

**Catechising Culture:
Assumption College, the Pius XI Labour School,
and the United Automobile Workers,
Windsor, 1940-1950**

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During the post-Depression years in Canada, a number of Church groups sought to develop new structures with a view to increasing the impact of religion on society. In this broad effort of accommodation, Church colleges such as Assumption College¹ in Windsor, Ontario, and St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, played a crucial role. The location of Assumption College in Windsor, a city rapidly emerging as the automobile manufacturing capital of Canada, brought it face to face with one of the most pressing questions of the day, concern over the rights of labour. Industrial unionism gained a foothold in Windsor in 1936 with the foundation of Local 195 of the United Automobile Workers. This was the U.A.W.'s first Canadian charter, and within a decade it had almost 20,000 members in Windsor. This amounted to nearly one-fifth of the city's population. At the same time, nearly forty per cent of Windsor's residents were Roman Catholics. These combined circumstances made Windsor an obvious scene for new social initiatives on the part of the Church. Yet the question of industrial relations was complicated for Catholic leaders by the fact that in its formative stage Local 195 (and later Locals 200 and 240) were heavily influenced by the Communist Party of Canada.² One of the

¹ Assumption College was founded in 1857 and incorporated the following year. It became an affiliated college of the University of Western Ontario in 1919 and a University in its own right in 1953. In 1963 it became a federated university in the new University of Windsor. The College has been conducted by the priests of the Congregation of St. Basil.

² John Manley, "Organize the Unorganized: Communists and the Struggle for Industrial Unionism in the Canadian Automobile Industry, 1922-1936," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Dalhousie University, Halifax, June 1981, p. 3. For a presentation on labour, politics, and communism in Canada in this period see Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of

methods of community outreach adopted by Assumption College was the Christian Culture Series, inaugurated in 1934 by Father J. Stanley Murphy, C.S.B. This lecture and performance series was created to provide the campus and the communities of Windsor and Detroit with exposure to exceptional Christian thinkers and social activists. In 1941 Murphy began the practice of highlighting the Series each year by bestowing the Christian Culture Award, a medal granted to an outstanding exponent of Christian social ideals. The first three recipients were the Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, and the Scots-born miner and union activist Philip Murray.

In the nine years following the commencement of the Christian Culture Lecture League, speakers and artists lectured and performed before capacity audiences in the largest public halls in Windsor and Detroit. By 1943 the Series had hosted more than 150 notables.³ The first Series speaker in 1934 was Fulton Sheen. He was followed by men and women from a variety of disciplines, including E. J. Pratt, Peter Maurin, Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Christopher Hollis, Mortimer Adler, John A. Ryan, Frances Parkinson Keyes, Heinrich Bruening, Wyndham Lewis, Morley Callaghan, and Philip Murray, who was by this time President of the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Moreover, Father Murphy established contact as early as 1937 with Norman McKenna and Richard L. G. Deverall, editors of *The Christian Front*, the monthly organ of an American movement begun by Catholic laymen to promote the Christian reconstruction of the social order. Contributors included Eric Gill, Paul Furfey, John L. Lewis, and John A. Ryan.⁴ In 1939 *The Christian Front* transferred its editorial office from New York to Detroit, forcing it, in the words of Deverall, “to come down from the clouds in theory and principles to practical every-day affairs.”⁵ Other correspondence indicates Father Murphy’s connections with Paul Weber, President of the Detroit chapter of the Association

Toronto Press, 1968), pp. 61-80. A brief introduction to industrial unionism as experienced in Canada is found in Desmond Morton and Terry Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (Ottawa: Deneau and Greenberg, 1980), pp. 151-164.

³ Fr. J. Stanley Murphy, C.S.B., Preface to *Rights and Duties*, by Philip Murray (Windsor: Christian Culture Press, 1943), cover.

⁴ The *Front* movement represented efforts of sympathetic Catholics to legitimize the union movement and to encourage co-religionists to accept responsibility for developing and strengthening their unions. This was not easily accomplished in the climate of the late 1930s, when the fledgling CIO was regarded with considerable suspicion by many Americans and Canadians as a leftist, if not Communist, organization.

⁵ Dick Deverall came to be associated with the UAW. He also taught part time at Assumption College, while serving as editor of *Christian Social Action: “Monthly Catholic Magazine of Social Reconstruction Edited by Catholic Laymen.”*

of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU).⁶ It was the contact with Richard Deverall that kept the Director of the Christian Culture Series in closest contact with the UAW and the CIO and led to the invitation to Philip Murray.

As other activities at Assumption indicate,⁷ the invitation to speak and the later award, while recognizing the accomplishments of the labour leader, were also intended to publicize the Catholic Church's stand on labour organizations and to prod reluctant Catholic labourers to join unions. Many Catholic workers were hesitant to have anything to do with unions, particularly if they were perceived as radical, as the CIO certainly was. In Windsor, a particular complication was that workers were drawn from the surrounding farming country and carried a rural suspicion of unions. The fact that the Communist Party had been so openly active in Windsor union affairs in the past and was eventually so involved in supporting CIO union efforts only accentuated ingrained prejudices.

