# THE WORKERS' CITY
# Lives of Toronto's Working People

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There's a large framed print of a painting hanging at the entrance to the Bloor/Yonge subway station. I suspect few of the thousands of commuters who pass through that space every day ever notice it. It was painted in 1954 by a commercial artist named Edwin McCormick in honour of the men who built Toronto's first subway. This piece of public art commemorating workers is relatively rare in Toronto. There is a monument to construction workers in the Cloud Gardens Park between Richmond and Temperance streets, a memorial to workers who died on the job in Simcoe Park above Front St, a stunning monument to Chinese labourers near the Rogers Centre, and a few more. On the whole, however, this is a city that has not kept alive at the public level much of the memory of the millions of working people who over the years made a living working for wages or kept house for those who did. The record of the people who built the city, made its many products, and provided its services is almost silent. This talk is about the city that workers made and worked and lived in, "The Workers' City."

But where to start? No one has written a full history of working-class Toronto, and, if you went to the public library, you would find only a short shelf of more specialized books on different parts of that history. How could I give you a sense of the scope and diversity of workers' experience in this metropolitan centre without keeping you here all night? I decided to tell you the stories of eight people. They are distinct but, as I hope will become clear, also linked. They will carry us across the historical landscape of Toronto from the 1840s to the turn of the twenty-first century. The people at the centre of these stories were not famous – they lived what we would undoubtedly think of as fairly ordinary lives. But I'm telling you about them because they are representative – they had life experiences that were shared by many others living in this city.

Let's begin with Patrick. Patrick swung the chute into place and released the grain from the hopper above into the milling machines. He watched carefully as the millstones began their grinding action and adjusted the pressure to assure that they were producing a meal of the right consistency. It was 1860, and the machinery Patrick was attending was part of the elaborate new production system that William Gooderham and James Worts

had put into place a few months earlier in their large new distillery on Toronto's eastern waterfront, just west of the mouth of the Don River. Patrick had been working as a miller for these men for several years. He had become familiar with how to run a milling operation powered by steam, first installed at Gooderham and Worts in 1834. This was somewhat different work from what was done in the dozens of mills across Ontario that still used water or wind to turn their mill stones. Gooderham and Worts had been making whiskey since 1837, but, when he arrived from Ireland in the mid 1840s, Patrick had worked in the part of the company's operations that produced flour. By 1850 visitors to that part of the mill had noted that, from the time the grain arrived on site till it was sealed in barrels it was untouched by human hands. Chutes and conveyors connected to pulleys moved the grain up and down the mill without the need for workmen to haul or cart it about. The same would be said about the new distillery that opened in 1859. With their arrangement and mechanization of the labour process, Gooderham and Worts were among the first Toronto employers to bring the Industrial Revolution into the city. With their large new complex of stone buildings, the company's business had been refocused on producing primarily whiskey and other spirits. With 150 workers and annual production of two and a half million gallons of spirits a year, this was Canada's biggest distillery.[1]

Patrick recognized that the new machinery he was tending in 1860 was bigger and faster, was more tightly integrated with the other steps in the distilling process, and required his close attention. He still thought of himself as a skilled worker, since the quality of the spirits produced in the distillery relied in part on the quality of the meal that came out of the milling machines. It was said that he and the other members of the team in the milling department had the "miller's thumb" for judging the output. He had to watch and listen carefully to both the grinding stones and the gears in the room below that turned them, and to adjust the speed of the millstones and their grinding capacity. At least every two weeks, the men in the milling department had to chisel away on the surface of the millstones (that is, to "dress" them, in the miller's vernacular) to make sure the stones were grinding the grain properly. [2]

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[1] *Globe*, 7 February 1862, 1; *Canadian Illustrated News* (hereafter *CIN*), 25 April 1863, 94-9; E.B. Shuttleworth, *The Windmill and Its Times: A Series of Articles Dealing with the Early Days of the Windmill* (Toronto: Edward D. Apted 1924); Dianne Newell, "Gooderham, William," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol.13; Dianne Newell, "Worts, James Gooderham," ibid.

This was not easy work. The hours were long – between ten and twelve hours a day, six days a week. The noise of the engine gears and the grinding stones was awesome, and there were dangers. Patrick had long ago lost a finger working around millstones and his body had many scars of other gouges and scrapes. He was also constantly coughing up flour dust that floated about in the milling department.[3]

Yet he was not one to complain. He was grateful to Gooderham and Worts for providing him relatively steady work year after year, even if there were seasonal layoffs. He felt a deep loyalty to his bosses. They were not distant strangers to him; he had often seen them and their sons working about the mill alongside their hired hands. Indeed he was well aware of being part of a tight-knit industrial suburb on the eastern edge of the city, where the Gooderham and Worts families lived in their comfortably large estates and where Patrick himself was able to rent one of the small cottages owned by his employers when he arrived from Ireland with his wife and young family.[4] On Sunday mornings Patrick led the family into a pew at Little Trinity Church, where they watched the Gooderhams and the Worts clan file into a front pew. As the patriarchs of this bustling community, they had been leaders in funding the new church, opened in 1844, so that their workers could receive the message of evangelical Anglicanism without having to pay the high pew rents demanded at St James Cathedral. Thanks to the philanthropy of another local industrialist, the brewer Enoch Turner, Patrick's young children also had access to some basic schooling at the schoolhouse behind Little Trinity Church. This was a system of industrial paternalism that bound together bosses and workers in a set of mutual obligations. Of course, that also meant that Patrick was never far from the patriarchal gaze of his employers and supervisors. Lingering too long in a tavern with his workmates would probably be noticed, for example.

