures exist for all cotton workers in Ontario but Canadian Cottons, in Hamilton and Cornwall, made up almost one-half of this total so the averages will, in general, apply to the company. As well, the hourly rates among the province's companies were fairly similar. See the RCTI Report, p. 286.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 283-284.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 10264-10266, 10271, 10280.
- 4 Ibid., p. 10125.
- 5 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter cited PAC) RG 33/20, Vol. 5, Royal Commission on the Textile Industry (hereafter cited RCTI): Transcript of Hearings, pp. 10151, 10174, 10193.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 10144, 10168, 10232, 10263.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 10190, 10199, 10302.
- 8 RCTI Report, p. 151.
- 9 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 5, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, p. 10311.
- 10 Ethel Morris Interview.
- 11 For details of the 21 July to 21 August 1937 Canadian Cottons strike see PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records (RG 27, Vol. 389, strike no. 203).
- 12 Standard-Freeholder, 21 July 1937.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Public Archives of Ontario (hereafter cited PAO) RG 3 Box 265, General Correspondence Subject Files (Public), Aaron Horowitz to Mitchell Hepburn, 15 February 1937.
- 16 PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 270. See Montreal Gazette, 26 July 1937 clipping.
- 17 Frank Love Interview. Love commented that no significant aid had come to Cornwall from the UTWA and that he regarded the UTWA official the Courtaulds local had to deal with as a "union bureaucrat." For the wider picture see Irving Abella, Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour (Toronto, 1973); pp. 26-28.

- 18 Standard-Freeholder, 23 July 1937.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 See A.E. Grauer, Labour Legislation (Ottawa, 1939), pp. 48-56; Ontario, Sessional Papers of Ontario, 1936-1938. The Department of Labour Reports carry annual summaries of labour legislation.
- 21 PAC, Strikes and Lockouts Records RG 27, Vol. 391, strike no. 255.
- 22 Ibid.; RG 27, Vol. 393, strike no. 319.
- 23 Ibid.; RG 27, Vol. 394, strike no. 363; PAO RG 7 V - 1b, Vol. 1, Conciliation Services Branch, Company and Strike Files 1937 (Canadian Cottons); PAO RG 7 Series I - 5, Vol. 1, Office of the Minister, Disputes and Strikes 1937-1938, Canadian Cottons Ltd., Louis Fine to N.N. MacBride, 23 November 1937.
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- 31 Roland Renner, "The Development of Unions in the Canadian Primary Textile Industry," M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 1977, p. 89.
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- 33 Standard-Freeholder, 21 July 1937; PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 20, RCTI: Exhibit No. 927, Statements of Average Hourly Earnings February 1936, Canadian Cottons.
- 34 Greater Cornwall Textile Joint Board: TWUA Local 779 Records: Reports of Negotiation at Courtaulds 1937-1940.
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- 37 Ellis Blair Interview.
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- 39 Ellis Blair Interview.
- 40 Greater Cornwall Textile Joint Board: TWUA Local 779 Records: Reports of Negotiations at Courtaulds 1937.
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Chapter III: The Quebec Experience 1936-1939

The Dominion Textile strike of 1937 ranks as one of the largest labour struggles of the 1930s. The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile's strike shut down nine mills in Montreal, Magog, Valleyfield, Drummondville, Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency. Around nine thousand workers walked off the job.¹ Although no monograph has been written on the strike, there is an abundance of articles, commentaries or works covering related material.² Unfortunately this body of work focuses almost entirely on the union leadership or Catholic unions from an institutional perspective. In order to understand more fully the Dominion Textile strike, it is necessary to explore the experience of the Quebec textile worker. As in Cornwall, the unionization drive began with a resurgence of shopfloor militancy. The developments after this initial burst of activity, though, differ from the Ontario example. Exploring this process requires an investigation into the period before the province wide Dominion Textile strike and into local events. For this work, the two case studies will be Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency.

St. Gregoire de Montmorency was almost exclusively French and Roman Catholic and had a population of 4,575 in 1931.³ Nearly every adult and adolescent worked for Dominion Textile as the mill employed 1,230 males and 606 females in 1935.⁴ The town was close to Quebec City, and other sources of employment could be

sought after a relatively short relocation. This, however, was one of the few counterbalances to the company's impact on the town.

Cotton had dominated the town since 1889 when the Montmorency Cotton Co. was established. In 1905, Montmorency Cotton merged with Merchants Cotton, Dominion Cotton Mills and Colonial Printing and Bleaching Co. to form a massive corporation, Dominion Textile.⁵ During the 1930s, the Montmorency mill produced cotton yarn, blankets, grey cotton and robe cloth for the Dominion Textile empire.⁶

The economy of Sherbrooke depended less on textiles than that of St. Gregoire de Montmorency. The city had a population of 28,933 in 1931. With 11,188 gainfully employed, 1,623 (14.5 per cent) worked in the local mills.⁷ The manufacture of textiles accounted for over one-half of total industrial employment in Sherbrooke in the mid to late 1930s.⁸ Although not a "mill town" like Cornwall or St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the textile industry powerfully affected life in Sherbrooke.

The Sherbrooke textile industry was composed of six mills. Two small mills, Quebec Rayon Mills and Sheer Silk Knitting Mills, only employed about seventy to a hundred workers between them.⁹ Neither mill would be organized. The other textile factories Paton Manufacturing Co., Canadian Silk Products, Julius Kayser and Co. and Dominion Textile all encountered strikes led by either Catholic unions or independent workers organizations.

The oldest textile factory was the Paton Manufacturing Co.¹⁰

Established in 1866, the company expanded in 1891 and sixteen years later bought out another woolens mill in Sherbrooke. Investors tied to Dominion Textile, albeit not the corporation itself, bought Paton in 1923 and began an extensive reconstruction. During the 1930s, the mill produced knitting yarn, blankets, rugs as well as woolens and worsted cloth. Paton employed four hundred workers in the first half of the decade and about 550 in the second.¹¹ Financial figures, only available for 1931 to 1935, indicate that Paton turned a net profit each year in spite of a trend for the absolute level of profits to decline. Paton did not benefit from a monopolistic or oligopolistic situation as the lion's share of production was divided among eleven companies; however, price fixing among the companies reduced competition.¹²

Julius Kayser and Co., a New York based firm, began a branch plant operation in Sherbrooke in 1915.¹³ By the 1930s, the parent company had several plants and subsidiaries in the United States, Britain, Germany and Australia employing between six and seven thousand workers. The Sherbrooke mill accounted for over one thousand of these workers and produced a wide range of products for the retail industry.¹⁴ No profit figures are available for the Sherbrooke operation yet the company did command 20.2 per cent of the total silk hosiery market in Canada during 1935. This made Julius Kayser the largest corporation in its field.¹⁵

Canadian Silk Products was Julius Kayser's nearest competition in Canada. Established in 1926, Canadian Silk Products, like Julius

Kayser, had participated in the Silk Association of Canada's price fixing and shared information agreement until 1935 when these deals fell apart. In that year Canadian Silk Products held 9.2 per cent of the silk hosiery market. The workforce varied between 550 to 650 millhands with around sixty per cent of these being women.¹⁶

Unlike the other companies mentioned, Dominion Textile entered Sherbrooke not by constructing a factory but by purchasing, in 1928, an existing one. That company, Canadian Connecticut Cotton Mills, had two plants, No. 1 constructed in 1914 and No. 2 in 1920.¹⁷ This corporation had been manufacturing tire fabrics. Dominion Textile switched in 1931 to cotton sheeting and narrow fabrics, most of these being sent to Dominion Textile's Magog plant for dyeing and printing. Four years later, the dormant No. 1 mill was converted to produce cloth with rayon mixed in. The rayon was not made at the mill itself but instead bought from Courtaulds Ltd. in Cornwall. Much of the equipment to spin the rayon and some of its employees were brought in from Dominion Textile's Verdun plant.

Employment varied from seven hundred to over one thousand between 1935 and 1937. In December 1935, 702 workers were at the mill.¹⁸ Some 1936 figures are broken down in detail. With 796 millhands in March 1936, 276 men and 234 women worked in the cotton division while 155 men and 131 women worked in the rayon section.¹⁹ Women thus occupied just under forty-six per-cent of all positions in both the rayon and cotton divisions. Reflecting an economic upturn in 1936 and 1937, Dominion Textile's total employment in Sher-

brooke had risen to 1,117 by 1937.²⁰

Organization and Strikes in St. Gregoire de Montmorency and Sherbrooke

Workers organizations, of course, had sprung up from time to time in both Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency. The Montmorency Cotton Co. locked out its employees for several weeks in July 1900 because they started a Knights of Labour assembly. This action proved effective as the assembly died within the year.²¹ From 1907 to 1909, the millhands started to organize again, first in the United Textile Workers of America and then the Federation des Ouvriers Textiles du Canada. When the FOTC collapsed in 1909, a union of spinners superceded it for an undetermined length of time.²² No known union existed at the plant during the First World War although in July 1919, the entire operation struck for four days in sympathy with a huge, and, for a time, successful United Textile Workers of America stoppage in Montreal.²³

The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile affiliated with the Confederation des Travailleurs Catholique du Canada had been in existence since the mid 1920s but with relatively little power. In 1935 the FNCT began serious organization in the mills of Dominion Textile, including the Montmorency cotton factory. Some workers had first invited in the United Textile Workers of America but then switched to Catholic unionism, thirty-eight employees founding a local union in April 1935. Recruitment proceeded slowly. Abbe Georges Cote, testifying at the Royal Commission on the Textile Industry hearings in early 1936, stated that a strong organization

did not exist yet.²⁴

As in Cornwall, shop floor militancy preceded the creation of a union. Between December 1936 and February 1937 three strikes took place at the Montmogeny cotton mill. The first strike occurred on 23 December 1936 when a foreman told a group of workers that, if they wanted to receive a seven per cent wage increase previously granted by Dominion Textile, production would have to go up.²⁵ Insisting that the increase was not dependent on production fifty-eight men and eighteen women walked off their jobs in the spinning room to be joined by forty-two winder cone tenders later. Within two days the number of strikers doubled. Although only two to three hundred workers of the mill's 1,715 were on strike, the mill closed because it did not have enough thread to weave.

Despite the absence of any official Catholic union involvement, Abbe Georges Cote wrote to the provincial Minister of Labour to request a mediator.²⁶ The strikers sought an arbitrated settlement but on the recommendation of Pierre Gosselin, the mediator, Abbe Cote and the Sub-Minister of Labour, they accepted a Dominion Textile proposal. The workers won a 5.5 per cent wage increase, a better distribution of work for the cone winder tenders, a plant committee to deal with grievances and a guarantee of no reprisals against the strikers.²⁷ Work resumed on 26 December 1936.

Dominion Textile had only beat a strategic retreat. Twenty-five male doffers in the spinning department struck on 4 January 1937 to protest the company not paying the full 5.5 per cent raise to

some workers.²⁸ The doffers travelled to various departments, shutting off the machines and forcing the plant to close for the night. The company responded vigorously by firing six men and posting thirty-five to forty special constables at the gate to keep out "trouble makers." The workers vainly requested that the provincial Minister of Labour enforce the December agreement.²⁹ A month later, sixteen men in the dye works department walked out to protest the company's renegeing on the wage increase only to find four of their number fired.³⁰

In Sherbrooke, textile unions had operated in the mills with mixed results. The Federation des Ouvriers du Canada could claim a Sherbrooke local from 1907 to 1909, the time of the FOTC's disintegration from internal dissension and a management offensive. In 1919, local machinists tried to start a union among the textile workers at Paton and Canadian Connecticut Cotton Mills with no notable success.³¹ A Catholic union at Julius Kayser and Co. fared slightly better, lasting from 1919 to 1921.³² Catholic union locals persisted in other Sherbrooke textile mills throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The weavers and perhaps some other workers maintained a local at Paton from 1920 onwards while a Connecticut Cotton, later Dominion Textile, local existed in various forms from 1925 to 1931.³³

These unions do not appear to have led any major strikes or signed collective agreements with the companies concerned. Statements by the Paton management indicate that they may have had a working relationship with a Catholic union in the weaving department. The cotton union, in all probability, was a "paper local" with no

significant membership.³⁴ Another Catholic union among the Dominion Textile cotton workers did appear in February 1936. Although the organization had a fairly small membership, union representatives met with company officials.³⁵

The Dominion Textile workers challenged the company before the Catholic union had established itself in the mill. On 11 December 1936, twenty-nine men in the spinning department of Dominion Textile's cotton operations walked out to protest low pay as well as the firing of an employee who had protested the rate of pay. They were soon followed by another group of about a hundred workers.³⁶ The Catholic union's only link to these events was a letter from the chaplain L.P. Camirand to the provincial Department of Labour requesting a mediator.³⁷ Dominion Textile blamed the strike on the discontent stirred up by the Royal Commission on the Textile Industry hearings in Sherbrooke.³⁸

The strike was effective. Although Dominion Textile claimed that only forty-nine men were out on the second day of the strike, a Catholic union observer put the totals at 250 males and 100 females. The company unsuccessfully attempted to replace the workers by young girls. Unable to keep production up, the company began laying off workers in the carding and weaving rooms on 15 December due to a lack of material.