The announcement of the Christian Culture Award, coming three years after Murray's election to the presidency of the CIO, drew considerable comment. Reports and editorials referred to the designation of a labour leader as the recipient of the Award as "unusual,"⁸ but all agreed on the merit of the man and the appropriateness of the committee's choice.⁹ Philip Murray's acceptance speech provided him with an opportunity to reflect on his impoverished youth, his immigration to America, and his work history and labour involvements. He spoke of earlier contacts with German labour leaders and referred to the fact that the first targets of the Nazis were "the Church and the Labour Movement."¹⁰ For this reason, among others, he noted the wholehearted effort of American and Canadian workers to provide the materials to do the job of winning the war, but at the same time commented on the reluctance of employers to join with their employees in efforts at developing closer cooperation for the advantage of the war effort.¹¹ In fact, the negative attitude of influential Canadians towards labour

⁶ Assumption University Archives, CCS V-159, Paul Weber to Rev. J. S. Murphy, C.S.B., 8 August 1940.

⁷ For further information on Assumption undertakings in the area of labour and industrial questions see: "Summer School at Assumption Opens July 2," *Register*, 26 May 1945, p. 1; "Assumption College Professors at Assumption Summer School," *Record*, 24 May 1943; "Famous Guest-Professors at Assumption College Summer School," *Register*, 13 May 1944, p. 3.

⁸ *Windsor Daily Star*, 27 January 1943; *Toronto Daily Star*, 29 January 1943.

⁹ See also: *Record*, 9 January 1943, p. 5; 13 February 1943; *Register*, 9 January 1943, p. 1; 30 January 1943, p. 4; "CIO Fine For Others," *Globe and Mail*, 30 January 1943.

¹⁰ Philip Murray, *Rights and Duties* (Windsor: The Christian Culture Press, 1943), p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

leaders and organizations accounts for Father Stanley Murphy's recollection that many Catholics believed the bestowal of the distinguished award on Murray was a cause of public scandal.¹²

The Christian Culture Series proved more enduring and influential than was initially imagined, extending the College's impact far beyond what might have been expected from a small sectarian college in an out-of-the-way location. In particular, its recognition of labour leaders contributed to the process of legitimizing labour organizations at a time when Canadian governments expressed bare toleration and business displayed open hostility toward them. Even more immediate and dramatic in its impact, however, was the short-lived Pius XI Labour School.

This "school" was launched by Father Edwin Garvey, C.S.B., professor of philosophy at Assumption College. The impetus came from a speech he delivered to the local chapter of the Optimist Club, in which he advocated the rights of workers to organize and criticized reactionary groups opposed to unionization. The speech was prominently reported by the Windsor *Star*, and a couple of days later Father Garvey was surprised to receive a visit from six men, including Harry Finch of the typographical union, who wished to discuss labour questions.¹³ Garvey was subsequently approached by Earl Watson, another influential union man, who requested help in promoting labour education. This led to a series of weekly meetings or seminars with fifteen to twenty-five people, and it is these discussions of labour issues which became known as the Pius XI Labour School.¹⁴

When Father Garvey arrived at Assumption College in 1937, he was thirty years of age and had been ordained two years. From the first he taught social and political philosophy. The industrial environment, together with the impact of the Basilian priest, led to a stronger emphasis on social ethics at Assumption than was to be found at most Catholic colleges at the time.¹⁵ Garvey had been especially influenced by Jacques Maritain, whose *True Humanism* and *Man and the State* became for him fundamental texts. Guided by the conviction that the social philosophy of the Catholic Church offered an unambiguous message of support to workers, he sought to make this teaching known and to draw workers into responsible union activities. The reluctance he observed among many Windsor Catholics to associate themselves with the labour movement only encouraged him further in the promotion of Catholic social teaching, even if his

¹² Interview with Fr. J. Stanley Murphy, C.S.B., Windsor, July 1979.

¹³ Interviews with Fr. Edwin Garvey, C.S.B., Houston, 22 May 1977; Toronto, 18 June 1980

¹⁴ After Pope Pius XI, author of *Quadragesimo anno*, "On Reconstructing the Social Order" (1931).

¹⁵ Telephone interview with Prof. Pat Flood, Windsor, 28 May 1980.

advocacy of labour unions shocked many Windsorites.¹⁶

The Windsor Labour School was not unique. During the 1940s and 1950s a number of Catholic Labour Schools were active in industrial cities in the United States, created specifically for the purpose of providing labour education opportunities, along with Catholic social teaching. The schools provided instruction in the basic features of organizing groups, conducting meetings according to proper procedure, and spotting manipulative practices in union affairs.¹⁷ The schools also provided a philosophy of union work and a social ethics emphasizing responsibility to the rank and file members and to the community at large. They frequently provided the only alternative to labour schools conducted by, and often controlled by, Communist-leaning educational directors. The Labour Schools in the United States were frequently developed by local Associations of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU), organizations set up to parallel and deliberately influence union affairs, specifically where Communist dominance was perceived as a threat to democratic union activity.¹⁸

Canadian expressions of the Church-worker alliance were rather different in conception and practice, although many of the same goals were present. The concern was for participation of all members, for the education of as many leaders as possible to encourage that participation, and for giving the workers the tools they needed to develop strong and effective unions. In Antigonish, Nova Scotia, the Peoples' School at St. Francis Xavier University fulfilled these functions, and in so doing challenged Communist influence in the coal and steel unions of Cape Breton.¹⁹

In developing the Pius XI Labour School, Edwin Garvey was assisted by

¹⁶ Interview with E. Garvey, Houston, 22 May 1977.

