Class and Ethnicity in the Early Twentieth Century

Proximity to cheap electricity, generated by the large hydro stations at Niagara Falls and Decew Falls, drew industrial employers to the Niagara Peninsula during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries. The imposition of tariffs on manufactured goods from the United States in the late nineteenth century, combined with proximity to the border, provided added incentive for American companies to establish branch plants in the Niagara Peninsula. Incentives from different communities in the form of bonuses, tax exemptions or fixed taxation, inexpensive hydro rates, and free links to sewage and water played a key role in determining where in the region employers built their factories. Both the number and size of local industries grew as new technology allowed employers to replace skilled workers with machines tended by semi-skilled workers. Although each of the larger communities in the peninsula attracted a variety of industries, a certain degree of specialization became evident among them. St Catharines became the centre of automobile parts manufacturing, chemical and allied industries located in Niagara Falls and Chippawa, metal and metal fabricating industries were Welland’s largest employers, Thorold and Merriton attracted large paper mills, while Port Colborne became a centre of flour milling and metal smelting. Construction of the hydro canals and power-generating stations, the new factories, and the fourth Welland Canal created additional demand for labour.¹

Because the industrial boom coincided with a dramatic increase in immigration from southern and eastern Europe, many of the new industrial and construction jobs were filled by immigrant workers. Armenians, Hungarians, Italians, Poles, and Ukrainians were some of the larger groups to migrate to Niagara at this time. The region appealed to these immigrants because, in the event of a downturn
in industry, the large construction projects connected with power
development and the Welland Canal, as well as seasonal work in
agriculture and canning, provided alternative local employment
opportunities. Immigrants could thus save the time and expense
of moving elsewhere in search of work. They took the least skilled,
least secure, lowest paid, and most physically demanding jobs in
manufacturing and large public works projects, partly because
many were former agriculturalists without previous experience in
factory work. Most were also sojourners, temporary residents who
intended to work in Canada only long enough to save enough money
to permit them to improve their situation when they returned to
their native lands. Because they did not plan to stay at these jobs
for long, they often put up with conditions that more established
Canadian workers would have found intolerable.

Welland Vale Manufacturing Company, makers of agricultural
implements, tools, and bicycles, established in 1901.
Courtesy of the St. Catharines Public Library, Special Collections.

Even if they decided to settle in Canada, however, these immi-
grants had little chance of getting better jobs. Starting in the early
twentieth century, the racializing of immigrant workers — attribut-
ing to them substantial, inborn characteristics that distinguished
them from others — became even more significant in the develop-
ment of Niagara’s labour movement than it had been during the
building of the second Welland Canal in the 1840s. Many of their employers, fellow workers, and other Canadians believed that southern and eastern Europeans, and especially those of Asian and African origin, were racially inferior and equipped to perform only menial labour.

McKinnon Industries, for example, recruited Armenian workers from the United States specifically to carry out hot and heavy work in its foundry, which became known as “Little Armenia.” Poles, Italians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, and other immigrants from southern and eastern Europe joined the Armenians in the foundry and in other unskilled jobs. During World War II, when labour shortages enabled European immigrant workers to move to better-paying and less arduous jobs, the company recruited blacks from Nova Scotia for its foundry.

Employers in Niagara, as elsewhere in Canada during this period, attempted to use racism to their own ends. The first large American manufacturer to locate in Welland — the Plymouth Cordage Company, makers of rope and binder twine — encouraged northern Italian employees from Plymouth, Massachusetts, to relocate to Welland and to invite relatives from Italy to join them there. This move was financially important for the employers because these supposedly unskilled immigrant workers possessed skills in ropemaking that the company would have otherwise had to pay new hires to acquire. The company also believed that hiring based on family and ethnic ties would strengthen worker loyalty. At the same time, however, the company’s officers took ethnic inequality so much for granted that they did not consider placing their experienced Italian workers in responsible positions such as that of foreman within their Welland plant. Instead, they proposed to send forty or fifty local Anglo-Canadians with no experience in ropemaking to Plymouth, Massachusetts, to train for these positions. They advertised their plans in the Welland Telegraph, probably to appeal to the sense of superiority and entitlement to local jobs felt by Welland’s Anglo-Canadian workers. They gave little thought to how their Italian employees might view this policy.
Such evident discrimination undermined or at least challenged the loyalty of workers of Italian origin. Some of the workers who agreed to relocate to Welland did so because they hoped to improve their jobs. They were sorely disappointed. Flavio Botari, the son of one of the leaders of the original group of Italian workers from Plymouth, remembered that his older brother, who was “clever mechanically,” found that he was “hitting his head against the ceiling because he was quite low on the promotion scale” at the company. “The sons of the white Anglo-Saxons were always ahead of him, and he never got a chance to get into the machine shop that he wanted to go into. He always felt that people with a lot less talent were being promoted ahead of him, so he left.” Botari’s reference to “white” Anglo-Saxons, to distinguish them from Italian workers, illustrates the nature of racialization in this period. Esch Orsini, of the same generation as Flavio Botari, recalled his parents’ observation that one became a foreman at Plymouth Cordage only “if you were ‘one of them,’ one of the Anglo-Saxons.”