The mediation of local political figures and Father Camirand moved the strike to a conclusion. Johnny Bourque, the Union Nationale M.L.A. for Sherbrooke, promised to inquire into the low pay allegations, while aldermen Alfred Cinq Mars and J.R. Royer urged the

strikers to return to work pending this investigation. After encountering no response from the millhands, the aldermen visited the company on 14 December to ask that the jobs be given back to the replaced men.³⁹ The workers, meanwhile, demanded arbitration of their grievances, a proposal ignored by Dominion Textile.⁴⁰ The workers decided to return on 15 December after a meeting held at the Catholic union headquarters. Edile Rioux, the mayor of Sherbrooke, Father Camirand, Clovis Bernier, a provincial mediator, and the aldermen Cinq Mars and Royer addressed the meeting.⁴¹ All pressured the strikers to return to work.

The mayor urged that the men return because Dominion Textile would not negotiate before their managing director, G.B. Gordon was available to come to the mill. If there was no deal at that point, then the workers would be justified in a strike. He reminded the workers as well that labour disputes could frighten away new industry from the town and proposed that they join the Catholic union. Father Camirand, representing the Catholic unions, spoke of duties to families and stated that, although the Catholic unions would help the strikers, no endorsement would be offered of their actions. The aldermen reiterated the same refrain as the mayor and the priest. After two and a half hours of discussion, the millhands voted to go back. Some workers though expressed doubt that Dominion Textile would grant concessions with no strike.

The politicians and the priest, despite their declared sympathy for the workers, had persuaded them to accept a terrible deal.

The strikers had returned to work with no immediate concessions and only vague promises of improvements for the future. The 'politicians' primary concern was to end the dispute. Father Camirand probably had more complex reasons for his behavior. The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile had been organizing in Dominion Textile plants across the province and wanted to confront the company at all its mills simultaneously. Camirand may have hoped to take advantage of the workers' frustrations by leading them into the FNCT rather than take a chance on defeating Dominion Textile in a spontaneous local strike. Over the next two months, the FNCT advertised meetings and ran articles in the local newspaper, La Tribune. Albert Cote, the FNCT president visited the town in February 1937.⁴² The Catholic unions were trying very hard to seize this opportunity.

Other Sherbrooke textile workers, perhaps influenced by this activity, pressed for improvements. The employees of Julius Kayser and Co. staged a one day walkout on 26 February 1937.⁴³ The day before, Julius Kayser and Co. had fired Newton Munkittrick, a spokesman for the workers asking for a raise. 212 workers struck with another hundred being indirectly affected. Although not in a Catholic union the workers met at the Catholic union headquarters to discuss the situation. The strike did not last long as Julius Kayser and Co. quickly agreed to rehire Munkittrick, set up a grievance committee, consider the raising of wages and not retaliate against the strikers. The millhands resumed work soon after hearing

of the company's capitulation.

By February 1937 the Catholic union was active at Paton, Julius Kayser and Dominion Textile. The FNCT and the Conseil Centrale Nationale de Sherbrooke held a meeting in March to form one union organization for all the textile unions in Sherbrooke. In a regular column in La Tribune, a Catholic union writer stated that the managers of the three plants favoured Catholic labour organization and agreed to the unionization of their workers, a rather wishful interpretation of the situation. The writer went on to stress that the Confederation des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada was open to all religions and nationalities.⁴⁴ Sherbrooke was seventy-five per cent French and eighty per cent Catholic but the CTCC obviously did not want to offend any significant minority of workers.⁴⁵

Unfortunately for the Catholic union, the role of Father Camirand in convincing the Dominion Textile workers to end their December 1936 strike offended the majority of workers there. On 10 March 1937, sixty spinning workers left their posts to be followed by shipping workers and others.⁴⁶ Ventilation difficulties, work speed ups and wages caused the stoppage as well as frustration over a lack of progress since December. The workers claimed that Dominion Textile, through various means, had reduced wages thereby violating the understanding reached in the last strike.⁴⁷ This time the 842 strikers (607 males, 235 females) ignored the Catholic union and gathered instead at the Club Liberal Howard, the head-

quarters of the area's federal M.P. Charles B. Howard. Meanwhile, the police peacefully dispersed the pickets and the mill management overoptimistically declared that the plant would still operate. By 11 March, both the cotton and rayon sections were shut down.⁴⁸

The walkout had marked more than just a general dissatisfaction with the last settlement; the workers moved to establish an independent union. Some planning had evidently been undertaken beforehand as the workers initially refused to talk to the press. Moreover, a strike and an aid committee to ask for donations from local merchants were assembled swiftly.⁴⁹ As the strike continued the desire for an independent union became more clearly articulated. The employees formed a new union, tentatively called the Union Ouvriere du Textile de Sherbrooke (later changed to Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile), which elected officers and issued membership cards. Both Catholic and international unionism were rejected. A workers meeting at the Club Liberal Howard ejected an international union representative.⁵⁰ As well Joseph Lemelin, president of the strike committee and a former secretary for a Catholic union in Sherbrooke attacked the Catholic union for their role in persuading the Dominion Textile workers to return to work last December without a concrete agreement.⁵¹

The female component of the Dominion Textile labour force although active in terms of striking with their fellow workers, held no prominent posts. While women made up about thirty per cent of the strikers, the seven person executive was all male as was the

ten member plant (strike) committee.⁵² It is possible though that women may have sat on some of the other committees without receiving mention in the press.

The workers chose to meet at the Club Liberal Howard because the local M.P. was very well regarded by the textile workers. C.B. Howard had gained popularity by condemning Dominion Textile for closing its doors in January 1936. The closure was supposedly a response to Japanese competition but was really an attempt by the company to blackmail the federal government into raising tariffs. Although the M.P. did not officially endorse the current strike, he issued statements that wages must be raised and allowed the workers to use his club's premises.

The workers did not restrict this appeal for aid only to Howard. The strikers approached Johnny Bourque, the M.L.A., as well. While Bourque kept fairly quiet during the strike, he may have assisted in procuring a provincial mediator, Clovis Bernier. Howard had helped in bringing in a mediator too, Alphonse Houle from the federal Department of Labour.

The course of events did not flow as smoothly for Dominion Textile as during the previous December. Trying to arrange a settlement with no concessions, the company asked the workers to return pending an investigation by the company. Not willing to be fooled again, the workers refused. Their strike was completely solid for, despite the police's action in dispersing the pickets and keeping the entrance clear, no employees entered the plant. The workers arranged for a plant committee to meet the management.

The union, taking into account the chance for a long strike, began to ask for donations and sell copies of strike songs.

On 16 March, Dominion Textile, making one last effort to stampede the workers back without negotiations, announced that the strike could easily lead to the closing of the "unprofitable" Sherbrooke factory.⁵³ The threat provoked little response. A massive political uproar followed Dominion Textile's attempt to close the factory in January 1936. Only a very unastute political observer would think that the company would risk repeating that move. Dominion Textile, soon after the statement, opted for negotiations.

The millhands gathered to debate the company proposals carried to them on 18 March.⁵⁴ The deal gave the spinners a ten per cent wage increase, the doffers a work reduction at no loss of pay and the apprentices a minimum salary based on seniority. Moreover, the company promised no retaliation against strikers, recognized the plant committee but not the union and, at the suggestion of the union, replaced the plant superintendent, George Carrigan, with a new man from another mill, David Pechie. All things considered, the settlement won some very real concessions for the strikers. After ten hours of deliberation, 297 voted for the package, 181 against, with 21 spoiled ballots.

These successes served to inspire other Sherbrooke workers to press for improvements. Negotiations had been going on at Canadian Silk Products for several weeks between the management and

the "comite des griefs" (later renamed "comite de cooperation" at the request of the company). Impatient at a lack of progress, the seventy-five knitters walked off the job on the 28 May night shift with others joining later.⁵⁵ Like the Dominion Textile strikers, they turned the Club Liberal Howard into their headquarters. Also like the cotton workers, the committee empowered to negotiate with Canadian Silk Products did not include any women despite their strong presence in the workforce.⁵⁶

Relations between the two sides became very tense at the start of the strike. The mill telegraphed the premier, Maurice Duplessis, complaining that labour agitators were preventing employees from entering the plant. The firm demanded the presence of the provincial police.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the company had to satisfy itself with the local officers. The Sherbrooke police did escort people not involved in the strike across the picket line but otherwise remained neutral. The employees, meanwhile, had initially allowed shipping department workers through. By 30 May, however, they stopped this practice and refused to allow any truck to take away merchandise, organizing a twenty-four hour picket to accomplish this goal.

The strike did not last long. Canadian Silk Products accepted wage increases in the range of five to twenty-five per cent, ended the fines system for damaged work and reduced the price charged to knitters for needles. The company also agreed to recognize the plant committee, honour seniority in promotions, establish a better division of work, improve the quality of the drinking water in the

summer and implement safer procedures for the handling of chloroform in the production of stockings.⁵⁸ Only two groups of workers seemed not to find the conditions acceptable. The female boxers and pairers (packaging employees) received virtually no wage gains because Canadian Silk Products refused to pay more than twenty-five per cent over the Quebec minimum wage for women.⁵⁹ Most other employees chose to accept the deal.

In all of these strikes, whether in Sherbrooke or St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the millhands took up the struggle with the companies without assistance from a union. Thus the Quebec workers seem to have been just as militant as their Cornwall counterparts. However, divergences between the Quebec and Ontario experiences soon occurred. In Cornwall, the rayon millhands almost immediately turned to experienced unionists for leadership and formed a union. In Quebec the textile workers initially sought aid from political leaders. The St. Gregoire de Montmorency workers demanded government arbitration and sought the Quebec Minister of Labour's help in enforcing the December 1936 agreement. In Sherbrooke, the first Dominion Textile strike saw a demand for arbitration and an appeal to Johnny Bourque, the M.L.A. Later these workers and the Canadian Silk Products strikers would ask for the intervention of C.B. Howard, the M.P., and took up residence in the Club Liberal Howard. The Dominion Textile workers in Sherbrooke, after turning to the local priest and politicians, ended up with a very poor deal following their first strike. That negative experience led to the formation of an independent

union. Early disappointments pushed the millhands to find a more effective means of pressuring the corporations.

The role of the Catholic unions in these early conflicts is somewhat ambiguous. The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile definitely had recruits at Dominion Textile, Paton and Julius Kayser. Nonetheless, the FNCT seemed almost invisible from December 1936 to the spring of 1937. At Julius Kayser, the problem may have been that the group of Catholic union sympathizers was simply too small. The FNCT local there would both start and die in 1937.⁶⁰ At the Dominion Textile mills in both Sherbrooke and St. Grégoire de Montmorency, the Catholic union neither led the strikes nor provided tangible aid and useful advice to the strikers. Father Camirand severely alienated the Sherbrooke workers by persuading them to return to work with no concessions. The FNCT representatives either were not competent to capitalize on the situation or, for strategic reasons, did not want to challenge Dominion Textile at that time. In any case, the FNCT had not made significant progress by the spring of 1937.

Women proved themselves willing to strike with their male counterparts. The "young girls" recruited as strikebreakers in the December Dominion Textile strike in Sherbrooke seem to have been completely novice textile workers.⁶¹ In contrast to the Cornwall experience though, no women's names appear among the lists of union leaders or negotiators although females made up a large section of the workforce at Dominion Textile and Canadian Silk Products. Incomplete records leave open the possibility that women

may have held unreported posts on minor committees.- Males, though, monopolized important positions of authority.

Local politicians did not become involved in the strikes at St. Gregoire de Montmorency but their counterparts in Sherbrooke entered the fray, although only as lukewarm allies. In the December 1936 Dominion Textile walkout, strong verbal support was offered by the mayor, several aldermen and the M.L.A. From the meeting which settled the conflict though, it is clear that their main preoccupation was the quick return to work by the strikers. C.B. Howard, the M.P., did not officially endorse the second Dominion Textile strike but, while criticizing the wage levels of the industry, he did lend his office to these strikers as well as those from Canadian Silk Products. The textile millhands were important enough to attract political support even if it was not wholehearted.