¹⁷ The charge was frequently laid that Communists and their sympathizers controlled union affairs by frustrating rank and file participation in meetings through intricate manipulation of rules of order.

¹⁸ The ACTU developed from followers of Dorothy Day who perceived the need for more structure to effectively confront the organizational strategies of the CP. A category of "Labour Priests" arose in the United States, a handful of men who devoted themselves to serving union affairs, conducting classes, etc. This phenomenon was quite different from the worker-priest experiments in Europe, and it proved very effective in continuing the American Church tradition of keeping close to the worker. See: Neil Betten, *Catholic Activism and the Industrial Worker* (Gainesville, Florida: University Presses of Florida, 1967); Mary H. Fox, *Peter E. Dietz, Labour Priest* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1953); Francis L. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963).

¹⁹ A concise evaluation of the work of the School in challenging Communist hegemony in the Cape unions is found in the undated manuscript by Rev. M. M. MacKinnon, "The Success of the People's School in Getting Communists Out of Labour Unions," Saint Francis Xavier University Archives, RG-340-2/5/644-650. See also "Communists in Cape Breton," RG 3-1/30/1.

some fellow Basilian priests, by fellow faculty members, including economist Désire Barath, and by the Assistant Registrar, Joseph O'Connor. O'Connor had come to Windsor after working with Catherine de Hueck in Toronto and participating in the "Back to the Land" movement sponsored by Father J. McGoey in King Township. In Windsor he continued his interest in social action work in association with the Dorothy Day House there but was employed as assistant to the Registrar at Assumption, Father Stanley Murphy. Conversations with Father Garvey on social questions, and later with Dr. Barath, led to a quickening interest in expressing Catholic social teachings through work with the labour movement. As the School evolved, O'Connor's considerable organizational talents were employed to ensure the continuity of the seminars. He prepared the agenda, chaired some of the meetings, and saw to the weekly affairs of the School.

Désire Barath emigrated to Canada from Hungary in 1931 following his high school education. One of the vivid memories of his youth is of a pastor who spent considerable time expounding the principles of *Rerum novarum* to the youth circle in his hometown parish. Following his graduation from Assumption, Barath continued studies at St. Michael's Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, earning a doctoral degree in philosophy. Back in Windsor the absence of a teaching position led to his employment as inspector with Ford for a year and a half during 1941 and 1942. He was impressed by the fact that during the thirties the teachings of *Rerum novarum* and *Quadragesimo anno* played a prominent role in the College curriculum.²⁰

Barath had concentrated on economics during his undergraduate years and on his return to Windsor participated in a number of activities concerning social questions at the College before joining the faculty to teach in the areas of economics and social philosophy. This led to an absorption with economics and at times disagreements with Father Garvey concerning social and economic policy, particularly on the question of property. Altogether this contributed to a lively atmosphere of dialogue and debate within the Labour School and the College itself.²¹ The fencing continued in the College classrooms, with students moving back and forth between economics and philosophy classes and participating in the debates of the Labour School indirectly through arguments which their professors had sharpened in the School debates.

Apart from union men such as Earl Watson, Henry Finch, Wilf Blackburn, and J. H. "Bud" Morillo, participants in the Labour School included a variety of Windsorites interested in labour questions. A local labour lawyer with a deep commitment to social Catholicism, "Whitey" Ford, was one of these.²² Some Basilians, such as Father Murphy, participated from time to time. There is no evidence of any Basilian opposition to the Labour School, in spite of an

²⁰ Interview with Prof. Désire Barath, Windsor, 27 May 1980.

²¹ Prof. Barath remembers that Prof. Gilbert Hom, Head of the Economics Department, also participated in the School in the early years.

²² Telephone interview with P Flood.

awareness that Father Garvey's penchant for publicity could negatively influence school financing.²³ In London, Bishop John T. Kidd approved of the work of the Labour School and commended Father Garvey for his efforts.²⁴ For the most part the Labour School consisted of stewards and union members. The group rarely exceeded twenty-five and was more normally composed of about a dozen people.

The School offered a wide variety of speaker-participants. These came both to instruct and to take part in discussions. The fact that the Christian Culture Series drew from an impressive pool of personalities with international reputations contributed to the cosmopolitan flavour of the meetings. Jacques Maritain was one notable who spent an evening in discussion with the union members. The attendance at these larger meetings included a number of local parish priests. On other occasions the group was visited by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin.²⁵ Father Stanley Murphy invited members of Quebec's *Jeunesse ouvrière catholique* (JOC) to a session, and Romeo Maione, Canadian, and later world leader of the Young Christian Worker Movement, also appeared.