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[2] *CIN*, 25 April 1863, 94, 96; Leung, *Grist and Flour Mills*, 29, 97-101; Dianne Newell and Ralph Greenhill, *Survivals" Aspects of Industrial Archaeology in Ontario* (Toronto: Boston Mills Press 1989), 85-96; Sally Gibson, "Building Histories: Building 3: Mill," Heritage Snippets, *Distillery District Heritage Website* (http://www.distilleryheritage.com).

[3] In 1863 a man was killed at Gooderhama nd Worts when a boiler exploded. Sally Gibson, "Frightful Explosion," Heritage Snippets, *Distillery District Heritage Website* (http://www.distilleryheritage.com).

[4] Shuttleworth, *Windmill and Its Times*; Sally Gibson, "Distiller Workers: Isaac Doran, Miller (1846-1854)": and Sally Gibson, "Distillery Women: Sarah Bright Worts (1817-1876," Heritage Snippets, *Distillery District Heritage Website* (http://www.distilleryheritage.com).

While Patrick was away all day, his wife Mary worked hard to maintain their small household with no running water or modern appliances and probably with an open fireplace for all cooking and heating. Her labours were never ending. As the couple reached middle age, the demands on Mary's time began to shift away from childcare to looking after Patrick. After years of inhaling flour dust, his respiratory system was deteriorating, and before he was fifty he had to give up his job at the distillery. Doctors were too expensive, and the city hospital was intended only for paupers. Patrick lingered for only a few more years. His poor health actually spared him the rupture that would almost certainly have hit his working life when his employers decided to install metal rollers to grind the grain, although the original grindstones remained in place for many more years.[5] The industry was moving on past its reliance on older artisanal knowledge. By that point too, an early phase in the social life of industrialization was coming to an end, as the Gooderham and Worts family members moved into more exalted status as some of Toronto's leading capitalists, with investments in banks, railways, and much more, symbolized by the new Gooderham mansion at St George and Bloor (now the exclusive York Club).[6] The close paternalistic links with loyal workers like Patrick were dissolving.

Meanwhile, further west in the city, another worker's life was following a different course. In the 1850s Henry had arrived from England as a young lad with his parents. His father, a printer, was determined that his son should follow the long family tradition of apprenticing in the craft. This was a sensible idea and not difficult, since printing and publishing were booming in the bustling commercial, industrial, and political metropolis. So, in his early teens, after only a few years in elementary school, Henry found himself working in a print shop in the heart of the city. It was a so-called job shop that did a variety of work and required the all-round traditional skills of the printer, from setting type by hand in a case to handling the printing presses manually, much as they had since the days of Gutenberg.

In 1870, when he moved to a new job in the newspaper composing room of the Toronto *Globe*, Henry noticed some significant changes that had been underway for a quarter century. With the arrival of the steam-powered printing press, a division of labour had emerged between the men who still

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[5] Leung, *Grist and Flour Mills*, 146-84; Sally Gibson, "Heritage Artefacts: High-Roller Mills," Heritage Snippets, *Distillery District Heritage Website* (http://www.distilleryheritage.com).

[6] Newell, "Gooderham"; Newell, "Worts"; Dean Beeby, "Gooderham, George," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 13.

set type by hand, known as compositors or typographers, and those running the printing machine, now known as pressmen. Moreover, the ethos of the craft was changing. Printers had long insisted that men should learn the trade through apprenticeship, then become journeymen who worked for wages, and finally, one day, become masters with their own businesses. At all three levels, practitioners were expected to respect and protect established craft principles and practices that ran back to the sixteenth century. Yet many owners of printing operations, including the publisher of the *Globe*, George Brown, one of the "Fathers of Confederation," felt no great attachment to the craft and saw their businesses in narrower terms as a capitalist enterprise. Brown was putting out a daily newspaper in an aggressively competitive urban market, not nourishing the so-called "art and mystery" of a trade.

Henry soon discovered that the friction between such bosses and the proud craftsmen who set the type had fuelled the creation of craft unions intended to protect the interest of the journeymen wage-earners. When he finished his five-year apprenticeship, he had been inducted into the Toronto local of the International Typographical Union, No. 91, and pledged to support his fellow craftworkers and what they liked to call the "art preservative." They held banquets, balls, and smokers where they liked to toast Gutenberg and Ben Franklin and other famous printers. They could also put on a good show in a parade with their glorious silk banner. In their individual workshops, they insisted on their collective right to control the labour process – training apprentices, dividing up the work, enforcing a workload, and setting a rate to be paid for composing type of various kinds. Like the independent printers of old, they expected to have autonomy in their work without direct interference from their bosses. Indeed, the foreman in each shop was a member of the printers' union.

Henry felt that belonging to his craft union helped to sustain a strong sense that he was respectable working man. He took pride in the value of his skills to society and, with other printers, insisted that his wages reflect that social status. That meant being able to support a family and to keep his wife, Harriet, out of the labour market and safely at home tending to domestic needs and raising their children. Men like Henry strongly opposed hiring women in print shops whom they saw as both threatening the craftsman's status through low-wage labour and disrupting the domestic equilibrium. These elements of the craft provided the backbone of what printers liked to call their manhood, their masculine identity. Like some other working men in the 1870s, Henry took the temperance pledge against drinking, since he did

not believe that men could survive in a capitalist labour market and support their families if they were drunk.

So it was a major affront to Henry and his fellow printers when in 1872 George Brown and almost all other newspaper publishers in Toronto rejected their request for a reduction of the working day from ten hours to nine. Henry had attended a large meeting of workingmen at St Lawrence Hall where many speakers had sung the praises of release from toil so that men could better enjoy the company of their families, as well as a fuller cultural and political life. All across southern Ontario and as far as Montreal, meetings like those had brought about the creation of Nine Hours Leagues to agitate for the shorter working day. In a meeting of the Toronto printers, Henry had voted with his workmates to strike against the owners who refused their demand. George Brown promptly had their leaders arrested for criminal conspiracy in restraint of trade under the common law. In effect, they were being told that belonging to a union was fine as long as you didn't actually use it to accomplish anything like shortening hours. The entire Toronto craft-union movement rallied to the printers' support, and some 10,000 people showed up at Queen's Park to protest (in a city of about 30,000). George Brown's arch enemy, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, intervened quickly to pass a new Trade Unions Act that took the criminal taint away from unionism. But in the meantime the strike had been broken.