The role of the police was ambiguous as well. In St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the question did not come up since Dominion Textile preferred to hire "special constables" when it wished to use force rather than rely on provincial or municipal officers. In Sherbrooke, the municipal police were neither as helpful to the strikers, nor as much of a hindrance as they could have been. Present at the picket line for all of the strikes, the police dispersed the picket line in the first Dominion Textile strike yet did not prevent the Canadian Silk Products workers from blocking shipments out of the plant. In any case, their presence had little effect on the outcome.

The strikers, when able to shut down the whole mill, normally won concessions. The December 1936 Montmorency strike as well as the Sherbrooke Julius Kayser and Co., Canadian Silk Products and March 1937 Dominion Textile strikes all proved successful in winning immediate concessions on wages, work practices and plant committee, if not union, recognition. The explanation seems fairly simple. 1936 and 1937 were good years economically for the textile mills and to let a lengthy strike disrupt production would not be good business.⁶²

Dominion Textile, both in Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency, added a twist to the corporate strategy of granting concessions to end the strikes. The company would agree to settle and then renege on the pact, reduce wages or speed up the work. If the workers could not close down the mill again, as in Montmorency, the company acted harshly. If the workers could close the mill effectively, as in Sherbrooke, the company tried to break the strike while remaining willing to reach an agreement if this failed.

The 1937 Dominion Textile Strike

Undoubtedly the major conflict in the Quebec textile industry of the 1930s was the province wide Dominion Textile strike of 1937. Alas, this study will not be able to provide the in depth research necessary to examine the entire Dominion Textile strike adequately. Instead, in order to continue the main themes of the thesis, this inquiry will outline the provincial course of events while concentrating on local developments in Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de

Montmorency.

The corporate giant that the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile challenged in 1937 had already been a tribute to monopoly capitalism for twenty-two years. In 1905, Merchants Cotton, Dominion Cotton Mills, Montmorency Cotton Mills and Colonial Printing and Bleaching Co. participated in the merger movement sweeping large scale Canadian business by forming Dominion Textile. The new company also was an important minority shareholder of and sales agent for Montreal Cottons. Altogether Dominion Textile controlled about one-half of all cotton manufacturing in Canada. What little competition existed was swiftly done away with in 1907. In conjunction with Wabasso Cotton, Hamilton Cottons and Canadian Cottons, a price fixing and product specialization agreement was hammered out.⁶³ The arrangement proved very stable lasting until 1938. Of course, this situation generated considerable profits for the founding stockholders of Dominion Textile who, through dividends on common stocks, received an average return on their original investment of ninety-eight per cent per year between 1905 and 1936.⁶⁴

The company expanded and prospered. In 1919, it bought the Mont Royal Spinning Co. in Montreal and, in 1928, two more mills Jenckes Canadian Co., a tire fabric company in Drummondville as well as Canadian Connecticut Cotton Mills in Sherbrooke. By 1937 the holdings were impressive: in Montreal, the Hochelaga, Merchants, Colonial, Mont Royal mills, the St. Anne Warehouse and a Verdun machine shop; outside Montreal, wholly owned factories in Magog, Sherbrooke, and St. Gregoire de Montmorency; finally, two partially

owned subsidiaries, Drummondville Cotton Co. and the Montreal Cottons Co. in Valleyfield.

Dominion Textile and its subsidiaries dominated the Canadian cotton industry, being responsible for 52.2 per cent of all sales of cotton yarn and cloth in 1935.⁶⁵ Canadian Cottons held second place with only 17.7 per cent of sales. During the 1930s, Dominion Textile turned an operating profit (gross sales minus cost of sales, depreciation and directors' fees) each year with this normally exceeding one million dollars.⁶⁶ An extremely generous dividends policy created company deficits in the fiscal years 1932, 1933, 1935, 1936, 1938 and 1939. Essentially, the company performed well in the 1930s with its dividend policy providing the only reason that it did not turn an overall net profit every year.

On the whole, Dominion Textile presented greater difficulties to a union than Courtaulds or Canadian Cottons. The Quebec firm could afford to pay its workers more but was strong enough not to do so. Its profitability would allow it to ride out a long strike. Having plants in several cities and towns meant that it could maintain production if one mill closed due to a strike. Naturally there would be repercussions in the other mills. For example, the Magog plant dyed and finished the cotton goods produced at Sherbrooke so a strike at one would affect the other. Nonetheless, a union, unless it had an exceptionally powerful local base, would probably need to confront the corporation on a broad front at all or most of its mills. This, of course, complicated any workers' offensive against the

company. Finally, Dominion Textile's strength in the cotton industry and agreements to reduce competition could help protect its share of the market during a strike. Other producers might take away a section of the trade temporarily yet Dominion Textile could probably step back in to recapture its former position.

Dominion Textile exploited its employees thoroughly. Dominion Textile workers outside Montreal were not only not paid well compared to other industrial employees, they were not paid well compared to other millhands. In February 1936, male cotton workers received the fourth lowest average hourly wage among males in Canada's major cotton firms while the women received the third lowest average hourly wage among women.⁶⁷ In both cases, one of the companies which had the ignominious honour of paying less than Dominion Textile was its subsidiary, Montreal Cottons in Valleyfield. While Dominion Textile Workers in Montreal stayed closer to the average among the cotton firms, outside Montreal the employees were among the more poorly paid workers of a notoriously low wage industry.

At both Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency, other difficulties arose over pay. Many workers were on piece work. The workers though could not judge how much they should receive because the company would not provide the necessary information.⁶⁸ Mistakes were impossible to correct. A bonus system geared to encourage the employees to work harder was tied to production levels so high that only a tiny fraction of the employees could harbour a hope of earning it.⁶⁹ The pay, however, was not always kept strictly tied to production for piece workers. If two millhands were stationed at the

same machine, one during the day, the other at night, the company, for its convenience, divided the wages earned from production by the number of hours worked by each, not the material produced by each.⁷⁰ As a result, a faster worker would not receive the full value of his production.

The employees at the mills tended to be young. Some had started in the mills as early as thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen years old or, on a rare occasion, at eleven years old.⁷¹ The low wages of the industry forced all members of the family to work. In February, 1936 at Dominion Textile, 12.28 per cent of all male workers were aged nineteen or under with 20.54 per cent of all female workers being nineteen or under.⁷² The youth of these employees in fact provided the company with an excuse for paying them less. Frequently, certain positions became "boys" or "girls" jobs with wages to match.

Two of the cruelest acts at the mills were committed against Montmorency women being paid the minimum wage and Sherbrooke apprentices. The Quebec minimum wage had two levels, a lower one for women in their first six months of work and a higher one for women in their second six months. Women in Montmorency moving from the lower to the higher minimum wage had to sign requests, sent to the government, that their wages not rise. The reason listed was that, if their pay rose, the company would find it uneconomical to keep them at their jobs and would fire them. The Commission du Salaire Minimum des Femmes generously allowed the ladies an exemption from

the minimum wage law.⁷³ At Sherbrooke, the exploitation did not attain this level of subtlety. The company took on apprentices who worked for free while learning their jobs. After several months, Dominion Textile fired them so it could hire new apprentices who would also work for free.⁷⁴

The working conditions at Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency, as well as the other Quebec mills provoked a litany of tales about heat, humidity and a painfully fast pace.⁷⁵ Georges Ruel of Sherbrooke complained of temperatures approaching 103° F around certain machines while Romeo Bouchard, a Montmorency polishing room worker, encountered heat close to 110° F in his department.⁷⁶ Others remarked on the humidity and ubiquitous dust. The speed of work surfaced as the worst aspect of the mills. Dominion Textile did not allow many of its employees to sit while doing their jobs. Both workers and factory inspectors testified that this restriction was not required because few workers had the time to sit at any point during their shift.⁷⁷ On top of this, the firm would periodically engage in a "speed up" to heighten the rate of production. The company would fire those who could not meet a daily quota so millhands, especially at Sherbrooke, started work before 7 a.m., the official starting time.⁷⁸ These extra hours of work were not recorded at Sherbrooke and did not enter the official statistics presented to the provincial government. Thus the mill probably violated the law regarding the maximum hours of work. In Montmorency, the mill, rather than violate the law directly, merely requested exemptions.

The provincial government granted almost monthly permission for women to work more than sixty-five hours per week during 1933 and 1934.⁷⁹ Why break the law when one can simply render it non-existent?

Dominion Textile dealt with its employees in a harsh and arbitrary manner. Workers could be temporarily laid off if the firm decided that their work was not up to standard. The machines themselves though were responsible for faults in the material that would lead to suspensions. In another situation, the company claimed that an employee had caused an accident in which he was injured. When he had recovered from the injury, Dominion Textile suspended him for a month.⁸⁰

The Dominion Textile-workers certainly possessed the grievances to spur them to organization. The questions were what form this would take and would it be successful. The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile, after almost two years of activity in the mills, felt secure enough in January 1937 to open negotiations with Dominion Textile. The letter to the company claimed that the FNCT had signed up the vast majority of the workers and warned the international unions might enter the plants if the Catholic union did not win an agreement.⁸¹

Dominion Textile, however, had no preference among unions; it intended to avoid them all.⁸² The firm refused to deal or meet with Catholic union representatives. G.B. Gordon, the managing director of Dominion Textile, went on a trip to Europe and the company proclaimed that it could not possibly negotiate with him away. The

company, meanwhile, issued statements to the press that the Catholic union represented only a small minority of workers and that the firm favoured a direct relationship with its employees without an outside intermediary. Dominion Textile also attempted to buy off the discontent both collectively and individually. All millhands received a three per cent bonus in 1937.⁸³ Joseph Leclerc, the president of the St. Gregoire de Montmorency local found his wages jump from twenty-one to thirty-three cents per hour. Later the company offered him twenty-one dollars more per week to quit as union president. After he refused, his salary was cut.⁸⁴

Confronted with an impasse, the FNCT conducted a series of strike votes in the various mills. Albert Cote, the FNCT president, claimed that 4,700 of the nine thousand Dominion Textile employees were union members prior to the vote, another two thousand joining during the course of the balloting.⁸⁵ The vote heavily favoured strike action.

The Catholic union had definitely improved its position in St. Gregoire de Montmorency and Sherbrooke. Perhaps as the FNCT openly confronted Dominion Textile, the workers drifted towards it. As the strike would prove, the Montmorency organization had developed a high degree of solidarity. Sherbrooke, despite the efforts of the Catholic union organizers, remained less secure. The independent Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile had won a strike as recently as March 1937. This group opposed a province wide settlement for fear that it would be replaced by the FNCT through a closed shop

agreement or that workers might defect to the Catholic union. The independent union, claiming a membership of three hundred, said that it would not participate in a strike.⁸⁶ At the strike vote, a Catholic union organizer stated that of the 1,117 in the cotton and rayon sections of the plant, 775 had cast a ballot. Of the 775, 325 were current Catholic union members while two-thirds of the other 450 had been members but left because no drastic action had been undertaken before this time.⁸⁷ The FNCT harboured enough doubts about its situation in Sherbrooke that it assigned Philippe Girard, a veteran Montreal Catholic union leader, to supervise the strike.⁸⁸

On the eve of the strike, which was set for 2 August, Dominion Textile changed its public position slightly. G.B. Gordon announced that the company would not negotiate until 1 September, the time when the Fair Wages Act (Loi des Salaires Raisonables) came into effect. This law created a board which, after hearing representations from the companies, unions and unorganized workers, could establish a schedule of wages, hours, job classifications and apprenticeship regulations for an industry and/or region.⁸⁹ Enforcement of the schedule would be in the hands of the government. In effect, all direct negotiations with the union would be bypassed. Alfred Charpentier, the president of the Confederation des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada, lambasted the Dominion Textile proposal and the law as a thinly disguised method to destroy unions.⁹⁰ He pointed out that the only way workers could pursue grievances was through an effective union and that this procedure ignored both negotiations

and union recognition.

The Union Nationale's 1937 Fair Wages Act covered much the same ground as the 1934-1935 Collective Labour Agreements Extension Act (Loi d'Extension Juridique) but was less advantageous to unions. Results of a collective agreement between employees and bone-fide unions could be extended to a whole industry and/or region under the Collective Labour Agreements Extension Act. A committee of workers and employers would jointly supervise the agreement with a tax being imposed on both sides to pay for a staff.⁹¹ In this way, negotiations and a collective agreement became preconditions for the operation of the law. Although the Fair Wages Act might be imposed to assist workers in areas where no prospect of a union settlement existed, its invocation had the potential of heading off a unionization drive.⁹²

The FNCT and CTCC realized that only a strike could get Dominion Textile to improve the lot of its workers.⁹³ The millhands left the plant on 2 August 1937 with the strike being solid in most areas. At St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the plant closed completely, the picket line only having to turn back a few who wished to work. District politicians, businesses and unions immediately rallied to the workers' cause. Dr. Philippe Hamel, a Quebec M.L.A. and Parti National leader, a local Woolworths store, a Catholic union of journalists and the Conseil Central National de Quebec contributed donations. The St. Gregoire de Montmorency mayor, F.B. Bouchard, turned down an offer to have provincial police stationed in the town.⁹⁴

Other locations exhibited a less united front. The Mont Royal and Hochelaga plants housed a skeleton staff. More disturbing was the situation in Drummondville and Sherbrooke. At the former town, the company stated that it was operating at near normal capacity, a claim substantiated by some newspaper reports.⁹⁵ At Sherbrooke, Dominion Textile maintained that 160 stayed at work while the Catholic union put the number at seventy-five.⁹⁶

The provincial government moved forcefully to the side of Dominion Textile. William Tremblay, the Minister of Labour, argued that the strike was untimely and that the unions should wait for the Fair Wages Act to go into effect. As Alfred Charpentier, the CTCG president, noted, this paralleled Dominion Textile's posture exactly.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the premier, Maurice Duplessis declared in a radio address his opposition to the concept of the closed or union shop.