One of the local labour leaders invited to participate in the seminars was George Burt, later Regional Director of the UAW. When he first arrived in Windsor as a CIO organizer in 1941-42, he stayed at the Wyandotte Hotel for three weeks until the manager discovered his occupation and asked him to leave, saying "he couldn't afford to have a C.I.O. organizer in his hotel."²⁶ Burt soon discovered that no one was willing to put him up. Shortly after this incident Father Garvey contacted him and asked him to come and speak at the Labour School. The labour leader recalls of Father Garvey, "He said I would have freedom to say whatever I wanted. I went several times."²⁷ The approach of the Labour School was fundamentally different from that of the American Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. While there was a great deal of

²³ Désire Barath recalls one incident of attempting to placate a Ford President who refused any contribution to a College fund drive. Barath tried to explain the precise purpose of the Labour School as serving the educational needs of workers and thus, indirectly, the welfare of the whole community.

²⁴ Assumption University Archives, Box 6, File 20, Basilian Superior to Most Rev. John T. Kidd, D.D., 28 April 1942.

²⁵ Interview with Désire Barath.

²⁶ Interview with Mr. George Burt, Windsor, 12 September 1980.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Burt was later criticized by members of the Rank and File group for being too cooperative with the left-wing leadership of the Windsor Locals. With some difficulty during the transitions of 1946-47 he managed to hold his own when all but one other Regional Director of the CIO was turfed out by the Reuther faction in November 1947. Many years later, while still Regional Director, he participated in a farewell party for Fr. Garvey when the priest moved to Vancouver. He said of the Basilian: "Fr. Garvey would be considered radical compared to the rest of the people in Windsor generally. He would encourage and legitimize trade unions. He saw unions as being able to bring peace to industry."

exchange with the Detroit ACTU people, and many of the ACTU leaders were invited as speakers and participants, the Windsor vision was distinctly different in conception. For one thing, the Labour School was open to all participants, not only to Catholics, and participants such as “Bud’ Morillo and John Quinell were not Catholic. Moreover, while the Windsorites were concerned with Communist presence and leadership, their emphasis was on education and participation of the membership. The ACTU, on the other hand, was openly and unabashedly committed to confronting Communist organization. In order to accomplish this, they encouraged a Catholic caucus to work for specific goals, swinging votes and capturing union leadership.

Father Garvey was himself wary of Church interference or domination of union affairs: “In the temporal order there are neither Catholic nor Protestant unions. Maritain made this point to me in 1940. He was always right.”²⁸ Although thoroughly familiar with U.S. Catholic initiatives he was not greatly influenced by them. For example, while speaking respectfully of the role of several “labour priests” in American labour affairs, he declared, “I would never accept that term as applied to myself.”²⁹ From Maritain, Garvey derived his hesitancy to impose Church prescriptions in the temporal order.³⁰ Garvey maintained, in line with Maritain's thought, that:

... the Church in her role as a teacher of a universal, social doctrine cannot make concrete applications of social principles. This work belongs to laymen working in the sphere of social action. Further, it is an area which calls for co-operation on the basis of democratic principles with those of different religious faiths or with no religious faith. The co-operation required for the realization of democratic rights, in areas such as business, labour unions and education, should cut across confessional divisions.³¹

If he was cautious concerning the limitations of Church activity in relation to practical details, he was not at all hesitant in pronouncing on the responsibility of lay workers: “The Church has demanded that workers organize, and has declared that they have a moral obligation to do so.”³²

Throughout the 1940s Father Garvey lectured in class, on the radio, to the

²⁸ Interview with E. Garvey, Toronto, 18 June 1981.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jacques Maritain went against the considerable body of Catholic opinion favouring Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War. He did not favour a “Catholic” state and was opposed to the idea of committing the Church to Franco.

³¹ E. Garvey, C.S.B., “Group Action for the Common Good,” *Industrial Relations Seventy Years After Rerum Novarum*, Catholic Social Life Conference, 1962 (Ottawa: Canadian Catholic Conference, 1962), p. 13.

³² “Father Garvey States Stand of the Church,” *Register* (19 March 1949), p. 1.

Labour School, and to countless clubs and service organizations around Ontario on questions of social justice and the rights of labour organizations. He believed that unions challenged the dominant economic system which set aside morality in favour of expediency.³³ He insisted that industry should not rely on government to fulfil its obligations to workers, since workers have a right to a living wage and should not be simply shunted aside during slack seasons.³⁴

The question of Communist influence in the Windsor UAW was a concern of Labour School participants and arose in discussions. On several occasions Communist activists in the local unions attended meetings to participate in the discussions.³⁵ However, “We were more interested in social justice than in being against Communism. This was not at all a dominant concern.”³⁶ As for Garvey, there is no doubt that his most consistent and vocal criticism was aimed not at Communism, but at the abuses of property and ownership positions which contributed so much to favouring an affection for any ideology which would help to right the balance. While he warned against the statist implications of socialism, there is little if any mention of Communism or Communists or red-dominated unions in any of the accounts.³⁷ Realizing that such charges only weakened the labour union movement, he pressed instead for the development of a strong, knowledgeable, and democratic union organization and aimed his salvos at the prevailing economic order and the opponents of unionism:

The labour movement is primarily a bulwark of human rights. But further – and this is a point which is often forgotten – it is a challenge to a social system which leaves wages to be determined by the law of supply and demand, which

³³ “Significance of the Labour Movement” (Radio Address), *Register*, 18 April 1942, p. 9.