Henry stuck with his job at the *Globe* and with his union. Most other printers did as well, and all the newspaper print shops remained unionized. Among Toronto's wage-earners, Henry and his workmates were well-paid men. In his case he had been able to keep his children in school long enough to get a good grounding in the 3Rs. But the family household was far from affluent. They never owned their own house, and Harriet still had to put in hours of hard physical labour to cook and clean and care for the children, as well as the occasional boarder. By the turn of the century she was at least able to have indoor running water.

In the 1880s Henry joined a new labour organization with branches across North America and overseas – the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. Toronto had some fifty locals and at least 5,000 members by 1887. The Knights were Henry's kind of people – serious, sober-minded, respectable, but determined to defend and promote the dignity of labour in a industrializing society that seemed to be demeaning it. They held educational meetings, agitated for better working conditions (including the eight-hour day), ran a few workingmen's candidates for office, and launched

a new annual workers' festival that would become known as Labour Day after the federal government made it legal in 1894.

By that date, Henry was sad to see, the Knights were fading away, but he had something more urgent to worry about. A new piece of technology was threatening to take away his job – the linotype machine. The *Globe* got its first one in 1891. This mechanical monster replaced the manual dexterity of compositors like Henry, and required that an operator simply sit at a keyboard and type the text that was to be set. The machine selected the letters and put them in order much faster than human hands could do. Henry's union did not waste time trying to oppose the new technology, but instead insisted that union men should run them and be well paid to do so. They pointed out that that there was considerable skill involved in producing reliable typed copy free of spelling errors and other problems. It took some hard bargaining, but their employers eventually agreed.

With this victory behind them, the International Typographical Union turned its sights on getting the shorter working day. They got a nine-hour day in the later 1890s, and in 1902 launched an International Eight-Hour Committee to coordinate negotiations across North America. In city after city, employers eventually conceded the new hours of labour, sometimes only after workers walked out on strike. The road was slow but smoother in Toronto, where in 1907 Henry and his workmates finally won an eight-hour day (six days a week, for a forty-eight-hour week). Most other workers would have to wait until after the Second World War to get such a change in their working conditions.

Now nearly sixty, Henry decided to retire. He could look back over a working life that saw men in his trade band together to ensure that the great changes of the Industrial Revolution did not leave them behind and to guarantee that their income, their status, and their pride did not suffer. Printers had been much more successful in these struggles than most craftworkers in industry, but they had extended their skills as unionists to play a major leadership role within the Toronto labour movement more generally. In 1914, for example, Henry was pleased to note that the first socialist elected to Toronto's Board of Control was a printer, Jimmy Simpson, a man destined to be mayor of Toronto twenty years later.

At that point, a little girl named Rosa was spending her free time playing along the lanes and sidewalks of her downtown neighbourhood. She had been born shortly after her parents arrived from Poland in 1910 and settled

in the newly emerging community of Jewish immigrants in the vicinity of Spadina Avenue. Her father was a tailor who got a job in a large Toronto factory owned by the Eaton family, where he had joined in a big strike in 1912. Rosa's childhood was full of responsibility to help her mother with housework and look after her younger brothers and sisters. Once she was in school, she was acutely aware that she lived in a distinct community apart from the mainstream Toronto. Around her everyone in her neighbourhood spoke Yiddish, most attended their own small synagogues, and many were animated by socialist beliefs and were deeply resentful at the anti-Semitism they faced in the city. Rosa often heard her parents and their friends loudly debating politics and the need for working people to make a new world for themselves.

In Europe as well as in Canada, it was not unusual for Jewish women to go out to work for wages, and when she was sixteen her father took Rosa by the hand and introduced her to a foreman in a garment factory. She started work immediately as a sewing-machine operator, stitching together cheap dresses. The shop was full of young women, all of whom, like Rosa, had learned to sew at home. Even though they needed considerable skill to handle their sewing machines, they were all paid less than half what the men got, partly because the labour market was glutted with young women with these skills, and, even more importantly, because anything defined as women's work in the world of paid labour was seen as worth much less. She never imagined that she could get access to the good jobs of cutting or pressing the garments – that was always defined as men's work. Like other men in the industry, her father told her not to complain because she would be leaving the work force to get married (indeed, employers regularly fired women wearing a wedding ring).

These young women had to work fast. Clothing was a seasonal industry and highly competitive. So they were expected to work sometimes for fourteen hours a day and sixty hours a week during the rush periods, and then to wait out lengthy layoffs when the annual production cycle slumped. Their bosses encouraged speed up by paying them by the piece, and foremen badgered them to work harder and faster. Many of the women felt intense nervous exhaustion, as a special federal government investigation discovered in 1934, and Rosa regularly saw a few of her friends in tears.