Dominion Textile decided to shut down all of its plants until police protection was sufficient to bring in strikebreakers. G.B. Gordon announced that he expected that police protection could be arranged sooner in Montreal than in the smaller towns. The municipal governments of the mill towns would find it politically difficult to use their officers in this manner or to invite in provincial police. In Montreal, however, the city council, depending much less on the textile workers' votes, would encounter stiff pressure from the Montreal business community. Moreover, strikebreakers could be more easily recruited among the large Montreal labour force, especially since only fifty per cent of the Montreal millhands had joined the

union.⁹⁸

The period of 3 August to 18 August witnessed company attempts to portray the FNCT as violent, thus manufacturing a need for police intervention. Union officials tried to avoid confrontation if possible and to generate mass public support for its cause. Due to a high level of frustration, anger and tension among the workers, incidents did occur that the company could exploit. The plant manager in Drummondville drove through the picket line scattering the strikers. Not surprisingly, they attacked him and his car. In addition, workers worried about goods moving in and out of the plant loosened rail tracks leading to the mill.⁹⁹ On one occasion, Sherbrooke strikers forcibly prevented a mechanic from entering the plant.¹⁰⁰ On 9 August, men and women pelted trucks leaving the Mont Royal mill with bricks. Three days later strikers fought with strikebreakers before they reached the Colonial factory.¹⁰¹ Dominion Textile declared that it would not rehire employees involved in the violence and accused the FNCT of hiring "thugs."

On 9 August, G.B. Gordon commented that:

It is better for the mills to remain closed than for the union with its subversive methods to appear to be successful.¹⁰²

The company became increasingly aggressive. The firm prepared to open the gates at the Montreal mills on 16 August, perhaps as a trial run for a full scale opening on 19 August.

The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile tried to avoid

overt confrontations with Dominion Textile. The FNCT at the start of the strike would not impede shipments if there was a heavy police presence and, after 14 August, did not stop shipments in Montreal.¹⁰³ In addition, the FNCT permitted office workers to enter the plants, something denied earlier. Union leaders Albert Cote and Alfred Charpentier, levelled a barrage of criticism at the provincial government backing of Dominion Textile. In conjunction with the textile union in Cornwall, the FNCT met with federal officials, demanding that the Canadian government threaten to lower the textile tariff if the companies would not negotiate with their workers. Neither the federal nor provincial governments, however, acted to assist the workers.

Within Quebec, support for the Dominion Textile workers grew within the nationalist movement. The image of a gigantic corporation dominated by the Montreal English business elite oppressing pitifully paid French Canadian textile workers transformed the conflict into something more than just another strike. For many, the Dominion Textile strike became part of the larger nationalist struggle. Moreover, within the analysis put forward by Catholic social doctrine which strongly influenced Quebec nationalists, this conflict could be seen as a struggle against communism. If the workers' needs were not satisfied under the auspices of a moderate Catholic union, then the vicious exploitation of these Dominion Textile millhands could force them to socialism or communism.

On 10 August 1937, a march started in St. Gregoire de Montmorency and finished in Quebec City with five thousand people

attending.¹⁰⁴ Along with the usual assortment of union speakers, Dr. Philippe Hamel, leader of the Parti National and two more party members, J.E. Gregoire, mayor of Quebec City and M.L.A. for Montmagny, and Rene Chaloult, M.L.A. for Kamouraska addressed the crowd. The FNCT denied any direct partisan tie to the politicians saying that all public men had been invited to the meeting and that two separate meetings took place on 10 August, the first a union gathering, the second for politically inclined people.

The premier, of course, charged that the unions were allied to his political enemies, the Liberals and the Parti National.¹⁰⁵ Alfred Charpentier, CTCC president, denied this at another huge mass meeting on 17 August in Montreal.¹⁰⁶ He also countered that the ruling Union Nationale supported Dominion Textile and that the Minister of Labour, William Tremblay, was incompetent.

Municipal government officials in Magog, Drummondville and Montreal took varying stands on the strike. In Magog, the mayor vigorously endorsed the strikers.¹⁰⁷ In Drummondville, where workers displayed less unity than their counterparts in Magog, the municipal council wavered on whether or not to arrange police protection for strikebreakers. Finally, they decided not to ask for the provincial police.¹⁰⁸ The Montreal municipal police, meanwhile, harassed strikers, supervised shipments in and out of factories, and maintained an intimidating presence at the mills. A minority of the city council criticized police conduct, donated money to the union and discussed ways to help the strikers.¹⁰⁹ Mayor Raynault sat on the fence.

Although he said that he did not agree with the strike, he gave ten dollars to the strike fund to aid the families of the workers.¹¹⁰

In Sherbrooke, the mayor Emile Rioux followed a similarly ambivalent policy. The Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile had indicated its willingness to cross picket lines and requested police protection so that its members could do so. While the mayor promised this assistance, the Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile announced on 7 August that insufficient assurances of police protection prevented its members from entering the plant.¹¹¹ Although the FNCT workers did not dominate Sherbrooke, they in conjunction with Sherbrooke's other Catholic unionists and strike sympathizers certainly would castigate the mayor if his actions led to either violence at the plant or an undermining of the strike. In all probability, this threat affected Rioux's actions.

The Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile never tried to cross the picket line during the course of the strike. A study by the Quebec Department of Labour after the strike's conclusion would even go as far as to say that the UOIT local had become defunct.¹¹² The independent union appeared to have some support at the mill when the walkout began as seventy-five to 160 workers stayed in the mill. The UOIT membership seems to have drifted away after that. Quite possibly, the rank-and-file balked at the prospect of acting as strikebreakers for Dominion Textile.

On the Sherbrooke picket line, the FNCT Dominion Textile local took a militant stand. Like the Montreal workers, they felt threatened by the possibility of strikebreaking. In response to the

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Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile's declared intention of crossing picket lines a twenty-four hour picket was set up at the plant. After a few days, this tightened to keep out management staff and office employees. When a rumour circulated that strikebreakers might attempt to enter the mill on 9 August, a mass picket of seven hundred millhands gathered.¹¹³ The strikers probably overdid matters on 16 August when they refused to let the manager, David Pechie, into the plant.¹¹⁴ In places where strike-breaking seemed likely, as in Drummondville, Montreal and Sherbrooke, the workers and their local unions preferred a vigorous presence at the mills.

The tensions between the Catholic and independent union spilled over into another workplace, the Paton Manufacturing Co. The Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile had established a branch at Paton called the Union Ouvriere Textile. From 12 to 14 August, twenty-eight weavers struck against the employment of two apprentices whom they claimed were Catholic union members.¹¹⁵ The company argued that it had shown no favouritism to any union although it had always dealt with a Catholic union committee in the weavers department previously.¹¹⁶ The weakness of the Union Ouvriere Textile became readily apparent. With the help of police, the mill's workers crossed the picket line and Paton replaced the pickets by new workers. The company did soften its position somewhat after the end of the strike as it agreed to rehire the dismissed workers as spots opened up. The strike revealed the continued conflict between the independent and Catholic unions as well as the former's weakness in not being able

to establish itself as the majority force in a textile factory.

Aside from the mayor and the UOIT, local support seemed solid. Merchants and professionals donated money.¹¹⁷ The CTCC and the Catholic church sent representatives to public rallies. A large Sherbrooke contingent swelled a five thousand person delegation in Magog on 6 August and three days later, the Sherbrooke textile workers organized their own public meeting.¹¹⁸ The church, in particular, distinguished itself in its efforts to aid the strikers. Along with Father L.P. Camirand statements to the press and radio broadcasts, M^{onsieur} Gagnon publicly endorsed the strike on 18 August. Moreover, after donating fifty dollars himself, he instructed the area churches to begin a collection for the cause.¹¹⁹

In St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the Dominion Textile strike engendered no divisions comparable to those in Sherbrooke. No workers stayed on the job and the company did not attempt to open the mill. Consequently, there was no need to adopt mass picketing or other tactics to keep strikebreakers away. Only one incident took place. A group of workers threatened a foreman rumoured to have been recruiting strikebreakers.¹²⁰ Henri D'Amour, the union secretary, denounced the gesture stating that this action had no connection with the union.

The strike generated considerable local support. On 4 August, Wilfrid Lacroix, the M.P., attended a public meeting along with professional men from the district to endorse the strike and donate money.¹²¹ During a visit of Alfred Charpentier, two hundred workers greeted him as he entered the town. Nine hundred people, just under

a quarter of the town's population escorted Charpentier to a 10 August rally in Quebec City.¹²² As well the church backed the strike. On 17 August, Cardinal Villeneuve visited St. Gregoire de Montmorency to give his blessings to the strike.¹²³

Women did not assume prominent places at public meetings nor apparently on the union executive. However, the union did focus some special attention on the women. When a group of female mill-hands offered to help the strike organizing committee, the union established a special committee for them. In addition, the union arranged a gathering of female workers to request their continued support and to discuss the strike.¹²⁴ Women, if not vigorously involved at the start of the walkout, were beginning to be incorporated into union activities.

The strike as a whole had not run across any major breakdowns either in or outside Montreal so far. With a change in company tactics on 19 August, however, the course of events would alter drastically. On that day Dominion Textile flexed its muscles and those of the Montreal municipal police. About 150 police escorted a similar number of scabs into the Mont Royal mill. After a few hours, 125 of these strikebreakers were shifted to the Colonial plant. The company planned to enter the Merchants mill as well but strikers there successfully blocked the gate. The Hochelaga mill continued to house only office staff.¹²⁵ Dominion Textile obviously did not intend to operate its factories via this small number of men. The company sought to demoralize the strikes by demonstrating its ability to break through the picket line. In this way, discouraged employees

might be persuaded to come back. Because only half of the Montreal workers had joined the union, this city had exceptional vulnerability to a company counterattack.

After fighting the police and scabs at each of these plants on 19 August, the Catholic union leadership called off mass picketing in Montreal one day later.¹²⁶ Considering what was at stake, the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile had backed off very quickly. By not returning to the plant gates, the union allowed Dominion Textile to bring in more strikebreakers and faced the demoralization of its Montreal membership. Confrontations with the police would have generated negative press coverage but this was hardly a new phenomena. Clearly, the Catholic union leadership decided to withdraw from the picket line before it had to. Alfred Charpentier identified the 1937 Dominion Textile strike as the struggle which began the radicalization of the CTCC.¹²⁷ The process evidently had not yet gone far enough that the union would challenge the police for a protracted period of time.

The strike, although seriously damaged, had not fallen apart. All plants outside Montreal remained shut. The Drummondville town council debated whether to conduct a vote of the millhands on a return to work. The provincial police would have been invited in if the ballot favoured an end to the walkout. The proposal, though, was abandoned because of a fear of violence.¹²⁸ Public support in Quebec stayed at a high level. Three Montreal aldermen protested the behaviour of the police. East end Montrealers donated money to a collection for the strikers.¹²⁹ Announcements of support arrived

from church and political leaders.¹³⁰ F.X. Bouchard, the mayor of Montmorency, proposed a conference of mayors from the affected towns and cities to seek a just settlement of the strike. All but Emile Rioux of Sherbrooke accepted.¹³¹

Before this conference could be convened, a potential resolution of the strike surfaced from a different source. On 25 August, Cardinal Villeneuve requested that both the union and the company accept the premier, Maurice Duplessis, as mediator. The cardinal asked Dominion Textile to consider the granting of a collective labour agreement but indicated to the workers that a collective agreement need not be the first step to social reconstruction.

G.B. Gordon, the managing director of Dominion Textile, jumped at the opportunity to obtain an end to the strike without an immediate prospect of a collective agreement and with mediation by the provincial government which had supported his company. The Catholic union could only reject a meeting suggested by the cardinal with difficulty. More importantly, the union needed a conclusion to the strike before its position deteriorated further. Alfred Charpentier of the CTCC and Albert Cote of the FNCT travelled to Quebec City hoping to salvage some sort of collective agreement out of the discussion.