³⁴ “Labour Unions and Human Rights” (Radio Address), *Register*, 16 May 1942, p. 5.

³⁵ Interviews with Wilfred Blackburn, Joseph O’Connor, Désire Barath, Edwin Garvey, C.S.B.

³⁶ E. Garvey, 18 June 1980.

³⁷ Indeed, a later reviewer reported: “He said the Churches [*sic*] role during these times was to legitimize unions, to make people understand they weren’t communist infiltrated organizations – they were just as normal as ‘city government’.” (“Priest finds Little Change in Labour Woes,” *The Windsor Star*, 19 January 1980, p. 10.) The problem in the 1940s, of course, was that some unions were so infiltrated. How was that fact to be confronted without discrediting the labour movement generally? One worker observed that “The Labour School was not a question of Church organizing labour vs. communists, but of dissenting labour looking for assistance in their struggle against communists.” (Interview with Mr. W. Blackburn, London, 9 April 1980). Yet another participant commented “Fr. Garvey didn’t teach tactics and the Labour School was not like the ACTU, which deliberately set out to bust the communists. Instead, he taught basic philosophy.” (Interview with Mr. Jerry Hartford, Toronto, 2 August 1979).

puts human labour in the same category as the dead and soulless factors of production. It is this which makes the development of unionism so significant. It is not then, in obtaining just wages or better working conditions that labour unions fulfill their whole purpose. They challenge an economic system which has put aside the moral principles of a just wage and a just price to follow the blind laws of supply and demand.³⁸

Father Garvey favoured many of the policies of the CCF and spoke publicly in support of the various CCF planks.³⁹ Professor Désire Barath recalls that the priest had a strong interest in the CCF party and “was to the left of the union men in the group.”⁴⁰ There were other CCFers in the Labour School, and Earl Watson ran unsuccessfully on the CCF ticket for Windsor-Walkerville in 1952. In spite of these leanings Garvey was adamant concerning the necessity of separating union from political affairs:

Labor should keep independent of political parties, he said, and be free to vote for any group it saw fit. He criticized the C.C.F. for too much control from the top, and said, “I don’t think it’s right for labor to align itself with the party. It has a right and duty to educate itself in regard to parties, to investigate and to find out what party is best and then support it, and see that helping labor and the nation is its predominant aim.”⁴¹

A number of other initiatives in social awareness were sponsored by Assumption College flowing from the interest in labour-management-production questions fostered by Father Garvey. When Detroit’s Father Clement H. Kern spoke to the Windsor Catholic teachers reminding them that they were “apostles of social justice,” he reflected:

Windsor is essentially an industrial city and it is an opportunity, and indeed an obligation, for the teachers here to instruct the pupils on labour problems ... and give them a clear picture of unions and how they work.⁴²

Father Kern pointed to the Assumption College classes on labour as an example of what teachers could and should be doing. Late in the decade, at the urging of the Windsor Board of Education, the College announced a unique educational

³⁸ E. Garvey, C.S.B., “Significance of the Labour Movement,” *Register*, 18 April 1942, p. 9.

³⁹ Interview with E. Garvey, Houston, 22 May 1977.

⁴⁰ Interview with D. Barath, 27 May 1980.

⁴¹ E. Garvey, “Lists Obligations of Union,” Unidentified newspaper, 25 January 1945, Service Records Scrapbook, Vol. 4, Assumption University Archives.

⁴² Fr. Clement H. Kern, “Windsor Teachers in Convention,” *Register*, 31 January 1948, p. 3.

programme for the city, a labour-management night school discussion group.⁴³ A year or so later, in response to the wishes of Bishop Cody, the Essex Priests' Conference sponsored a course in "Management-Labor Relations" at Assumption College in order to bring the priests up to date on current questions associated with the work-place and to discover pastoral approaches to the questions. The weekly conference drew on Canadian and American Catholic social thinkers and activists and involved a good many members of the local clergy.⁴⁴

These later developments stemmed from the earlier success of the Labour School in responding to the request of local working men for assistance in preparing for more membership participation. By 1944 one "graduate" of the Labour School had been elected president of United Automobile Workers' Local 240, and several others were involved in attempts to change the direction of the union.

