

AL CAMPBELL AND THE LEFT: BUILDING UAW/CAW LOCAL 27

Jason Russell

Assistant Professor,
Department of Labor Studies,
Empire State College,
State University of New York (SUNY),
Saratoga Springs, New York, United States of America

ABSTRACT

The role of the Left in unions, women's activism, and the rise of industrial unions in the post-World War II decades have been the subject of valuable academic scrutiny. This article seeks to add to our understanding of these topics by looking at the role that one prominent activist—Al Campbell—played in building UAW/CAW Local 27 from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. Campbell strongly advocated an independent Canadian autoworkers' union, supported women's activism, and was instrumental in helping expand a major composite local in the union. I argue in this article that, in order to understand the nature of the post-war Canadian labour movement, we need to devote greater attention to the role of devoted leftists in building local unions.

Post-World War II North American labour movements have been the subject of much academic study. The role of women, the impact of race, electoral politics, and deindustrialization are only a few of the themes that have been examined by historians, political scientists, and sociologists. The labour studies community has also benefited from work done on places such as Hamilton, Toronto, Detroit, and other cities across the United States and Canada. This article seeks to expand our understanding of local unions and left-wing volunteer activists in the post-war period by looking at the life of one prominent activist in an autoworkers union local from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. UAW/CAW Local 27 in London, Ontario is a composite local that organized eleven bargaining units during the 1950s and 1960s. Considering Al Campbell's activism in Local 27 adds to the scholarship on the role of the Left in post-war unions, interaction between national union offices and locals, the impact of the Cold War on local unions, and the importance of local union activists who were willing to give freely of their time to the labour movement.

CHILDHOOD AND EMBRACE OF COMMUNISM

Al Campbell was an activist who has rarely appeared in analyses of the UAW in the post-war years. He is instead someone who is widely remembered by current and former activists. He frequently interacted with people in the UAW who were either in major leadership roles in the Canadian labour movement, or would assume such roles, including George Burt and Dennis McDermott—both of whom led the UAW in Canada—and future secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Bob Nickerson and Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) president Gord Wilson. This analysis of Campbell's role in UAW Local 27 relies on archival documents but, because of Campbell's political ideology, it more frequently cites oral accounts of his role in the local, in particular the memories of Campbell's third wife, Jeanie Campbell. As Alessandro Portelli suggested, written sources convey information about events, and oral sources convey meaning (Portelli 2006). In the case of Al Campbell and other activists in Local 27, the role of the Left only sporadically appears in archival documents. The contributions that they made to the local, and what they meant to the local's future, are only fully revealed through oral history sources.

Allison Campbell was born in 1919, one of ten children in a large Cape Breton coal mining family. He often liked to note that he was born the same year as the Winnipeg General Strike. Campbell and other members of his immediate family were Communists. He knew hardship at an early age. He was born with a club foot, and spent much of the first two years of his life in the hospital. He decided, at a relatively young age that he "had read all the religions, read all the books, and he decided that this (Communism) was the only way to go." His family supported left-wing politics, and his mother sewed a hammer and sickle on a sweater that he wore while handing out a left-wing newspaper outside of the gates of the coal mine where his brother and father worked (Campbell 2007).

Campbell rode the railways as a hobo during the Depression years. This was when he formally joined the Communist Party of Canada. He met other Canadian Communists like Bill Walsh and Tim Buck. Campbell belonged to other unions prior to joining the UAW including the leftist International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter workers (Sefton-McDowell 2001; Campbell 2007). He regretted that he could not serve in the regular forces during World War II due to an ongoing problem with his foot, but he still served in the reserves. Like many other Communists, Campbell left the party in 1956 in the wake of the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution and Khrushchev's acknowledgement of Stalinist brutality against various Communist movements (Yates 1993; Gindin 2005). But, like other former Party members, he remained proud to have been a Communist long after his association with the party ended (Campbell 2007). Campbell moved to London in the early 1950s and found employment at Eaton

Automotive, Local 27's first bargaining unit, where he quickly became the most influential leftist in the local.