Despite these pressures, Rosa enjoyed the sisterhood of the shop she worked in. Her workmates became friends on and off the job.  They went to movies and dances together. Yet. she noticed that, although there was a

union, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the male workers who ran the union largely ignored working girls like her, unless they needed them to support the men's strikes. During the 1920s Rosa nonetheless learned a lot about workers' rights, attending lectures and plays in the new Labour Lyceum on Spadina Avenue and listening to Communist, socialist, and anarchist speakers on their soapboxes on street corners. She was impressed with the new Communist-led union known as the Industrial Union of the Needle Trades, founded in 1928, and eagerly joined many other young female clothing workers in big strikes that shut down the garment factories on Spadina several times in the early 1930s. She served on the shop committee that represented the workers in the factory where she worked. They got some wage increases in all the factories, especially after new provincial legislation in 1934 encouraged all employers in the industry to pay the same rates, rather than competing with each other, but the harsh pressures of the piecework system did not disappear. In 1936 Rosa joined the others in this Industrial Union in ending the factionalism between unions and merging into the mainstream International Ladies Garment Workers' Union.

A few months later, Rosa quit her job and married a young tailor who shared her radical politics. She had her hands full with a growing family in a crowded household with no electrical refrigerator, washing machine, or vacuum cleaner. Like thousands of working-class housewives in Toronto she told the census-takers in 1941 that she didn't have these household amenities. But Rosa had not abandoned her public interests. To help make ends meet, she returned to the clothing factories to work for wages from time to time as her children got older, though she still had responsibility for all the household labour. Sometimes, she bundled up her youngsters and took them with her to picket lines when women workers were on strike. She was also active in a group of radical housewives known as the Jewish Women Workers' Association, and each year she joined these women in May Day demonstrations.

As she entered middle age in the 1950s, however, Rosa and her husband became disillusioned with the Communist leadership they had respected for so many years. He eventually got a job selling real estate and they eventually moved their family north to the new suburbs in the Bathurst and Lawrence area, where many other Jewish families were resettling. The old Jewish community in the garment district on Spadina quickly dissolved, and other groups moved in to take up the jobs and the households left behind by Rosa and so many others.

Donald was not one of those people. His family was third-generation Anglo-Canadian, and had never worked in factories. He was born above a dry-goods shop that his parents ran, and as he grew up, he was expected to help out in the store. His parents encouraged him to stay in school, and he completed Grade Twelve in the midst of the Second World War. He had taken commercial courses so that he could find office work after he graduated, and his first job was as a clerk in a small import-export firm. But his father was an active member of the Conservative Party in the local constituency, and, after the Tories were re-elected at Queen's Park in 1945, he leaned on his MPP to get Donald a job in the provincial civil service. Despite years of promises of reform, the provincial civil service was still highly susceptible to patronage appointments.[7] The politician used his influence, and Donald found himself sitting behind a desk in the Liquor Licensing Board of Ontario office on University Avenue.

At school and in his first private-sector job, Donald had learned that he would have access to better jobs in offices than the girls around him. They got stuck as typists, stenographers, machine-operators, or receptionists, while he could expect to do more responsible work, with clerical help from the women.[8] In practice, his desk work was routine and bureaucratic, and required him to use a typewriter, telephone, and other office equipment. He reviewed forms, wrote letters, prepared short reports, and generally helped to keep track of licensed liquor establishments across the province and to maintain detailed files on their operations.[9] For this he was paid considerably more than the women in the office, and, in the 1940s, a good deal more than most blue-collar workers.

Donald never married, and in fact preferred the company of his male friends in and outside the office. Beside the private activities that he and his workplace colleagues enjoyed, often in quiet drinking rooms in downtown hotels, they were part of the LCBO/LLBO Employees Association, which was largely a social club that held golf tournaments and other social activities. These organizations had been around since 1911, when the Civil Servants'

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[7] J.E. Hodgetts, *From Arm's Length to Hands On: The Formative Years of Ontario's Public Service, 1867-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995).

[8] Graeme S. Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1987).

[9] Dan Malleck, *Try to Control Yourself: The Regulation of Public Drinking in Post-Prohibition Ontario, 1927-44* (Vancouver: UBC Press2012); Scott Thompson and Gary Genosko, *Punched Drunk: Alcohol, Surveillance, and the LCBO* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Press 2009)

Association of Ontario was formed, and they had never been much like unions. As industrial unions got stronger in the 1940s, white-collar workers like Donald kept their distance. They prized the clubby atmosphere of government offices and the paternalism of senior managers. Donald had noticed that he was something of an exception, since the government had filled the board offices with ex-servicemen, who viewed their jobs much like being in the armed forces. Their managers ran their departments in a similarly rigid, militaristic spirit. Most staff in government offices didn't want to mix organizationally with men who worked with their hands. To reinforce their discomfort, the provincial government forbade them from joining unions.

Sometimes, however, as they were clinking glasses in one of their evening gatherings, Donald would ask his workmates whether they liked the way they were being treated by the government. He reminded his colleagues about what he'd been reading in the newspapers in the late 1940s and early 1950s about how the new blue-collar unions, like the autoworkers, were nailing down substantial new wage and benefit increases. Within a few years, he was not alone. Many civil-servants were beginning to recognize that their historically superior status in the labour market was under threat. In 1953 the LCBO/LLBO Employees Association finally, though hesitantly, created an employee representation committee to deal with workplace issues. But Donald was among those board employees who felt that the association was simply a company union, with free office space at the board headquarters and cozy relations with board managers. He tried to convince his fellow workers to join the larger and more aggressive Civil Service Association of Ontario, but to no avail.[10]

Through the 1960s, however, Donald noticed he had more supporters. Public servants at all levels of government were getting more interested in unions. They were deeply troubled by what they believed were inadequate salaries, especially in comparison with blue-collar unionists, and they resented being denied the democratic rights to negotiate that other workers enjoyed. Eventually, after years of agitation, new provincial legislation passed in 1970 provided for full-scale collective bargaining for the public sector, though without the right to strike. All across the public sector workers turned their associations into real unions, affiliated with the mainstream

[10] Beverly Dalys, *No Longer a "Two-Bit" Union: The History of the Ontario Liquor Boards Employees' Union* (n.p. n.d.).