Plans for worker housing also reflected the employer’s assumptions of racial hierarchy. Welland, still a very small town in 1905, could not accommodate the influx of workers. Consequently, the Plymouth Cordage Company built new housing for its workers. Over one hundred families were housed in three large single-family homes, twenty-four duplexes, ten four-unit buildings, and a large boarding house. Flavio Botari described how the hierarchy at Plymouth Cordage manifested itself in the configuration of company housing. The residents of the “upper crust section” were Anglo-Saxons: the foremen, office workers, and the painters and carpenters who performed maintenance work on the company housing. Almost all residents of the four tenement houses were Italian, with the rest consisting of a Portuguese, a Spaniard, and a Romanian, as well as one or two French Canadian families, all of whom came up from Plymouth. The single male workers housed in the boarding house were also mostly Italians.
The Plymouth Cordage Company was not alone in its race-based housing policies. Another Welland employer, the Canadian Steel Company, built a separate lodging house for its “foreign” workers and employed an Italian immigrant to run it. In neighbouring
Thorold, the British-owned Pilkington Glass Company, a manufacturer of sheet and plate glass, brought most of its tradesmen from its plant in the United Kingdom and built housing for them in the planned community of Windle Village. It made no such provisions for the ordinary labourers in its employ. The men, principally Italians, Romanians, and Bulgarians, built rough shacks from old lumber and tar paper for themselves. Without adequate services, they found it difficult to maintain sanitary living conditions in their dwellings. The Norton Company, a manufacturer of abrasives in Chippawa, also built housing for its workers, constructing individual cottages for its Anglo-Canadian workers and lodging houses for “foreigners.” During this boom period, Niagara developers assumed that local residents of British origin, whatever their class, probably shared the employers’ views. This is why the developer of a “better class of houses for working men” in Maple Leaf Park, Crowland, advertised the subdivision as “restricted,” assuring prospective buyers that “you will have no foreign element building or living next to you.” Even if “foreigners” had been able to afford homes in better neighbourhoods, restrictive covenants excluded them, thus reinforcing segregation. Consequently, immigrant factory workers who were not accommodated by company housing rented and built homes in “foreign quarters,” often on the outskirts of Niagara towns and villages, in the shadow of large factories. Soot from the factories covered their homes and gardens. Such neighbourhoods also lacked essential services such as sewers, sidewalks, and fire protection.

Employers’ exploitation of ethnic differences became most clearly apparent during strikes, when they recruited strikebreakers. In 1899, a strike by trackmen near Port Robinson for higher wages and shorter hours spread to other rail workers in the area. The Grand Trunk Railway responded by bringing in three coaches fitted up as living accommodations and filled with workers, some of them Italian, to replace the strikers. In this case, the plan failed. As Welland’s People’s Press reported, “Three prominent ladies of the town went out to the cars and made the men so ashamed of
themselves that they left.” The paper added that “the sympathy of the whole village here is with the men who have struck for a living wage, and it is not thought any further attempt will be made to replace them here.”

Four years later, “foreign” labourers, described as Italians and “Huns,” were imported from Buffalo to replace striking workers in the Sherkston quarry, between Port Colborne and Ridgeway. According to the Welland Telegraph, the government refused to enforce the federal Alien Labour Act, which prohibited the importation of contract labour. An angry editorial in the paper demanded: “Is it right that respectable Canadian citizens, the heads of families, should be compelled to compete for work with gangs of aliens whose mode of living is hardly above the Chinese standard?”

Ethnically based inequality was also pronounced among workers on the large public works projects in Niagara: provincial hydro canals and generating stations and the federally funded construction of the fourth Welland Canal, each of which employed thousands of workers in the early twentieth century. The skilled workers among them, such as carpenters, machinists, electricians, masons, and operating engineers, were of British descent; the majority of common labourers were non-Anglo-Celtic. The skilled workers belonged to such well-established craft unions as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, the United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters, and the International Association of Machinists. These unions monitored wages and hours on public works projects and attempted to ensure that they were consistent with those elsewhere in the Niagara Peninsula. When the unions called a strike, they could encourage the participation of tradesmen by threatening them with fines and blacklisting throughout the region if they continued to work. During the years of labour protest between 1918 and 1920, the “foreign” workers, with some exceptions, were unorganized. Consequently, they could be more easily replaced by returning soldiers and native-born workers at the end of the war, when the demand for labour along the canals became less acute.
Canadian Niagara Power Plant workers excavating through rock for the wheel pit, 1902. 
Courtesy of the Niagara Falls (Ontario) Public Library [D41545OC].