The interested parties reached a solution late on 27 August. Dominion Textile kept the open shop and staved off union recognition except in a partial form. An attempt to negotiate a collective agreement was to be pursued by eight representatives: four from Dominion

Textile, two from the Catholic unions, and, despite the Catholic union's representation of the majority of the workers, two from non-unionized employees or members of non-Catholic unions such as the Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile. The Fair Wages Board could begin an investigation into wages and other matters. If the committee of eight could not finalize an agreement by 1 March 1938, the Fair Wages Board ruling would become the contract. Any contract negotiated through the committee would last only six months. Dominion Textile would pay the new wages retroactively to the start of work. In immediate terms, the FNCT called an end to the strike and Dominion Textile promised to rehire all employees in their old posts.¹³²

Before discussing the agreement and its aftermath, the local events at Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency leading up to the close of the strike will be reviewed. In Sherbrooke from 19 August to the strike's conclusion, the mill did not open despite some hints that the company might opt for this tactic. On 20 August G.B. Gordon sent telegrams to the mayors of towns outside Montreal involved in the strike to suggest a reopening with the aid of the provincial police. Gordon also asked Emile Rioux, the Sherbrooke mayor, to relay to the workers the company's offer of a return to work at wage rates to be set by the Fair Wages Board.¹³³ The workers turned the offer down but the town wavered on the question of police protection. After declaring that police would aid those wishing to work, the municipal government announced that any arrangements to protect workers would have to originate with the provincial police

because the Sherbrooke centennial celebrations placed too much of a drain on local police forces.¹³⁴ Sherbrooke could have easily asked for the stationing of provincial police in the town but never did so. The local government, while not wholly sympathetic to the strike, did not feel comfortable openly challenging it.

The FNCT proceeded with activities designed to boost morale. As in all strike centres across the province, speakers from other Catholic unions were paraded at workers' meetings. At one of these gatherings, a former secretary of the Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile made known his defection to the Catholic union.¹³⁵ Local priests endorsed the strike at church services.¹³⁶ Men and women maintained picket lines until the official word arrived of a settlement.¹³⁷

When Cardinal Villeneuve initiated his efforts to end the stoppage, a strikers' assembly hailed his statements.¹³⁸ Their enthusiasm cooled swiftly once the workers saw the terms of the agreement. The meeting to ratify the accord did not flow smoothly.¹³⁹ The agreement seemed too similar to the one the Catholic union had persuaded them to accept following the December 1936 walkout - no immediate concessions and only promises of improvements. Another key issue to the Sherbrooke workers was the absence of the union shop. Because the Catholic union in Dominion Textile had to compete with the Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile, not having a union shop presented a threat to the future stability of the local. Philippe Girard, the Montreal union leader assigned to run the Sherbrooke strike, stated that the local union could accept the deal while at

the same time criticizing it. He reminded the millhands that the union simply did not have the strength to force through a union shop clause. To pacify the Sherbrooke workers, Albert Cote, FNCT president, would later promise them that, if a good agreement did not arise out of negotiations, the union would return to the picket line in six months.¹⁴⁰

The meeting did have one unexpected speaker. Johnny Bourque, the Union Nationale M.L.A. for Sherbrooke and Minister of Public Works, displayed more courage than discretion by showing up to defend the government. Philippe Girard, despite delivering his own tirade against the Union Nationale, allowed Bourque to talk without being drowned out by boos and catcalls. Bourque then tried to portray the Union Nationale as being pro worker because it had tolerated illegal picketing tactics, established the Fair Wages Board and favoured collective agreements. The validity of these remarks is less important than the fact that he felt compelled to make them. The M.L.A. obviously was worried about the future votes of the Sherbrooke textile workers, Catholic unionists and their sympathizers.

In St. Gregoire de Montmorency, both public support and public relations were handled well in the last section of the strike. Female millhands sought a donation at Maurice Duplessis' Quebec City office and received favourable publicity after being turned away.¹⁴¹ The premier as well did not do his cause any good when he claimed that some Catholic union chaplains were acting as communists. A quick witted union spokesman replied that, if the chaplains were communists, then the government should invoke the padlock law against those who

appointed them, the Quebec bishops.¹⁴²

Support from municipal administrations and the population persisted to the strike's conclusion. The mayor and police chief of Quebec City allowed the union to solicit donations in that city.¹⁴³ As in Sherbrooke and Montreal, female millhands performed most of this work. Donations followed in even after the strike finished. People gave individually or through collections in the Catholic church. Prominent politicians donated money as in the case of provincial Liberals Adelard Godbout and T.D. Bouchard or the federal M.P., Wilfrid Lacroix, who also spoke at union rallies.¹⁴⁴ Several hundred townspeople showed up to listen to Henri D'Amour and Joseph Leclerc, secretary and president of the Montmorency FNCT local. They told of their visit to the other striking towns in Quebec.¹⁴⁵

The Montmorency reaction to the agreement was more positive than in Sherbrooke. Almost all of the millhands belonged to the Catholic union and the strike had run into no breaks in solidarity. Therefore, the absence of a union shop clause did not generate serious fears for the union's future. One thousand strikers cheered Alfred Charpentier at a celebration after the announcement of a settlement.¹⁴⁶

The Aftermath 1937-1939

Although Dominion Textile would reach agreement with union and non-union representatives on a six month contract, by February 1938, it would become clear that the company had merely been seeking a more favourable opportunity to smash the union. The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile's popularity had already suffered

from a strike settlement without major immediate concessions on wages, union recognition, working conditions and a union shop. The corporate counterattack in 1938 would prove to be too much for the embattled FNCT to handle.

First the committee of eight was formed. Dominion Textile held two spots, with Montreal Cottons and Drummondville Cotton taking another two. Alfred Charpentier and Albert Cote presidents of the CTCC and FNCT respectively, represented the Catholic textile union. The remaining two posts fell to Ephrem Clement and Lorenzo Plouffe. Plant delegates who had been elected by non-unionists selected Clement as the non-union representative to the committee. Plouffe, a member of the executive of the Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile had originally been appointed to the committee without plant elections in Sherbrooke so that his union would have a spot at the negotiating table.¹⁴⁷ The FNCT objected to Plouffe on the grounds that his union was defunct. The Quebec Department of Labour investigated and declared that the independent union was too small to deserve its own committee member. Lorenzo Plouffe then won a Sherbrooke plant election. At a subsequent gathering of non-union plant delegates, he then was selected to be the second non-union representative on the committee of eight.¹⁴⁸

Negotiations thus finally began in November 1937, leading to an agreement on 20 December.¹⁴⁹ The contract resulted in some significant benefits to the millhands. The firm would pay a five per cent bonus on all work done between 30 August and 11 December. After

that day, piece workers received a five per cent raise and hourly paid workers obtained seven per cent more if earning less than thirty cents per hour or five per cent extra if earning above thirty cents per hour. As well there was a two per cent bonus for night work and apprentices. Apprentices were limited to twenty-five per cent of the mill workforce and could only remain in this classification for one year.

There were gains on non-monetary issues as well. Five ten hour days between Monday and Friday made up the work week; thus Saturday work was eliminated and an average of five hours per week dropped from the previous schedule. If a millhand worked over fifty hours, he received a five per cent bonus on the extra hours. Workers were issued note books to help them record their hours or piece work. The company had to stop all machines during mealtimes except those designated continuous process machines.

Local committees of six members each enforced the overall collective agreement, sorted out any minor variations on the contract for the local mills and dealt with grievances. Three representatives came from the company. If the plant had over fifty per cent of its employees in the FNCT, the Catholic union held two spots with one falling to a non-Catholic union representative. If a plant had less than fifty per cent of its workers in the FNCT, non-Catholic unionists had two posts and the FNCT one. The Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile was guaranteed a place in any negotiations at Sherbrooke.

The contract contained two clauses that were exceptionally disadvantageous to the union. One specified that no rayon workers

were covered by the agreement. This section therefore excluded just under half of the workers in the Sherbrooke mill from the terms of the contract for which they had struck. Another clause limited any agreement to a six month duration. This gave the union only a short respite before the next battle. The agreement would expire on 28 May 1938 provided that either party informed the other of its desire to terminate the agreement by 28 February 1938.

Dominion Textile undertook to scuttle the FNCT early in the new year. It demanded revisions in the contract and salary cuts in January 1938, impossible concessions for the union.¹⁵⁰ In February 1938 the company issued the notice required to end the agreement and followed this up by an April attempt to establish works councils or company unions. Although the federal and provincial governments voiced their disapproval of the company's actions, neither took any effective steps to aid the union.¹⁵¹

The FNCT knew that it could not win a strike in 1938. The 1937 experience had shown that the Montreal locals could not keep those plants closed. Moreover, an economic downturn in 1938 rendered the prospect of winning in that year even less likely than in the previous one.¹⁵² Instead the FNCT opted to oppose the works councils, successfully in the case of St. Gregoire de Montmorency, and to raise salaries through the Fair Wages Board. The FNCT drastically lost membership at this time. Despite the presence of activists in many plants, by 1939 the majority of the membership was at the Montmorency local. Certainly in Montreal and Valleyfield, the organization collapsed completely.¹⁵³ Only the Fair Wages Board ordinance put

into effect to substitute for the collective agreement protected the workers from pre-1937 style exploitation.

In Sherbrooke, the FNCT had maintained a fairly solid base with a membership at the Dominion Textile plant of 510 in October 1937 and 439 in February 1938. In comparison, the Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile apparently had almost no membership in October 1937 and only 31 paid up members in March 1938.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, by the close of 1938 the FNCT local had become defunct. Notably the Catholic weavers local at Paton died in the same year despite having survived since the 1920s.¹⁵⁵ The difficulties in the organization as a whole must have precipitated the fall of the wool local.

In St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the FNCT local proved to be much stronger. During the October elections for a non-union plant, delegate only fifty-eight people voted.¹⁵⁶ The result may reveal a difficulty in union recruiting for fifty-two of these voters were women. It does not seem likely though that these women were protesting a lack of female representation among the union leadership for all three candidates in the non-union election were men. In January 1938, the union's position appeared to be even more formidable when the committee to oversee the local collective agreement could not find a non-union representative to sit on it.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, when Dominion Textile tried to force the election of works councils, the St. Gregoire de Montmorency locals responded by spoiling their ballots.¹⁵⁸

Montmorency faced one strike after August 1937, the only Dominion Textile mill to do so. The company had introduced new machines to

the plant which essentially required more work for the same pay. Forty workers demanded a return to the old system and were fired. Thus spinners and doffers on the 11 July 1938 night shift walked out.¹⁵⁹ The other plant employees soon followed. The manager found his car halted at the plant gate and then they escorted him to the office of F.X. Bouchard, the mayor.¹⁶⁰

On 14 July, the strike turned violent. F.X. Bouchard and Gerard Picard, the secretary of the CTCC, met with G.B. Gordon, Dominion Textile's managing director, to iron out the difficulties. After negotiations produced no results, Gordon encountered workers who had entered the plant. After he rejected their demands, the millhands chose an extremely aggressive form of collective bargaining. They manhandled G.B. Gordon and the assistant plant superintendent, Harold Fisher, forcing the former to sign a contract.

Four men were arrested for the assault, and the Catholic union disassociated itself from the strike. After a week the mill reopened but the night shift was cancelled, costing from four to six hundred millhands their jobs. This led to protests by the townspeople and an appeal for aid by the mayor to the federal and provincial governments. Dominion Textile, however, stuck to its decision and cemented it by blacklisting some seventy-six employees believed to be troublemakers.¹⁶¹

The St. Gregoire de Montmorency local, while not able to defeat Dominion Textile, still managed to maintain a solid base. The firm tried to introduce works councils in 1939 under the guise of a "comite de suggestion" which awarded prizes for recommendations

that facilitated production. The millhands simply refused to cooperate with the scheme.¹⁶²

The FNCT had sunk to the level where it served only as a lobbying agent for Dominion Textile workers at Fair Wages Board hearings. In this capacity, the FNCT did obtain some wage increases in 1939 and, more importantly for the future, kept together a cadre of activists in the mills. When the booming economic growth of World War II replaced the economic slump of 1938, organization would recommence and bear fruit.¹⁶³

Although it did not make the difference between winning and losing, the mill town atmosphere had been a beneficial environment for the unions to work in, especially at St. Cregoire de Montmorency. There the vast numerical predominance of the textile workers virtually assured that the mayor, F.X. Bouchard would never call in the provincial police and that the local M.P., Wilfrid Lacroix, would endorse the workers' cause. Donations flowed in from the local businesses, professionals and townspeople. One of the drawbacks of striking in a single industry town - that the strike itself dries up sources of financial backing - was mitigated by Montmorency's proximity to Quebec City. With the important presence in that city of the Catholic Church, Catholic unions, and sympathetic politicians including some Liberals as well as nationalist leaders, the textile union was assured of a continuous flow of moral support and dollars.