labour movement, and even, where they could, walked out on strike. Many of us will remember the teachers' strikes of the mid 1970s.[11]

The LCBO/LLBO Employees' Association quickly took on all the trappings of a union, and Donald got heavily involved in preparation for their negotiations. Then, to his disgust, in 1975 their arbitrated settlement had to go before a new federal government agency, the Anti-Inflation Board, which promptly rolled back the employees' wage increases. Donald's union was furious, and set up informational pickets outside LCBO stores, which was all they could do since could not yet legally strike. Not surprisingly, the association changed its name to the Ontario Liquor Boards Employees' Union in 1978. Late the next summer, as Donald helped to build the float for his union's first ever entry into Toronto's annual Labour Day parade, he had trouble getting a militant young LCBO worker to understand just how far civil servants had come from the days of standing aloof from the rest of the labour movement. They won second prize for their float that year.[12]

It would be hard to imagine more different work experiences than those of Donald and Tony. Tony had been born in a large peasant family in a village in Abruzzi in central Italy, and had grown up helping out on the small family farm. But the Second World War left behind a devastated agricultural sector, and, like thousands of others, Tony decided to leave home and migrate to Canada to look for well-paid work. He hoped to make money to help his family and to get a nest-egg for his own marriage. He sailed to Halifax, took a train to Toronto's Union Station, and, knowing no English, jumped into a taxi that took him to a cousin's home. The next morning the farmer who had sponsored Tony to work in Canada showed up and drove him out to a farm well outside the city, where he would work under contract for the next two years. To better understand the new culture he had landed in, Tony took some English classes, but he still felt like an outsider. Within a few years he would head home to Italy to find a wife whom he could understand better than the Canadian women he encountered around Toronto.[13]

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[11] Wayne Roberts, *Don't Call Me Servant: Government Work and Unions in Ontario, 1911-1984* (North York, ON: Ontario Public Service Employees' Union 1994).

[12] Dalys, *No Longer a "Two-Bit" Union*.

[13] Frank Colantonio, *From the Ground Up: An Italian Immigrant's Story* (Toronto: Between the Lines 1997); Marion Toppan, *The Voice of Labour: A Life in Toronto's Construction Industry* (Toronto: Mariano A. Elia Chair in Italian Canadian Studies, York University, and Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies, University of Toronto 2003).

When his contract on the farm was finished, he moved back into the city, and, through another relative, heard that a building contractor was hiring new immigrants, “greenhorns,” they called them, to build new houses out in the rapidly expanding suburbs. Many Italian men and other newcomers were being hired to do simple carpentry. Each worker did a narrowly specialized job in the process of throwing up partly pre-fabricated structures as quickly as possible. It was almost assembly-line labour, and did not produce well-rounded craftworkers. Not surprisingly, these were jobs that the established building-trades workers tried to avoid. Wherever possible those men stuck to constructing offices and factories rather than homes and apartments – work that was organized through their unions’ well-established hiring halls and was better paid.[14]

Tony discovered quickly that safety standards were almost non-existent on the residential building sites and many men got hurt, that hours could be extremely long, but work was sporadic and insecure, that his pay was pitifully low, and that the small-scale contractors he worked for were unreliable, even though many of them were recent immigrants themselves. In fact, within a few months, he found that his pay cheque, along with those of all his fellow workers, had bounced and the contractor had vanished. The industry had many examples of these unscrupulous, fly-by-night builders, who were also escaping the more powerful developers who had contracted with them to get the homes built. Many others ignored legislation that limited hours of hours or required them to provide vacation pay. It was a cutthroat jungle of an industry, where sub-contractors tried to undercut other bidders and then squeezed their immigrant workers to make the contract pay. This system worked because there was a swelling labour pool of men like Tony flooding into the city from Italy and elsewhere and ready to work for whatever pay they could get. By 1961 Italians made up a third of Toronto’s construction workers, and two-thirds of the residential construction work force.

Tony and his paesani grumbled about the way they were treated, but no one dared to complain out loud for fear of getting fired, or even deported. But something snapped in March 1960 when the word spread among them that five Italian labourers working in an underground tunnel in Hogg’s Hollow had died in a disastrous accident where safety measures had been ignored. Public attention was suddenly focused on the plight of such workers. A young

[14] Colantonio, *From the Ground Up*; Toppan, *Voice of Labour*; Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1992).

journalist, Frank Drea, wrote articles in the *Toronto Telegram* that broadened the story to all immigrant construction workers. At that very moment, a determined group of those workers in the residential sector were starting up their own unions to demand better wages and working conditions. The established building trades unions held back, partly because they didn't believe these residential builders were really skilled men worthy of being in their craft unions, but also because many of them couldn't hide their contempt for the new immigrants as people. Tony had started attending the meetings of the new carpenters' union, which, like the other new unions of bricklayers, plasterers, cement masons, and labourers, met in an Italian hall on Brandon Avenue, which runs west off Dufferin south of Davenport. Before long this feisty new group of unionists had become known as the Brandon Group.[15]

In July 1960 some 6,000 thousand immigrant workers in residential construction responded to the call to go on strike. This was an illegal action since they had not followed the legal procedures required by the Ontario Labour Relations Act, but that didn't hold back the excitement and enthusiasm of workers who finally felt that could stand up to exploitative employers. This became a formative moment in the Italian community in particular, as these newcomers forcefully announced that they wanted to be a properly respected part of Canadian society. Decrying their status as second-class citizens, their battle cry was "Canadian wages, Canadian hours." Every day Tony was in the huge crowd that showed up for meetings at the Lansdowne Theatre at Lansdowne and Bloor. He also joined one of the many flying squads of picketers who drove out to the suburbs to try to shut down housing construction sites. Confrontations out there with contractors and workers who wanted to continue working sometimes got violent, and the police were soon involved. After three weeks the strikers got hundreds of contractors in each of the four branches of the industry to sign agreements providing a forty-hour week and wage increases. Yet a majority of the contractors had not accepted these terms, and within a few months even some of those who had signed were pulling away again. By the end of May 1961 a second strike seemed necessary, now with support from the more established building trades unions. This one was bigger and longer than the first, dragging on for seven weeks, and became much more bitter. Again the flying squads of picketers fanned out across the city. Violence escalated, and one of Tony's best friends was among the dozens of strikers who ended up in