A turning point came on 6 October 1944 at a meeting held in the Prince Edward Hotel involving more than fifty men representing Locals 195, 200, and 240, from such plants as Kelsey Wheel, Dominion Forge, Champion Spark, Canada Bridge, Chrysler Plant 1, and General Motors. This gathering had been triggered by a recent Open Letter to the Drew government of Ontario initiated by President Roy G. England of Local 200 and President Alex Parent of Local 195. The letter appeared over the signatures of sixty-four local union officers and had been prepared in such a way as to suggest UAW support for the Labour-Progressive Party (LPP). Some members complained that they had understood that the letter was to have been a simple vote of non-confidence in the Drew government and they had been tricked into signing it.⁴⁵ The men were also disturbed, however, by the LPP politicking which had accompanied the recent UAW convention in Grand Rapids. Further, as events of the next month were to prove, there was a considerable opposition to the manner in which labour leaders engineered the nomination of LPP candidates on UAW slates for

⁴³ "Night Classes in Labor-Management are Inaugurated," *Register*, 31 January 1948, p. 3.

⁴⁴ "Essex Priests' Conference to Sponsor Labor Relations Course at Assumption," *Windsor Star*, Undated, Newspaper Clippings, Box 2, File 8, Assumption University Archives.

⁴⁵ J. MacLean to 6 October meeting, "Minute Book of the Non-Political Wing of the UAW-Windsor Area" [hereafter Minute Book], courtesy of Wilfred Blackburn, now on deposit, PAC Labour Archives. The folder covers the activities of the Non-Political Wing of the UAW-Windsor Area, 6 October 1944 to 2 March 1945, and of the Rank and File Union Action Committee, 18 December 1945 to 22 February 1946.

the December municipal elections.⁴⁶ It was no new thing to have political questions and allegiances cut across labour affairs, but the manner in which this was expressed again and again at municipal, provincial, and federal levels eventually generated a backlash within the union.

J. MacLean of the UAW regional Office opened the evening's discussion with a review of recent events and expressed his satisfaction at the meeting's turnout:

He believed we were on the right road to regain control of our locals. He was sincere in saying that we believe the trade union movement comes first. The executives of Local 195 and 200 are putting politics before everything and there is no union business being done in the union halls. We are not to disrupt any person's political views or actions provided they are kept strictly to political meetings.⁴⁷

Others at the meeting voiced the same concern over what was happening to their unions, but one man expressed what was undoubtedly a common concern when he demanded to know who had organized the present meeting. In reply Brother Lawler explained that the meeting was arranged by fourteen delegates to the UAW Convention who began the "Non-Political Wing of the UAW-Windsor Area" for the purpose of gaining autonomy in the locals and eliminating those officers who were splitting the labour movement in Windsor with their political views. The questioner, Brother Billy Martin, appeared satisfied with the answer and offered his own opinion concerning the present leadership and how things should be done by the new group, insisting that "the trade union movement comes first ..."⁴⁸

The meeting resulted in the election of a committee of ten members, four from Local 195, four from Local 200, and two from Local 240, to organize resistance to the current way in which matters were being directed. One of the members cautioned that "We should not bring out the old Communist bogey that has been done in the past and is strictly factionalism," and Brother MacLean agreed, noting that the opposition was not to parties but to "groups forcing wrong policy on our membership in local unions."⁴⁹ At a membership meeting the following week MacLean was again careful to point out that "we are not red baiting,"⁵⁰ but that the group was concerned with opposing the policies being

⁴⁶ Opposition to the municipal nominations is examined in the following articles: "Second Unit is Opposed," *Windsor Star*, 16 November 1944; "More Units are Opposed," *Windsor Star*, 17 November 1944 (Wm. Martin Scrapbook, courtesy of Prof. Desmond Morton).

⁴⁷ Minute Book, 6 October 1944.

⁴⁸ Wm. Martin, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ J. MacLean, Minute Book, 13 October 1944.

forced on the membership of Locals 195 and 200 “by a minority group who are interested primarily in putting their party before the labour movement.”⁵¹ MacLean reported that there were “stooges” in the Non-Political Wing meetings who were carrying word back to the union executives of the opposition meetings. He insisted that the Non-Political Wing was “definitely not trying to get control of Local 195 or 200 but are trying to get a straight labour policy back in the Union instead of politics.”⁵² Most of the men, and MacLean himself, soon realized, however, that “getting control” of the locals was precisely what had to be done in order to effect the changes in policy and action which so antagonized them.⁵³

In order to begin to change the direction of affairs in the locals the Non-Political Wing decided it was necessary to work from the bottom up, to secure the election of stewards sympathetic to their intentions, and to work to change the executive at the union elections in the winter. In order to avoid infiltration and betrayal of this cause, it was argued that membership in the Wing should be closed after the first couple of meetings. Since the chief purpose of the group, however, was to counter a climate of secrecy and backroom deals, membership remained open. Eventually all plants were invited to have representation on the Inner Council.⁵⁴

By early January the group had secured the regular use of the Local 240 Hall for Inner Council and membership meetings. The general meetings remained relatively small, but members expressed confidence in the gathering momentum of the movement, claiming the cause was well received in the shops and much interest was being expressed. The group was not strictly Catholic, although there were a good many Catholics represented on the Inner Council and within the membership. Among others, Chairman Neil Carruthers, Wilf Blackburn, and secretary J. A. “Bud” Morillo participated in the Pius XI Labour School seminars directed by Father Garvey. The minute book contains no reference to the Labour School as such, although one member spoke on Catholic organization of unions at one meeting.⁵⁵ The Non-Political Wing was also characterized by participation of women among the reform group.