In Sherbrooke, the millhands dominated industrial employment figures but not the town as a whole. Many local people, the merchants and, of course, the church donated money. However, the links to local politicians existed in a more tenuous state. Johnny Bourque, the M.L.A. and a minister in the Union Nationale government, defended his party's blatant assistance to Dominion Textile. He worried enough about this embarrassment that he sought to address a union meeting after the walkout concluded. Nonetheless, he did not feel sufficiently threatened that he would consider breaking party ranks. C.B. Howard, the M.P., did not figure prominently in the strike one way or the other. Due to his previous aid to the Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile and the Union Ouvriere Textile, allowing both these groups to meet at the Club Liberal Howard, the M.P. not surprisingly kept a low profile during the Catholic union's strike.¹⁶⁴

The mayor, Emile Rioux, and the municipal council played a game of one step forward, two steps back. Alternately they announced their intention to provide police protection to those wishing to return to work and then vacillated. The mayor and the council contributed no money to the strike while it was in progress although Rioux did donate ten dollars just at the finish.¹⁶⁵ In what was less of a mill town than Montmorency or Cornwall, the textile workers wielded less influence over politicians.

This pattern developed in an even more exaggerated fashion in Montreal. In what was surely the antithesis of a mill town, the strikers lined up some political support but nothing comparable to that in the mill towns. Some aldermen urged that aid be supplied to

the millhands; nonetheless, the city turned the municipal police into a strikebreaking force for Dominion Textile. The large urban environment, moreover, facilitated the recruiting of strikebreakers. In smaller towns, Dominion Textile would have had to import many outsiders to staff its mills, an approach not likely to be welcomed by the local communities.

The tactics and attitudes of Dominion Textile paralleled those of other corporations in the 1930s. It first sought to destroy the union and, if this did not seem possible, to minimize gains, especially union recognition. Prior to the strike, the company stalled, refusing to meet Catholic union leaders while trying to buy off discontent. Unlike the Cornwall strikes though, Dominion Textile could not point an accusing finger at communist agitators. The Toronto Clarion poked fun at the Dominion Textile dilemma:

First they objected to the CIO. Then they did not like Canadian unions with outside leaders. Now they can't stomach the Catholic textile unions. Pity the poor cotton kings. They're having a 166 terrible time finding a union to their liking.

There remained the standard claim that the Catholic union represented only a minority of employees. Although employees could join this organization, the company would not deal with it.

When the walkout began, Dominion Textile decided to wait, closing plants which the strike had shut down anyway. The announcement that no negotiations would be consented to before the Fair Wages Board went into operation, conveniently postponed any contact with the union for a month. By exaggerating the importance of periodic scuffles at various plants, the company sought to portray the

Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile as a violent, lawless body. In this way, the company tried to present a more convincing case for police intervention. The corporation focused its campaign on Montreal where it found a more willing municipal administration and a larger pool of strikebreakers.¹⁶⁷

By the end of the strike, the momentum had clearly swung to Dominion Textile. It had demonstrated that the union could not keep the Montreal plants closed. Past profits allowed the company to wait out the strike without the danger of falling into a precarious financial situation. Dominion Textile's position in the cotton market also was not threatened because of its dominance of the industry as well as agreements with the other cotton firms to specialize in non-competitive products. The question then arises of why the company decided to try to end the strike in late August rather than break the strike completely.

Several points should be noted. Dominion Textile had not recruited enough strikebreakers to satisfactorily operate its mills in Montreal. Even if enough people were available, the problem of the factories outside Montreal would remain along with the question of the interdependence of the company's overall operations. Demand for textile was on an upswing in 1936 and 1937. To be shut down by a strike at this time was not a profitable move.

Dominion Textile could look positively on the terms of the settlement. The agreement contained no direct union recognition, permitted non-union representatives on the committee of eight and only provided for the possibility of negotiating of a six month

contract. As Dominion Textile's subsequent manoeuvres would prove, it had settled in August 1937 in order to launch a counterattack at a more propitious time.

One part of the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile's tactics was its attempt to build a large, popular base of support in the province. The FNCT and CTCC's public appeals drew from Catholic social doctrine and Quebec nationalism.¹⁶⁸ If large corporations dominated by English Canadians or foreign interests exploited French Canadian workers, the attraction of communism and socialism would be enhanced. According to Catholic social thought, the views and practice of laissez-faire liberal economic theory should be overturned and replaced by a cooperative society where employees and employers could work together for their mutual interests. In refusing to deal with its employees, Dominion Textile provoked class conflict and upset the social fabric of Quebec. It was in this sense that the CTCC and FNCT speakers and placards proclaimed that the walkout was a "strike against communism" as well as Dominion Textile.¹⁶⁹

These arguments struck a responsive cord in certain sectors of Quebec society. The French language press painted a quite positive picture of the strikers. In Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency, La Tribune, and, naturally, L'Action Catholique loaned journalistic aid to the FNCT. Among certain Quebec politicians and political groups, close links existed with the Catholic unions. At the 10 August rally in Quebec City, the head of the Parti National, Philippe Hamel, endorsed the strike along with other well known nationalists Rene Chaloult and J.E. Gregoire.¹⁷⁰ These men had

previously joined the Union National coalition but left because of Maurice Duplessis' unwillingness to follow through on social or nationalistic policies after the 1936 election victory. F.X. Bouchard, the mayor of Montmorency, who assisted the strikers, also participated in nationalist political activities.¹⁷¹ Support did originate with politicians outside nationalist circles such as the Liberals Adelard Godbout and T.D. Bouchard. Nevertheless, there seems to have been a special affinity between the Catholic unionists and the Quebec nationalists despite official claims of political neutrality.

Two advantages that the FNCT had over the Cornwall union in terms of attracting political endorsements were that it did not have to combat a fear of communist leadership and that it already had ties to local political figures via the church or nationalists sympathetic to Catholic ideology. As a result Dominion Textile strikers received political support from the start of their struggle rather than after the first strike, as was the case in Cornwall. Except in Montreal no town officials moved against the strikers. This political aid combined with the CTCC's antipathy for entering politics helped to insure the local unionists, unlike their Ontario counterparts, would not decide to enter municipal politics themselves.¹⁷²

More important to the outcome of the strike was the FNCT's picket line strategy. The textile union occasionally took a strong stand against shipments in and out of plants or set up mass pickets to guard against strikebreakers entering the plants (as in Sherbrooke or Drummondville). However, when Dominion Textile made its 19 August

push to open the Montreal mills, the FNCT ended mass picketing and street confrontations with the police after only one day.

The opening of the Montreal mills demoralized the union's membership in a city where it had only recruited fifty per cent of the Dominion Textile workforce.

The FNCT opted for an arrangement that did not grant complete union recognition, permitted non-Catholic union representatives on the negotiating committee and led only to a six month long collective agreement. The union accepted such a mediocre deal because of the collapse of the Montreal strike and severe financial difficulties. Alfred Charpentier recalled that, in another two weeks, the strike funds would have been exhausted.¹⁷³ Moreover, the CTCC faced another major strike at this time, among Sorel's metal workers. Therefore the parent union central had limited resources. The FNCT gambled that it could persuade Dominion Textile to sign a contract on the basis of the union's base in the plants outside Montreal. The union leadership did not object to non-Catholic unionists on the committee of eight because it did not think that this stipulation would lessen union influence. The FNCT and CTCC leaders expected these people to be elected in plant wide voting which would include Catholic unionists.¹⁷⁴ Instead, the non-Catholic union representatives were elected only by people outside the Catholic unions, thus preventing indirect FNCT control of elections.

The role of women in the Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency strikes is ambiguous. Many accounts show women as active participants. In both places women marched on the picket line, and

worked for the strike just like their male cohorts. The unions tended to assign women to fund raising duties as in door-to-door collections. The St. Gregoire de Montmorency local set up a special committee to involve women workers in the strike although reports did not describe the exact duties of this committee.¹⁷⁵

The situation with regard to leadership positions, however, seems more bleak. Not once in newspaper reports or the Report on Labour Organizations in Canada did a female Catholic textile union official emerge in Sherbrooke or St. Gregoire de Montmorency. No women spoke at public meetings. The absence of union records for this period prevents an absolutely certain statement that there were no female union leaders yet all indications point to this conclusion.

In the realm of ideology, the CTCC has acquired a reputation for viewing women only from the perspective of their role in the family.¹⁷⁶ Women performing industrial work were seen as an abnormality. The CTCC encouraged women to remain in the home. If this was not possible, then special protective legislation would have to be enacted to safeguard them. In addition, during the 1930s depression, the FNCT opposed women holding "men's jobs" in the textile industry.¹⁷⁷ With this combination of attitudes, it should not be surprising if leadership posts were closed to female unionists.

The attitude of the Quebec government during the Dominion Textile strike combined distinct hostility to the Catholic union with relatively meagre concrete action. William Tremblay, the provincial

Minister of Labour, parroted the company's insistence that the strike should be handled through the Fair Wages Act and not the Collective Labour Agreements Extension Act. Maurice Duplessis, the premier, opposed the idea of a closed shop, accused the CTCC of ties to his political opponents and in a slightly ridiculous moment, implied that some of the Catholic union chaplains were communists. Although the Union Nationale government did the union no favours, it took no specific measures to break the strike. Assigning the provincial police to an urban area contrary to the wishes of local officials would have created a political furour. So, as no requests from the concerned towns arrived in Quebec City, local forces handled the situation. Alas, in Montreal, the large and aggressive municipal police force proved sufficient to escort the Dominion Textile strikebreakers across the picket line. In a practical sense, then the Montreal city council did more to break the strike than the provincial authorities despite their antipathy for the textile union.

Footnotes

- 1 Canada Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, 1937, p. 967.
- 2 See for example Gilles Groulx, "Le Syndicalisme dans l'industrie textile du Quebec," M.A. Thesis, Universite de Montreal, 1954; Jacques Rouillard, Histoire de la CSN 1921-1981 (Montreal, 1981); Alfred Charpentier, Les Memoires d'Alfred Charpentier (Quebec, 1971); Alfred Charpentier, "L'ideologie de la CTCC, une response à Louis-Marie Tremblay," Relations Industrielles (1976), pp. 132-139; Alfred Charpentier, "La conscience syndicale lors des greves du textile en 1937 et de l'amiante en 1949," Labour/Le Travailleur (1978), pp. 197-220; Jean Paul Metu, Lutte des travailleurs du textile au Quebec (Montreal, 1979); Jean-Paul Lefebvre, "Le textile 1937" in En Greve, ed. by Jean-Paul Lefebvre (Montreal, 1963), pp. 23-57.
- 3 Canada, Census of Canada, 1931, Volume II, p. 14.
- 4 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter cited PAC), RG 33/20, Vol. 11, Royal Commission on the Textile Industry (hereafter cited RCTI): Exhibit No. 274, Analysis of wage earners according to weekly wages 1935, Montmorency Branch, Dominion Textile Co. Ltd.
- 5 Jacques Rouillard, Les Travailleurs du coton au Quebec 1900-1915 (Montreal, 1974), p. 13.
- 6 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 1, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, p. 1952.
- 7 Census of Canada, 1931, Vol. VII, pp. 298, 300.
- 8 Compare the totals of Canada Manufacturing Industries of the Province of Quebec, 1935 p. 18 1936 p. 18 1937 p. 14 1938 p. 14 1939 p. 14 for total industrial employment with employment totals in Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1935 pp. 126, 162, 171 1936 pp. 131, 140, 141 1937 pp. 138, 147 1938 pp. 136, 145 1939 pp. 138, 147. Dominion Textile employment for this period varies between 700 to 1,100 in this period. A general figure of around 800 is acceptable.
- 9 Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1935 p. 127 1938 p. 145 1939 p. 147.
- 10 Canadian Textile Journal, 2 December 1932, p. 15; Tom Naylor, The History of Canadian Business 1867-1914: Volume II Industrial Development (Toronto, 1975), p. 143.
- 11 Moody's Manual of Investments (Industrials), 1936, p. 1315; Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1935 pp. 126, 162 1936 p. 131 1937 p. 138 1938 p. 136 1939 p. 138.