[15] Colantonio, *From the Ground Up*; Toppan, *Voice of Labour*; Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People.*

jail. The strike soon spread beyond housing to the commercial sector of the construction industry. At one point a rally of 17,000 workers filled the CNE stadium – the biggest labour gathering in the city in living memory. Meanwhile, like other strikers' wives, Tony's wife was struggling to keep the household afloat without her breadwinner's wages coming in, and finally, despite Tony's objections, had to find a part-time job. Eventually Ontario Premier Leslie Frost intervened. When the fifty-one-day strike ended in mid July, the workers had little to show for their determination besides Frost's promise of a royal commission to investigate the residential construction industry. The recommendations of that commission did eventually bring some legislative changes that eradicated some of the worst exploitative practices in house-building. The strikes had made a difference.[16]

In the café on College Street where he liked to hang out with his friends, Tony repeatedly argued that the strikes had been worth it, that they brought a new confidence to Italian-Canadian workers about their rights as Canadians. He stayed committed to his union and continued to build houses and bring home a good pay packet to his growing family every week for years to come. In his late forties, however, a serious back injury left him unable to continue as a carpenter and brought him into ongoing battles with the tight-fisted Workmen's Compensation Board. Like a considerable number of other Italian-Canadian workers in similar situations, he turned his activist energy toward the new Union of Injured Workers to get better treatment from the board.[17] Tony settled into old age a proud but somewhat embittered man.

It is possible that, in his need for health care, Tony had met Gloria. She was a nurse at Toronto General Hospital around the time he had his back injury. Gloria had grown up in the 1950s in a working-class, African-Canadian family in Toronto with roots stretching back to the Underground Railway of the mid nineteenth century. Her father worked as a janitor, and her mother as a part-time domestic. So Gloria had early on learned how to shoulder big responsibilities for helping to keep her family fed and cared for. Gloria's childhood was full of reminders that being black in Toronto was not easy – the taunts and insults, the patronizing teachers, the informal exclusions from

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[16] Colantonio, *From the Ground Up*; Toppan, *Voice of Labour*; Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People.*

[17] Robert Storey, "They Have All Been Faithful Workers: Injured Workers, Truth, and the Workers' Compensation System in Ontario, 1970-2008," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 43, no. 1 (2009), 154-85; Robert Storey, "Their Only Power Was Moral': The Injured Workers' Movement in Toronto, 1970-1985," *Histoire Sociale / Social History,* (2008)

restaurants and other public spaces. Her family found some comfort in a predominantly black evangelical church. Gloria did well in school academically and athletically, and, as she approached graduation from high school, she decided that she wanted to be a nurse. This was a courageous plan, since nursing was a thoroughly white profession, and Canadian nursing schools had a long history of barring African-Canadians from their programs. Fortunately for Gloria, by the 1960s Ontario faced a growing shortage of nurses as the rapidly expanding publically funded hospital insurance brought many more people into hospitals. A few black nurses trained in the Caribbean had even been allowed to enter the Canadian nursing market. Gloria applied for and was admitted to the three-year training program at the Toronto General Hospital. Racist attitudes died slowly, however, and she was shocked to find the women of her graduating class in 1967 blackening their faces and putting on an old-fashioned, racist minstrel show.[18]

Nursing training was demanding – long twelve-hour shifts on the wards balanced with intense classroom time, repetitive routines of personal care and cleaning watched over by rigid, authoritarian management. Nurses of any colour were learning an identity as female professionals, symbolized by the crisp white uniforms, especially the small white cap. They also learned stern lessons about their subordination to doctors, who were almost all men and to whom they were expected to show complete subservience. The motto of Canada's first nursing school back in 1874 had been "I see and am silent," and the same expectation survived. Gloria realized that as a black nurse she had to meet all these expectations to the letter or risk failing in the program. She had to be perfect. She also had to learn to cope with racist comments from patients. [19]

When she graduated and became a Registered Nurse qualified to practice in Ontario, Gloria had taken a huge step forward from the limited work experiences available to African-Canadian women of her mother's generation. She had a secure job that paid reasonably well (though still less than a city garbage collector). She married soon after graduation, but continued to work in nursing, taking only short spells off when each of her two children was born. Her husband, a computer technician, nonetheless left most of the domestic labour to her. Her mother-in-law or babysitters helped with child care.

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[18] Karen Flynn, *Moving Beyond Borders: A History of Black Canadian and Caribbean Women in the Diaspora* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2011).

[19] Flynn, *Moving Beyond Borders*.

Gloria found great satisfaction in working with her sister nurses, and soon recognized how important they were to the running of the ever-expanding hospitals. One day in the early 1970s, as she left work, she noticed a large demonstration of women up the street on the steps of Queen's Park. She stood on the edge of the crowd listening to a series of feminist speeches, and headed home thinking a lot harder about the rights of women workers. She and her workmates were talking a lot more about their limited role in the hospital's health-care system in spite of their skills and about their lack of authority to make decisions despite the considerable teamwork expected of hospital workers. And they felt underpaid.