The early-twentieth-century immigrant canal workers, not unlike the Irish canalers of the nineteenth century, remained on the margins of Niagara society. They lived in shacks, converted barns, bunkhouses, and sometimes even tents near construction sites or in crowded housing in the “foreign quarters” of local towns and villages such as Crowland, Humberstone, Niagara Falls, Stamford, St. Catharines, Thorold, and Welland. By contrast, many of the skilled canal workers were local men who lived with their own families or boarded with Anglo-Canadian ones in communities along the canals. Those who could not find such accommodations were housed in contractor-built camps that were separate from, and slightly more expensive and comfortable than, those for “foreigners.” Because boarding workers was not particularly profitable, contractors preferred to pass on the task when they could. The gender imbalance among sojourners worked to the contractors’ advantage. Given the
racism prevalent in Niagara, and their own poverty, often the only way that the few immigrant women who accompanied canal workers could find housing was by agreeing to run boarding houses for southern and eastern European immigrants.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1910, the tragic death by fire of twelve foreign-born workers in Falls View village, near Niagara Falls, drew public attention to living conditions in the “foreigners” camps. The men lived in overcrowded tarpaper shacks with earthen floors, a few small windows, and narrow doors that opened inward. One of the shacks had sleeping accommodations for eighteen, but it housed twice that number. The female boarding-house keeper explained that “only 18 sleep at one time as the day shift gets into the same beds the night shift vacates.”\textsuperscript{18} Such overcrowding of working men who lacked proper facilities for washing themselves and their clothes created an atmosphere replete not only with unpleasant odours but also with diseases, some of them contagious. A Roman Catholic priest who visited the shacks before the fire found a man dying of tuberculosis lying a foot away from other boarders, who did their best to tend to him.\textsuperscript{19} A fireman called to the scene of the blaze commented that the shacks were “just made to burn up.” The horrific tragedy temporarily breached the gulf that separated mainstream Niagara society from the “foreigners.” The Niagara Falls Daily Record declared, “Deserted and isolated, neglected by the authorities and the denominations alike and constantly subjected to the fatal risks of fire and disease 150 men of foreign birth are living the lives of outcasts from civilization just beyond the corporate limits of this city.” It blamed not only the Stamford officials who allowed a town meeting sanitary and safety regulations to be ignored but also the Niagara Falls residents who owned the shacks. The paper expressed outrage at the decision of the local coroner not to conduct an inquest following the fire: “We join our voice with those of the twelve dead laborers and ask the coroner a single question. Why?”\textsuperscript{20}

Race-based inequality was pronounced in Niagara’s important agricultural sector as well. Local farmers employed Anglo-Celtic farm help who worked the year round, but most of the seasonal
agricultural and cannery workers they hired were of southern and eastern European origin. Although in Niagara there were few openings for year-round farm help, immigration officials went to great lengths to recruit agricultural workers from Great Britain to fill them. The recruitment of seasonal farm labour was generally left to the farmers. Because such jobs involved backbreaking work for long periods, at times up to sixteen hours a day, for wages that were lower than those for almost any other type of work in the region, farmers could not always find enough workers locally. Before the First World War, some farmers traveled to Buffalo in the harvest season to find immigrant women to work as fruit pickers and in canneries. According to the 1911 census, 80 percent of those employed in the canning industry were female, some of them girls as young as twelve. Accommodation for these workers, if provided, was generally primitive. Gender-based paternalism, moreover, placed serious limits on the freedom of female workers. Some of them were housed in compounds, in bunkhouses built right next to the canning factories, and were not allowed to leave the compounds after eight o’clock in the evening. A 1915 survey on the condition of female agricultural workers, prepared by the Department of Social Service and Evangelism of the Methodist and Presbyterian Church, likened the terms of their employment to slavery.

Labour Revolt in Niagara

Although immigrant sojourners were more likely to put up with working and living conditions that workers with greater options disdained, there were limits to what they were willing to endure. Since their goal was to earn as much money as quickly as possible so that they could return to their homelands with savings, they reacted especially strongly when employers attempted to reduce