By late December 1944 the Non-Political Wing members believed they were making an impact. Small meetings were successful, there was a sense that the members were getting the message across at the plants, and Walter Poole was convinced that the Wing could play a decisive part in the election of union

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The formation of the Non-Political Wing represented the third effort by union reformers to effect some change in union affairs (Minute Book, 13 October 1944). By this time most of the reformers were convinced that only by gaining control of the executive could they change the direction of the union.

⁵⁴ Minute Book, 9 January 1945.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 2 December 1944.

officials. If the membership was responsive to this new addition to the Windsor labour scene, however, so too was the executive. Fearing the Wing's initiatives, the executive founded a "Save the Union Committee," and a pamphlet war ensued.

In spite of this opposition, the reform leadership and membership were very optimistic about union elections scheduled for mid-March. At their final meeting on March 2, arrangements were thought to be complete. A gathering was scheduled for March 16, and the affairs of the Non-Political Wing concluded on a hopeful note. The Wing's subsequent loss of the election to the incumbents indicated an overly optimistic assessment of their situation. No further record is given for the Wing, which expired with the election. Before the year's end, however, many of the same people were back, hot on the heels of the prolonged autumn strike, and ready once again to challenge the leadership and change the emphasis in UAW affairs to more explicitly union concerns.

On 18 December 1945 a group of sixteen men gathered at Bedell's Hotel. Many of them had participated in the earlier efforts of the NonPolitical Wing. Others may well have participated in the two earlier efforts to challenge their locals' leadership as well. Undaunted by the losses in the election of the previous winter, and spurred by what some considered to be the inept and manipulative management of the strike of the early autumn, they laid the groundwork for a new assault. The second meeting of the group, held early in the new year, witnessed the election of a seven-man executive and the choice of a name, "The Rank and File Union Action Committee." Four members of the executive had participated in the programmes of the Pius XI Labour School. The chairman was Earl Watson, whose request for labour education had provided the immediate stimulus for the establishment of the School.

Watson was a Windsorite who had served with the Canadian Forces in World War I and then studied law at the University of Detroit. He was involved in Liberal politics in Windsor until 1925 and only became active in community affairs again in 1940 when his interest in labour affairs was stimulated while working as a shipper in Auto Specialities Manufacturing Co. (Canada) Ltd.⁵⁶ He was a strong supporter of the Reuther wing in the UAW International and also of Pat Conroy and the Canadian Congress of Labour. When he was asked at the meeting of 18 December 1945 whether "The Rank and File Union Action Committee" was a political group, he answered:

... we were all Union members and we are primarily interested in better conditions etc. for all members. We are fed up with the past policy of our leadership

⁵⁶ Information on Earl Watson can be found in many issues of the *Windsor Star* during the 1940s and 1950s. For example: "Earl Watson," *Star*, 21 November 1951, concerning CCF candidacy; "Local 195 President III for Year," *Star*, 27 May 1957 obituary. Further information was supplied by W. Blackburn, a long-time associate in union affairs.

and we hope to remove and replace them in the next election with men who will work for the benefit of all members and not for the benefit of a political group.⁵⁷

Following the election of an executive and the choice of a name, the Rank and File meetings of early 1946 got down to the business of preparing for the election of union executives and of delegates to the annual meeting in Atlantic City, to be held the following September. The concern and commitment of the Rank and File Union Action Committee is best expressed in the remarks of two of the executive members at the early January membership meeting at the Prince Edward Hotel. Introducing an eight-point programme:

Bro. MacDonald stated that we must remove the present control of our union by people who do not carry a card in our Union, and place our union back in the hands of the Rank and File. We are not on a Red baiting spree but we, as members are tired of the party policy of our present leadership.⁵⁸

During the next weeks the Rank and File reiterated their determination to continue efforts at changing the union leadership, regardless of the results of the approaching elections. They repeatedly admonished one another to avoid red-baiting, on grounds that more positive criticism and approaches would be the most effective vehicle for their message, particularly emphasizing the importance of democratic practices in the union. Further, they aligned themselves with the International UAW leaders and the CCL.

At one strategy session examining the goals and public offerings of the group, it was suggested that they “Keep religion [priests] out of meetings.”⁵⁹ There is no mention in the minute book of Father Garvey or any other cleric appearing at any meetings, but it was not uncommon for members of the Rank and File group to bring up questions at the Labour School seminars or to consult with Father Garvey. There was an obvious ambivalence towards the place and role of the “Church” in all of this, Blackburn noting that: “In 1946-47 the Church didn’t push one way or another, and we were just as glad. We didn’t want a lot of interference.”⁶⁰ Obviously Assumption College’s educational effort was welcome, but the union men did not want the reputation of being dominated by the Church or any other group.

If priests were not wanted at the meetings, the Rank and File group depended heavily on Detroit speakers, men from groups aligned with Walter Reuther and frequently connected with the ACTU organizations which were so

⁵⁷ Minute Book, 4 January 1946.