The problem was that starting in the 1970s hospitals as workplaces were changing dramatically, as they struggled to cope with financial restraints. Gloria had to get used to a much more bureaucratic structure of work, with many more specialized jobs and groups of less skilled support workers such as nursing' aides. She felt the increasing pressure of administrative control and surveillance of her daily tasks, and increased patient loads as the hospital tried to run with relatively fewer nurses. She also regularly had to learn to integrate new technology into her work routines, often at the expense of time spent with direct patient care. Shiftwork was exhausting, and work was getting more intense and nerve-wracking. Some nurses quit or dropped to part-time status. [20]

Like lots of other Toronto nurses, Gloria turned to her union. While she had been in training in the mid 1960s, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario had begun to take its first steps toward collective bargaining by supporting local nurses' organizations in negotiations. Gloria was staggered to read in the newspaper in 1969 that the first nurses' strikes had taken place in a few Ontario communities. Four years later, in October 1973, she attended the founding convention of a new separate organization to act as a province-wide union that could engage in collective bargaining. They called it the Ontario Nurses Association, and starting planning for province-wide negotiations. Early in 1974 the ONA took its first provincial strike vote as negotiations with the province stalled (even though strikes were illegal). Gloria joined a demonstration outside her hospital carrying a sign "Honk if You Support Nurses." There was so much honking that the hospital administration complained. Gloria and her friends were delighted with the

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[20] Pat Armstrong, "Women's Health Care Work: Nursing in Context," in Pat Armstrong, ed., *Vital Signs: Nursing in Transition* (Toronto: Garamond 1993), 18-59.

settlement reached that summer, which covered 10,000 nurses and provided for substantial salary increases. They felt a new sense of power to shape the terms of their employment. The new union would take up many issues in coming years, including pay equity for nurses.[21]

Over the next twenty years, Gloria occasionally spent her lunch hour joining nurses' protests on the steps of the provincial legislature, notably one on a cold January day in 1989 that focused on the shortage of nurses in Ontario and their deplorable working conditions. She had more fun every March when the ONA lined up in the annual International Women's Day march. Yet, Gloria had also become more sensitive to issues that affected visible minorities in nursing – being relegated to the least popular jobs, more closely monitored, harassed, and disciplined, ignored for promotions, and laid off more often as hospital restructuring proceeded. In the early 1990s she attended meetings of the Coalition for Black Nurses, and the Nurses and Friends Against Discrimination, which pressured the ONA, the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and the provincial government to take these charges of discrimination seriously.[22]

Gloria had retired by 1995, when a new Conservative government was elected under Mike Harris, but she was back in the streets a year and a half later to join the quarter of a million people who participated in the Toronto Days of Action against that government's severe cutbacks. No one was surprised to see her there. Her sense of herself as a worker had been shaped by being a black woman and being a skilled practitioner of health care service. As she found her workplace rapidly changing in large part as a result of new government policies, she had been galvanized into a more committed activist.

And then we have Christina. Her story is shorter. She grew up in a Portuguese-Canadian family in Etobicoke, and she eventually attended the University of Toronto at Mississauga, graduating with a degree in Psychology in the early 1990s. Her parents who had never attended university were intensely proud of her. But it was soon clear that her job prospects were dim. Like so many of her generation, she sent off dozens of letters of application, but never got beyond an interview. She had been working part-time in retail since she was sixteen, first at McDonalds, then at Shoppers' Drug Mart, and

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[21] ONA website; Armstrong, "Women's Health Care Work"; Elaine Day, "The Unionization of Nurses," in Armstrong, ed., *Vital Signs*, 90-113.

[22] Agnes Calliste, "Antiracism Organizing and Resistance in Nursing: African Canadian Women," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 22, no.3 (August 1996), 361- .

now, after graduation, she extended her hours at a Suzy Shier clothing store in the Sheridan Mall. Her working hours fluctuated erratically from week to week, and she got little more than minimum wage. Her sales were monitored electronically by computer. She had to get used to strict discipline on the job, including tight restrictions on talking among her fellow “associates,” as these corporate retailers liked to call their employees. She had learned that it was easy to get fired suddenly for stepping out of line or having hours cut back drastically for so-called “bad attitude.” Quietly, on their coffee breaks, the women she worked with complained about the indignities they faced. Then one day, one of her fellow workers took her aside and explained that she had been talking to a union and was trying to convince the workers in six Suzy Shier stores to sign membership cards. Christina hesitated, but eventually, with encouragement from her father, who was a unionized construction worker, she took the plunge. In 1996 the Ontario Labour Relations Board scheduled a vote to determine whether the union had enough support to be certified as the bargaining agent for these workers. The company sent female managers from Montreal to meet the workers individually and to promise better working conditions. Only three of the stores were ready for the vote, and in two of those, the women voted not to join, probably both fearful of being fired and hopeful that management’s promises would be made good. To Christina’s great delight, the workers in her store voted to accept the union – the first time in Canada that a women’s clothing store had voted to unionize.  Shortly after, the union signed a first collective agreement. Unfortunately, in a pattern that was familiar across the retail sector, the store was closed two years later. Christina was once again adrift in the uncertain, precarious labour market where so many young people of her generation were trying to survive and where unions were hard to organize and maintain.

Finally, I want to take you into a retirement home to meet a ninety-two-year old woman, Helen. Her body is starting to fail her, but she has sharp memories to share. If you ask her for her occupation, she will probably say homemaker. As long as she can recall, her life has revolved around family households, first the one she grew up in during the Great Depression and then the one she made with her late husband George. Helen never imagined being anything more than a wife and mother. Her parents certainly encouraged her to think of marriage as her main goal in life. She did find a job as a waitress for a couple of years after high school, but she met George when she was 20 and married him a year later. She was pregnant at the

wedding, and so mothering started early. She would eventually have four boys.