- 12 Canada, Royal Commission on the Textile Industry Report (hereafter cited RCTI Report) (Ottawa, 1938); pp. 52, 140.
- 13 Moody's Manual of Investments (Industrials), 1936 p. 798
1938 p. 475 1940 p. 99.
- 14 Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1935 p. 171 1939 p. 147.
- 15 RCTI Report, pp. 138-139; For the performance of Julius Kayser and Co. as a whole see Moody's Manual of Investments, 1936 p. 798
1938 p. 475 1940 p. 99.
- 16 Manual of the Textile Industry of Canada, 1930 p. 199 1935 p. 171
1937 p. 147 1938 p. 145 1939 p. 147; PAC Strikes and Lockouts
Records, RG 27, Vol. 387, strike no. 137.
- 17 Canadian Textile Journal, 4 October 1935, p. 18; PAC RG 33/20,
Vol. 1, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, pp. 45-141.
- 18 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 13 RCTI: Exhibit No. 266, Analysis of wage
earners according to weekly earnings, Sherbrooke Cotton and
Rayon Divisions, Dominion Textile Co. Ltd.
- 19 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 10 RCTI: Exhibit No. 40, Statement of number
of piece workers and rate workers in Cotton and Rayon Divisions,
Sherbrooke Branch, Dominion Textile Co. Ltd.
- 20 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 26, Vol. 390, strike no. 22.
See Montreal Gazette, 22 July 1937.
- 21 Rouillard, Les Travailleurs, pp. 111, 112.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 92, 103.
- 23 Labour Gazette, 1919, p. 799; See also RCTI Report, p. 183 and
PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 315, strike no. 216.
- 24 Groulx, "Le Syndicalisme," pp. 71-73; PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 2,
RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, pp. 2587-2591.
- 25 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 380, strike no. 197.
- 26 Archives nationales du Quebec (hereafter cited ANQ), Department
de Travail, E 24 Art. 118, n. loc., 7A21-3102A, G13.
- 27 L'Action Catholique, 28 December 1936.
- 28 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 381, strike no. 1.
- 29 L'Action Catholique, 5 January 1937.

- 30 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 381, strike no. 18.
- 31 Louise B. Lavoie, Les Debuts du mouvement ouvrier a Sherbrooke 1873-1919 (Sherbrooke, 1979), p. 81.
- 32 Ibid., p. 117; Canada Department of Labour, Report on Labour Organizations in Canada, 1920 p. 49 1921 p. 38 1922 p. 61.
- 33 Report on Labour Organizations in Canada, 1920 p. 49 1921 p. 38 1922 p. 61 1923 p. 60 1924 p. 57 1925 p. 60 1926 p. 66 1926 p. 71 1928 p. 60 1929 p. 59 1930 p. 60 1931 p. 61 1932 p. 122.
- 34 For Paton see PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 391, strike no. 236. See Montreal Gazette, 13 August 1937.
- 35 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 1 RCTI; Transcript of Hearings, pp. 372-377.
- 36 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 380, strike no. 188; La Tribune, 12 December 1936.
- 37 ANQ Department de Travail E 24, Art. 118, n. loc., 7A21-3102A, G10, L.P. Camirand to Gerard Tremblay, 12 December 1936.
- 38 Groulx, "Le Syndicalisme," p. 76.
39. La Tribune, 14 December 1936.
- 40 Ibid., 15 December 1936.
- 41 Ibid., 16 December 1936; ANQ Department de Travail E 24, Art. 118, n. loc. 7A21-3102A, G10, L.P. Camirand to Clovis Bernier, 18 December 1936.
- 42 La Tribune, 5, 8, 25 February 1937.
- 43 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 381, strike no. 32.
- 44 La Tribune, 1, 5 March 1937.
- 45 Census of Canada, 1931, Vol. II, pp. 498, 703.
- 46 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 382, strike no. 40.
- 47 La Tribune, 11, 12 March 1937; ANQ Department de Travail E 24, Art. 118, n. loc. 7A21-3102A, G10, Anonymous employee to Dominion Textile, 12 March 1937.
- 48 La Tribune, 11 March 1937.

- 49 La Tribune, 15 March 1937.
- 50 Ibid., 13 March 1937.
- 51 Ibid., 16, 17 March 1937; Report on Labour Organizations in Canada, 1935, p. 37.
- 52 La Tribune, 17, 18 March 1937; ANQ Department de Travail E 24, Art. 118, n. loc. 7A21-3102A, G10, List of strike committee members.
- 53 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 382, strike no. 40.
- 54 Ibid.; La Tribune, 19 March 1937.
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- 69 Ibid., pp. 439, 444, 3431; PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 27, Exhibit No. 797, Memorandum by La Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile Inc. on complaints of workers, 18 August 1937, p. 6.
- 70 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 1 and 2, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, pp. 350, 354, 2308, 2309; PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 27, RCTI: Exhibit No. 797, Memorandum by La Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile Inc. on complaints of workers, 18 August 1936, p. 2.
- 71 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 1 and 2, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, pp. 120, 222, 229, 233, 237, 249, 270, 271, 319, 336, 410, 2240, 2250, 2288, 2303, 2309, 2355, 2388.
- 72 RCTI Report, p. 307.
- 73 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 2, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, pp. 2511, 2554.
- 74 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 27, RCTI: Exhibit No. 797, Memorandum by La Fédération Nationale Catholique du Textile Inc. on complaints by workers, 18 August 1936, p. 5.
- 75 To see how conditions stayed the same over time, read Rouillard, Les Travailleurs, pp. 51-77.
- 76 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 1 and 2, RCTI: Transcript of Hearings, pp. 265, 331, 2259, 2277.
- 77 Ibid., pp. 163, 214, 230, 261, 358, 2569.
- 78 Ibid., pp. 168, 175, 197, 200, 213, 232, 241, 245-249, 261, 319, 2304-2335, 2413.
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- 81 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 48, RCTI: Exhibit No. 1332, Correspondence Between Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile and G.B. Gordon Dominion Textile Co. Ltd. re. collective agreement January 1937.
- 82 Rouillard, Histoire de la CSN 1921-1981, p. 86.
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- 86 Ibid. See Montreal Gazette, 29 July 1937.
- 87 Ibid. See Montreal Gazette, 22 July 1937.
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- 93 For the radicalization of the Catholic unions during the 1930s, see Rouillard, Histoire de la CSN 1921-1981, pp. 82-95; Charpentier, "La conscience syndicale," pp. 200-216; Charpentier, "L'ideologie de la CTCC," pp. 132-136.
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- 97 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 2210. See Montreal Gazette, 3 August 1937.
- 98 Charpentier, Les Memoires p. 209.
- 99 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 220. See Montreal Gazette, 7 August 1937 and Ottawa Morning Citizen, 5 August 1937.
- 100 Ibid. See Ottawa Evening Journal, 4 August 1937.
- 101 Ibid. See Ottawa Evening Journal, 9 August 1937 and Montreal Herald, 12 August 1937.
- 102 Ibid. See Ottawa Evening Journal, 9 August 1937.

- 103 Ibid. See Montreal Star, 5 August 1937 and Montreal Gazette, 14 August 1937.
- 104 L'Action Catholique, 11 August 1937; Quebec Chronicle Telegraph, 13 August 1937.
- 105 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 220. See Windsor Star, 17 August 1937.
- 106 Ibid. See Montreal La Presse, 18 August 1937.
- 107 Ibid. See Montreal La Presse, 7 August 1937.
- 108 Ibid. See Montreal Gazette, 14, 16 August 1937.
- 109 Ibid. See Toronto Clarion, 13 August 1937.
- 110 Ibid. See Montreal Herald, 10 August 1937.
- 111 La Tribune, 4, 7 August 1937.
- 112 ANQ Department de Travail, Art. 88, n. loc., 7A21-1301A; G4, Clovis Bernier to Gerard Tremblay, 19 October 1937.
- 113 La Tribune, 9 August 1937.
- 114 Ibid., 16 August 1937.
- 115 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 391, strike no. 23.
- 116 Ibid.
- 117 La Tribune, 10 August 1937.
- 118 Ibid., 6, 9 August 1937.
- 119 Ibid., 18, 19 August 1937.
- 120 L'Action Catholique, 17 August 1937.
- 121 Ibid., 5 August 1937.
- 122 Ibid., 9, 11 August 1937.
- 123 Ibid., 18 August 1937.
- 124 Ibid., 6, 10 August 1937.
- 125 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 220. See Toronto Star, 19 August 1937; Montreal Star, 19 August 1937 and Montreal Herald, 19 August 1937.

- 126 Ibid. See Windsor Star, 20 August 1937.
- 127 Ibid. See Ottawa Evening Journal, 21 August 1937 and Toronto Globe and Mail, 23 August 1937.
- 128 Ibid. See Montreal Gazette, 24 August 1937.
- 129 Ibid. See Montreal Gazette, 23 August 1937 and Montreal La Presse, 26 August 1937.
- 130 Ibid. See Montreal Star, 23 August 1937 and Hamilton Spectator, 23 August 1937.
- 131 Ibid. See Montreal La Presse, 24, 25 August 1937.
- 132 Ibid. See Ottawa Evening Citizen, 28 August 1937.
- 133 La Tribune, 21 August 1937; ANQ Department de Travail, Art. 88, n. loc. 7A21-1301A, G4, G.B. Gordon to Gerard Tremblay, 20 August 1937 and G.B. Gordon to Emile Rioux, 20 August 1937.
- 134 La Tribune, 21, 23 August 1937.
- 135 Ibid., 24 August 1937.
- 136 Ibid., 25 August 1937.
- 137 Ibid., 27 August 1937.
- 138 Ibid.
- 139 Ibid., 30 August 1937.
- 140 Charpentier, Les Memoires p. 226. Valleyfield workers also strongly criticized the lack of a closed shop agreement.
- 141 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 220. See Montreal La Presse, 20 August 1937.
- 142 L'Action Catholique, 19, 20 August 1937.
- 143 Ibid., 20 August 1937.
- 144 Ibid., 28 August 1937; PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 220. See La Patrie, 30 August 1937.
- 145 L'Action Catholique, 24 August 1937.
- 146 Ibid., 28 August 1937.

- 147 ANQ Department de Travail, E 24, Art. 129, n. loc., 7A21-3501A, C4, Alfred Charpentier to William Tremblay, 24 September 1937, Johnny Bourque to William Tremblay, 8 October 1937.
- 148 Ibid., Gerard Tremblay to Clovis Bernier, 15 October 1937; Clovis Bernier to Gerard Tremblay, 19 October 1937; Gerard Tremblay to Clovis Bernier, 22 October 1937; Report of the meeting of non-union plant delegates, 30 October 1937.
- 149 RCTI Report, pp. 273-279.
- 150 Charpentier, Les Memoires. pp. 233-247.
- 151 Ibid., p. 239.
- 152 Renner, "Development of Unions," p. 119; F.H. Leacy, Historical Statistics of Canada, see table R41-246.
- 153 Charpentier, Les Memoires pp. 244-247; Hetu, Lutte, pp. 33-34; Terry Copp, "The Rise of Industrial Unions in Montreal 1935-1945," Relations Industrielles (1982), p. 852.
- 154 ANQ Department de Travail, E 24, Art. 129, n. loc., 7A21-3501A, C4, Gabriel Racine to William Tremblay, 11 February 1938; Affidavit of Union Ouvriere de l'Industrie Textile, 12 March 1938; Clovis Bernier to Gerard Tremblay, 19 October 1937.
- 155 Report of Labour Organizations in Canada, 1938, p. 237.
- 156 ANQ Department de Travail, E 24, Art. 129, n. loc., 7A21-3501A, C4, J.A.V. Anger to Gerard Tremblay, 7 October 1937.
- 157 L'Action Catholique, 29 January 1938.
- 158 Charpentier, Les Memoires p. 236.
- 159 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 397, strike no. 97.
- 160 L'Action Catholique, 13 July 1938.
- 161 ANQ Department de Travail, E 24, Art. 154, n. loc., 7A21-2102B, J11, L.P. Tessier to Gerard Tremblay, 13 October 1938.
- 162 Ibid., Albert Cote to William Tremblay, 25 February 1939.
- 163 Copp, "Rise of Industrial Unions," p. 843.
- 164 La Tribune, 13 August 1937.
- 165 Ibid., 27 August 1937.