⁵⁸ Minute Book, 9 January 1946.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 January 1946.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

strong in that city.⁶¹ These speakers hammered away at the key question of involving membership in union affairs, keeping politics out of the union, and of contesting Communist Party influence in local affairs.

During these same weeks, interest in the work of the Rank and File Committee was growing. The executive was determined to develop a broad basis of participation, with representation from every plant. By January 30 membership doubled.⁶² When a nomination ballot was drawn up for the Rank and File slate at the coming union elections, some fifty names were advanced for the eight positions.

The Rank and File Union Action Committee differed from the former Non-Political Wing in that it was concerned solely with the affairs of Local 195. This enabled the Committee to focus directly on the issues affecting one local. By late February the Rank and File Union Action Committee was ready for Local 195 elections. A Windsor *Star* photographer covered the last meeting held on 22 February 1946 at the Norton Palmer Hotel. Walter Reuther was to have been present at the meeting, but as he was involved in negotiations, he was replaced by a staff member, Clayton Fontaine of Local 235.

This was the last meeting of the Rank and File Union Action Committee, for the elections saw their full slate of candidates carried into office, and the task of running Local 195 became the new concern of this group. The name "Rank and File Action Committee" was retained for the next few years, however, and the Watson faction began a term of leadership of 195 which continued until Watson's death in 1957. For a year and a half after the election, the Committee was concerned with consolidating its position locally and contributing to Walter Reuther's successful challenge for the UAW leadership at the International Convention in Atlantic City in March 1946 and November 1947. At the 10th Annual Convention of the UAW in March, Reuther successfully challenged incumbent R. J. Thomas. Among those voting for Reuther were delegates Bud Morillo and Wilfred Blackburn of the Rank and File Union Action Committee.⁶³

The Pius XI Labour School officially ended its activities in 1948, after eight years of service in the Windsor area. Wilfred Blackburn recalls that once the Rank and File Committee had succeeded in electing their own men to the executive they were extremely busy with meeting after meeting for the next few years, and also with "cleaning out the feeder plants." Blackburn attributes the union changeover to the work of the Labour School in providing the educational background necessary for disaffected men to organize their grievances and to offer an alternative labour philosophy to the membership. Though himself a Catholic, he acknowledges that he knew nothing of church social teachings prior

⁶¹ W. Blackburn points out that "Every local had a right-wing group, but they were out of power and had a difficult time just to stay organized."

⁶² No figures are given for membership, but Blackburn spoke of 200 to 300 people in attendance at some of the meetings.

⁶³ Blackburn Clippings File.

to his participation in the Labour School. From that point on the social encyclicals became a central part of his labour message as he continued on the executive of Local 195 and later as a member of the International staff.

Blackburn and his associates also sought to carry the message of the Labour School to fellow workers. The Windsor men travelled to Oshawa, St. Catharines, and locals in the Toronto area to support dissident members' rebellion against left-wing leaderships during 1947 and 1948. Drawing on their own experience in the Border City, the union men were able to encourage the efforts of men such as Harry Benson, Dick Courtney, Wes Grant, and John Brady in Oshawa to develop what they believed to be a more democratic union for the membership. In this way Blackburn, at least, believes that the Labour School's influence produced a "ripple" effect, rendering it far more significant than the small number of participants would seem to indicate.

For those who did actively participate, the Labour School offered the first opportunity for an adult education that was suited to their needs and motivations. It provided the philosophical basis for union activism among Catholic laymen and contributed greatly to an atmosphere of cooperation and exchange between Church and worker. This cooperation was duly noted in 1948 by Professor C. W. M. Hart of the University of Toronto, who contrasted the overwhelmingly pro-union stance of the Catholic Church with the ambivalent or even hostile policies of the Protestant Churches.⁶⁴ Subsequent comments by Father Garvey and by Henry Somerville show that Professor Hart's grasp of Catholic social policy was less than perfect, but he seems to have been correct at least in perceiving that in Windsor the Catholic Church was closely identified with workers.⁶⁵

The Pius XI Labour School, especially when seen in connection with other social and educational initiatives promoted by Assumption College, beyond the traditional curriculum, clearly represents a successful experiment in responding to community needs. Ultimately, it reflected a belief in the possibilities of quasi-corporate organizational structures working along a solidarist line for the amelioration of the lives of working people. By encouraging, informing, and, in effect, seeking to "catechise" the industrial order, Assumption College anticipated the sensitivity to the concerns and structures of the modern world subsequently expressed in *Gaudium et Spes* and other documents of Vatican II.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ C. W. M. Hart, "Industrial Relations Research and Social Theory," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* XV (February 1949), p. 68.

⁶⁵ "Catholic-Labour Entente in Windsor Saved Union from Red Domination," *Register*, 19 March 1949, p. 1; "Father Garvey States Stand of the Church," *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, a document unlike any ever to come out of a Church Council, was one of the most significant of the Second Vatican Council's sixteen documents. It was strongly influenced by the line of documents on social questions from *Rerum novarum* (1891) through the final encyclical of Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963).