George was a truck driver, and, when he wasn't laid off, brought home a modest pay cheque. The couple started out renting a small house in the east end, but in the early 1950s decided to take a bold leap and bought a small piece of land far out in Scarborough, where George immediately started putting up a tiny house with help from his brothers. Like many other like-minded working people, they became pioneers in the new suburbs, before the arrival of huge subdivisions.[23] Helen still says that this gave them more financial security. What she is reluctant to admit, however, is that juggling the finances rested on her shoulders. She had to stretch the dollars that came in as far as possible. Making ends meet meant frugal shopping for food and careful preparation of simple meals. She watched for bargains on children's clothing, often turning to the new discount department stores – Towers, K-Mart, Zellers, or Savette. She took pride in sending the boys to school looking neat and clean, if not expensively dressed. Money was the source of many fights with George, who still believed he could get drunk with his friends after work on Friday nights, using up precious money that Helen had earmarked for family needs. Occasionally, once the boys were all in school, Helen would do some part-time waitressing at a local banquet hall to bring in a little extra cash. That helped to meet the payments on the new television set they bought, to cover unexpected dental bills, or maybe to buy a new coat for herself.[24]

Keeping house for this family was a demanding task. For many years, the house was unfinished, and maintaining cleanliness and order was a challenge. So was watching that the youngsters were safe amidst the construction. Like her mother, she started out married life with only an ice-box and therefore had to shop for food more or less every day. But moving out to Scarborough cut them off from ice deliveries, and before long they had to buy an electric refrigerator and got into a weekly pattern of shopping at the nearest supermarket. She was happy when she also managed to convince George that they needed an electric wringer washing machine, so that she didn't have to boil and scrub the laundry by hand as she had had to do in her parents' household. They found one second hand. Aside from an

[23] Richard Harris, *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2004); Veronica Strong=Boag, "'Their Side of the Story': Women's Voices from Ontario Suburbs, 1945-60," in Joy Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995), 46-74.

[24] Joan Sangster, "Doing Two Jobs: The Wage-Earning Mother, 1945-70," in ibid., 98-134.

electric stove, those were the only appliances Helen used for many years – no clothes dryer, no dishwasher, not even a vacuum cleaner at first. Brooms, mops, scrub brushes, and pails of soapy water were her basic defence against the suburban mud that was tracked through her house on young feet.[25]

When the boys had moved out, and one by one got married, Helen extended her domestic work to helping out in their new households, and often babysat for her grandchildren. She also found time for the Ladies' Aid at her church. They could never afford much of a vacation, but a few times they rented a cabin near Lake Simcoe, where she still had to do the cooking and cleaning. After George's retirement, Helen had to keep the household going on their small government pensions and some meagre savings. As a widow, she stubbornly stayed on in their Scarborough bungalow until she could no longer manage on her own. Now she is happy to flip through her photo albums with visitors to tell stories about all the good times she and her family had.  She doesn't dwell on how she hard she worked to hold that family together economically and emotionally for all those years. We might be struck by how difficult her life had been –the relentless work, day in and day out, the anxiety and worry, the self-sacrifice involved. Through her eyes, however, it was all unquestionably a labour of love.

So those are my eight workers – Patrick the miller, Henry the printer, Rosa the seamstress, Donald the civil servant, Tony the carpenter, Grace the nurse, Christina the retail worker, and Helen the housewife. Their lives touch on some of the key themes in the history of the workers' city. I would like to be able to take you by the hand and carry you back in time to meet each of them. I'd like to be able to show you Power Point pictures of where they lived. But I can't. These are composite figures that I put together from what we know about the working lives of such people. I walked them through the real experiences that workers faced and the real events that actually happened in Toronto.

Together their stories can tell us a lot about the city that Toronto workers inhabited and shaped to their own needs. We can see the constantly changing relationships that wage-earners had with their bosses, whose management policies ran from paternalistic to authoritarian. Strangely enough, we can see parallels between the approaches of William Gooderham in the 1850s and corporate retailers 150 years later, between George

[25] Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labor of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Press 1980).

Brown’s toughness in the 1870s and the rigidities of civil-service managers in the 1950s or hospital administrators in the 1980s. We can also see some strong continuities in the willingness of workers to stand up to their employers when they believed they were facing injustice in the workplace. We can see some wide variation in the kinds of organizations they turned to help them take a stand, from the narrowly focused craft unionism of the printers to the more inclusive industrial unionism of the garment workers to the wide-ranging public-sector unionism since the 1960s. Yet we can also see how the celebrated rich diversity of our city’s ethnic and racial mix often created barriers that made those solidarities painfully difficult, whether you were a Jewish garment worker, an Italian carpenter, or an African-Canadian nurse. And we can certainly see that the world of paid labour was not an even playing field for women, whose labour was degraded and poorly paid and who were expected to be more appropriately confined to the domestic work of the home. Yet, as Helen’s story reminds us, the labor of women in the home was crucial to the survival and prosperity of working people in the city. As Gloria and a majority of married women had discovered by the 1970s, however, that work had to be combined with a more-or-less full-time job. A double day of work for these women was the price of maintaining a decent standard of living. Overall, across the past century and a half, the labour of women and children in the working-class household proved to be crucial in sustaining their families and in making it possible for the breadwinners to head out each morning to build and manufacture and serve.

There is a great deal more work to be done on the history of working people in Toronto. I hope that maybe I’ve stimulated some interest and some questions to be pursued. Sixty years ago, the image that hangs in the Bloor/Yonge subway station also appeared in a booklet published by the TTC. The caption attached to it read: "Men with widely differing racial and national backgrounds combined in the army of workers who laboured to build ‘Canada's First Subway.’ This portrait of a typical subway worker represents true democracy in action and is symbolic of the Canada of tomorrow." I hope you will agree that reviving the history of working-class Toronto is indeed a project in “true democracy,” and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some of it with you.