- 166 PAC Strikes and Lockouts Records, RG 27, Vol. 390, strike no. 220. See Toronto Clarion, 9 August 1937.
- 167 Charpentier, Les Memoires p. 209.
- 168 See Quebec Chronicle Telegraph, 10 August 1937; La Tribune, 10, 18, 21, 30 August 1937; L'Action Catholique, 11 August 1937, Universite de Laval, Alfred Charpentier Papers 212/3/2. See material on St. Jacques Square demonstration.
- 169 Ibid.
- 170 L'Action Catholique, 11 August 1937; For relations between the nationalists and the Union Nationale see Herbert F. Quinn, The Union Nationale: Quebec Nationalism from Duplessis to Levesque, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1979), pp. 74-78.
- 171 L'Action Catholique, 16 July 1938.
- 172 See Denys Chouinard, "Alfred Charpentier face au gouvernement du Quebec, 1935-1946," M.A. Thesis, Universite Laval, 1975, pp. 93-95; Louis-Marie Tremblay, Le Syndicalisme Quebecois: Ideologies de la CSN et de la FTQ 1940-1970 (Montreal, 1972), pp. 54-56.
- 173 Charpentier, Les Memoires p. 224.
- 174 ANQ Department de Travail E 24, Art. 129, n. loc, 7A21-3501A, G4, Alfred Charpentier to William Tremblay, 18 September 1937; G.B. Gordon to William Tremblay, 24 September 1937.
- 175 L'Action Catholique, 6 August 1937.
- 176 Tremblay, "Le Syndicalisme Quebecois," pp. 99-102; Mona-Jose Gagnon, Les Femmes vues par le Quebec des hommes: 30 ans d'histoire des ideologies 1940-1970 (Montreal, 1974), pp. 114-126; Mona-Jose Gagnon, "Les femmes dans le mouvement syndical quebecois" in Les Femmes dans la societe quebecoise, ed. by Mamie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard (Montreal, 1977), pp. 151-155.
- 177 PAC RG 33/20, Vol. 27, RCTI: Exhibit No. 797, Memorandum by La Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile Inc. on complaints of workers, 18 August 1936.

Conclusion

Whether in Cornwall, Sherbrooke or St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the unionization process began with a surge of shop floor militancy. Local workers confronted their employers before unions had become a substantial influence at the plants.

In terms of grassroots militancy and combativeness no differences existed between the Quebec and Cornwall millhands. Some distinctions did occur during and after the initial strikes because of the nature of the leadership available.

Frank Love helped direct the Courtaulds employees into the United Textile Workers of America. Dominion Textile employees in St. Gregoire de Montmorency and workers at several different plants in Sherbrooke tended to rely on the mediation of politicians or local Catholic priests in their discussions with management. Only after this proved fruitless did the millhands drift to either independent or Catholic unionism. Both the Quebec and Ontario textile workers shared a desire to defend their interests yet the former deferred to an authority structure which delayed union development. In comparing the record of the Cornwall millhands with that of the 1937 Dominion Textile strikers, one sees that both displayed solidarity and militancy. The leadership of the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile, though, seems to have been uncomfortable with confrontations with the police. By discontinuing mass picketing in Montreal, the Catholic union leadership undermined the strike there and proved itself more conservative than many of its members.

The influence of the mill town environment emerged during the

strikes. Cornwall and St. Gregoire de Montmorency fell most clearly into this category. The strikers there demonstrated solidarity, garnered local financial aid and obtained political support. In Sherbrooke, financial assistance did come forth but the political situation was more ambiguous. The municipal council and mayor vacillated on whether to endorse or act against the Dominion Textile strikers. Montreal, definitely not a mill town, witnessed the intervention of municipal police to protect strikebreakers. This situation demonstrated the danger to workers when they could not strongly influence local politics.

Cornwall and Montmorency were not "classic" single enterprise mill towns. Thus, the unions benefited from community bonds without suffering the disadvantages associated with that situation. Neither town council was completely dominated by the textile companies.¹ Moreover, when one company went out on strike, local financial support was still available. The Courtaulds and Canadian Cottons workers never struck at the same time and Montmorency was close enough to Quebec City so that donations could be sought there.

The mill town environment did not, however, represent the key to a successful unionization effort. Corporate structure had a more direct impact. Courtaulds had all of its operations in one town, preventing a production shift elsewhere. The firm, with a near monopoly of viscose rayon, was quite profitable. While this gave the company the resources to ride out a strike and insured that no competitor could take over its market share, these factors were offset by the desire not to miss out on potential profits and the inability to generate income at other plants. As well, the mill was vulnerable to a strike due to technical considerations. The fact that viscose rayon hardens to the consistency of a solid when left stationary in the pipes of the plant machinery

raised the cost of start-up operations after any strike. The company, therefore, could not afford to renege on agreements or provoke repeated conflicts with the union. The Courtaulds union actually exploited the threat of sporadic job actions to win union recognition in 1937.

Canadian Cottons had advantages over Courtaulds in that it could transfer production to Hamilton, Ontario or Milltown, New Brunswick and faced no prohibitive start-up costs. This may explain why it took several strikes to break the resistance of the company. The constant disruptions to its three Cornwall plants which represented the majority of its production facilities eventually brought the company into line. The cotton industry did have an oligopolistic structure combined with price fixing and product specialization agreements. This, however, did not preclude a loss of customers by Canadian Cottons to other cotton firms if the company could not meet its orders.

At Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency before the province wide Dominion Textile strike, the walkouts were too short to make corporate structure an important factor. When Canadian Silk Products, Julius Kayser and Co. and Dominion Textile gave in to worker demands, it was because 1936 and 1937 were prosperous years and a strike would hurt profits. Dominion Textile, though, followed a policy of renegeing on its agreements. In St. Gregoire de Montmorency, this led to the firing of workers who demanded that the company keep its word and, in Sherbrooke, to the formation of an independent union.

When the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile challenged Dominion Textile, the Catholic union encountered a tougher foe than

the Cornwall workers. Dominion Textile, a huge multi-plant operation, controlled over fifty per cent of the Canadian cotton market. The FNCT had to fight several simultaneous strikes with all of the organizational difficulties that engendered. Meanwhile, the company did not have to fear a permanent loss of its market share. No other firm had the financial strength or the production facilities to usurp Dominion Textile's markets.

The conservatism of the FNCT leadership played a part in damaging the Dominion Textile strike also. In Montreal, the FNCT quickly backed off from picket line conflicts when the company tried to place strike-breakers in the mills. The opening of Montreal plants demoralized the union membership in that city. Considering that the Catholic union had only signed up one-half of the Montreal employees, the FNCT's action was a dubious strategic move. Alfred Charpentier has argued that the Dominion Textile strike marked only the start of the Confederation des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada's radicalization. Consequently, the Catholic unions were more prone than later to errors along these lines.

The strength of the strike outside Montreal pushed the company to negotiate a settlement. Nonetheless, the brief duration of the agreement, six months, insured that Dominion Textile could counter-attack after a short delay. The FNCT accepted this and other negative terms because the union's finances were running out swiftly. The establishing of works councils in February 1938 put the union in an awkward position. The union could not expect to win a strike in the less favourable economic climate of 1938 with a membership alienated

by the last settlement. In the end, Dominion Textile completely broke the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile with the exception of some pockets of resistance such as at Montmorency.

Women participated vigorously in the strikes at Cornwall, Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency. No significant divisions over issues or militancy developed between the men and the women. Consequently, this study lends weight to those who do not see social conditioning as important at least in the decision to join a union or go out on strike.

The women's place in the union leadership, though, presents a more complicated picture. In Cornwall, women held union executive and negotiating committee posts during the Courtaulds strike. Later women did not serve on the plant wide negotiating committee. They sat solely on committees representing areas of the plant where women were the vast majority. An absence of union executive records prevents an examination of whether women held any executive posts from 1937 to 1939. During the Canadian Cottons strike, women did not sit on that negotiating committee. It would appear, therefore, that women played a less important leadership role after the initial conflict. In Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency, the picture is even less encouraging. There are no examples of women being on negotiating committees or union executives during the entire period 1936 to 1939.

Neither the written nor the oral research explored in this study adequately explains why the Cornwall women did not take as strong a part in the running of their union after the Courtaulds strike. Aside from the restricting of women from the picket line in the first Canadian

Cottons strike, no instances exist of overt distinctions between the sexes being established. The union's practice, in fact, involved narrowing the gap between men and women's wage rates.² One could speculate about the greater need for female support at Courtaulds, as compared to Canadian Cottons, due to the higher proportion of women at the former company. Nevertheless, this does not aid our understanding of events at Courtaulds after 1936.

For Quebec and the Catholic unions, in particular, more definite conclusions are possible. The Confederation des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada adopted an ideology that rejected a place for women outside the home, especially with regard to industrial labour. This attitude undoubtedly created some resistance to the prospect of women union leaders or a hesitancy by the women themselves to take an active part in their unions beyond merely joining. A few women union leaders did emerge in the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile, such as at Magog, but this did not prove to be the case at either Sherbrooke or St. Gregoire de Montmorency.³ It should also be noted that women leaders did not appear in strikes of independent workers organizations such as at Canadian Silk Products or the Sherbrooke branch of Dominion Textile in spite of a significant female presence at both plants. This result suggests that attitudes similar to those prevalent in the Catholic union movement may have been influential among workers outside the confessional unions.

The textile millhands of Cornwall, Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency fought for the same goals of improved wages, greater security in employment, tolerable conditions in the workplace and the right to defend themselves against arbitrary, sometimes abusive, treatment by the textile companies. A grassroots militancy preceded and underscored the unionization drive in all three locations. This militancy was the sine qua non of the unions and their strikes. By linking up with the workers' own frustration, the Cornwall union was able to win notable victories and the Catholic unions fought a strong yet ultimately unsuccessful struggle. Developments did vary, of course. Although the mill town environment assisted in promoting community solidarity, Sherbrooke's more diversified economic structure prevented the same political domination of local authority seen in Cornwall and St. Gregoire de Montmorency. The Quebec workers lost while the Cornwall workers won. This result grew out of the conservative tactics of the CTCC-FNCT leadership and, more importantly, the contrasts in corporate structure between Dominion Textile, Courtaulds and Canadian Cottons. Among the workers themselves differences did exist. Despite all of the clouds over the evidence concerning women in the respective unions, it seems clear that women played a more vigorous leadership role in Cornwall than Sherbrooke or Montmorency. As well, Quebec workers showed considerably more initial deference to local elites. Only after the path of accommodation had been discredited did the Quebec millhands move to unionism as their Cornwall counterparts had done earlier. The millhands in the three areas shared many common experiences and attitudes.

However, the questions of women's participation in the union and deference to elites suggests the presence of significant cultural and/or ideological differences among the textile workers.

5

Footnotes

- 1 For the negative effects of company domination of local government, see Robert Robson, "Strike in the Single Enterprise Community" Flin Flon, Manitoba - 1934," Labour/Le Travailleur (Autumn, 1983), pp. 63-82; Queen's University, Institute of Local Government, Single Enterprise Communities in Canada: A Report to the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (Kingston, 1953); Roland Renner, "The Development of Unions in the Canadian Primary Textile Industry," M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 1977, pp. 55-58.
- 2 Greater Cornwall Joint Board: TWVA Local 779 Records: Reports of Negotiations at Courtaulds 1938. See the meeting for September 8, 1938.
- 3 Jean Paul Hetu, Lutte des travailleurs du textile au Quebec (Montreal, 1979), p. 22.

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Abstract

This thesis examines textile workers, unions and their strikes at Cornwall, Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency from 1936 to 1939. Via a community study approach, several themes important to textile unionism in particular and industrial unionism in general will be covered. All three places were mill towns. How did this affect political, financial and moral support? How did the corporate structures of the firms involved influence the outcome of the strikes? Were there differences between workers in terms of militancy and their reactions to unionism? What was the role of women at the rank-and-file and leadership levels in the union?

The mill town influence usually favoured unionization but this factor was less important in deciding strike results than corporate structure was. In each town financial and moral support came forward easily with local political assistance being prominent at Cornwall and St. Gregoire de Montmorency. In Sherbrooke, the millhands made up a significantly smaller section of the population and thus had difficulty controlling the local political scene. Local aid, while useful in keeping the strikes solid, did not ensure victory. Courtaulds and Canadian Cottons in Cornwall gave in to their workers because the concentration of production facilities in one town rendered the companies vulnerable to strike action there. Dominion Textile, which had plants not only in Montmorency and Sherbrooke, but

at several other locations throughout Quebec; presented a tougher target. The Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile struck at all of these plants simultaneously. When the strike collapsed in Montreal (partially due to overly conservative union tactics), the union found itself in an untenable situation.

Interesting parallels and differences existed among the workers in the three towns. A powerful grassroots militancy predated the establishment of effective unions and served as the basis for these unions' growth. This experience is very similar to that encountered by United States industrial unions in the same period. The workers at St. Gregoire de Montmorency and Sherbrooke did not form unions as quickly as their counterparts in Cornwall due to the intervention of local elites as mediators. That these interventions were accepted and sometimes sought after reflects a cultural distinction between the Quebec and Cornwall workers. Differences appeared concerning female millhands as well. While women workers supported the unions in all three towns, only in Cornwall did they take a strong, if ambiguous, role in the union leadership. The absence of women union leaders in Sherbrooke and St. Gregoire de Montmorency arises partially from the ideological perspective of the Catholic unions. This perspective, however, may have had a wider diffusion in the working population as textile unions in Sherbrooke who were outside the Federation Nationale Catholique du Textile did not have women in executive or negotiating committee positions also.