INTERNAL UNION POLITICS UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE COLD WAR

While Canada did not have a public anti-Communist movement on the scale of the hearings conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the United States, Cold War anti-Communism nonetheless had a significant impact on the Canadian Left and Canadian unions (Yates 1993; Gindin 2005). Purges of suspected leftists in the Canadian civil service took place. In the case of the UAW, post-war anti-Communist hysteria led to determined purges of known and suspected Communists by the Reuther administration. International unions like the UAW were gradually purged of leftists in the United States (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2004). The UAW, led by long-serving international president Walter Reuther, was committed to anti-Communism, even though leftists had been instrumental in building the union. It is almost impossible to discuss the UAW in the post-war decades without considering Reuther's impact on it (Lichtenstein 1995; Barnard 2004). He had actually spent time in the Soviet Union, but put leadership aspirations above ideological principle and made efforts in the late 1940s and used anti-Communist fervor in the United States as a pretext to root out suspected leftist sympathizers. Reuther brooked little dissent within US-based locals, as illustrated by the systematic purging of Local 248 at Allis-Chalmers in Wisconsin in the late 1940s, and his repression of leftists in Local 600 in Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s (Meyer 1992; Cutler 2004).

Bill Freeman (1982) and Charlotte Yates (1993) have shown that the post-war Canadian labour movement, including the UAW, included Left and Right caucuses, which meant divisions between social democrats and more left-leaning groups such as Communists over issues such as the economic role of the state. The Right caucus aligned with Reuther accepted the role of the private sector in the economy while striving to win better economic rewards for union members. The Left saw a need for greater state regulation of the economy and the auto industry, and advocated the development of a Canadian-made automobile and greater independence for the autoworkers union in Canada. The Canadian Left was able to articulate policy positions despite the UAW international administration's anti-Communist orientation.

AL CAMPBELL AND LOCAL 27

Local 27 was initially founded in 1950 when a new Eaton Auto plant was built in London. It quickly grew to include General Motors Diesel, Kelvinator of Canada, Minnesota Mining and Manufacture, and an automotive dealership called Central Chevrolet (Campbell 2007). The UAW viewed construction of the

Eaton Auto plant as an effort to transfer work away from the company's unionized plant in Windsor, Ontario. Local 27's charter members, and first rank-and-file activists, were comprised of workers who moved to London from Windsor to maintain employment with Eaton Auto. There is no evidence—oral or written—regarding the ideological orientation of the local's early members. An identifiable Left faction in the local began to appear by the latter 1950s as people like Campbell became members of Local 27 bargaining units. Al Campbell's role in Local 27 was comparable to the role played by Communists in other Canadian and U.S. local unions, where they did the mundane but essential organizing work that built and sustained a local (Meyer 1993; Keeran 1980). He was involved in routine union activities at Eaton Auto bargaining unit including negotiations and grievance handling, but he also organized local-wide social events such as family picnics as a vehicle to build internal solidarity (Campbell, 2007).

There was some evidence of anti-Communism within Local 27's ranks. For example, comments were made during a 1960 GM unit meeting about how "Communists" Charlie Brooks from Chrysler in Windsor and Gordon Lambert from GM in St. Catharines were thought to be "taking direction once again from the Commie Party in Canada" (Archive of Labour and Urban Affairs, hereafter ALUA, UAW Local 27 Collection). GM was commonly known to be the base of the Right caucus in the local, and Campbell would have known where GM's membership stood on Communism. Eaton Auto became the base from which Campbell gradually espoused his political views, and where he routinely won unit elections including those for plant chairperson. There were other leftists at Eaton Auto and in other units including Bill Harrington, who eventually became president of the London Labour Council. UAW staff reps and administration including Bob Nickerson recognized Campbell's influence on members such as Harrington, who Nickerson described as "right in Al's pocket" (Seymour and Nickerson 2006). Campbell helped other leftists come to leadership positions in the local. Former staff representatives Al Seymour and Nickerson believed that Sam Saumur, who worked at Northern Electric and eventually became Local 27 president, was aligned with Campbell. Seymour described Saumur as a "fellow traveler," while Nickerson was more specific in calling him a Communist. Saumur was a protégé of Campbell and his political ideology and union activity would certainly have benefited from Campbell's union experience (Seymour and Nickerson 2006).

There were political differences in Local 27 in the 1950s and 1960s. While Campbell espoused Communist ideology, Bill Froude from the Kelvinator unit who was local president by the late 1960s, was a social democrat and wrote approvingly of the CCF in the *Local 27 News* (Local 27 Archive, hereafter L27A). Despite their ideological differences, Campbell supported Froude in at least one local election. Froude, unlike Campbell, does not appear to have engaged in

many conflicts with UAW Region 7 Vice-President George Burt or UAW staff representative George Specht. Campbell, on the other hand, was the focus of much angst within the Canadian UAW leadership, particularly within the Canadian Council, which Yates (1993) argues served as a central deliberative body within the UAW and a space for local leaders to challenge the national leadership. Former Local 27 activist and UAW staff representative Gord Wilson recalled that there were a handful of people on the UAW Canadian Council in the 1960s who could really challenge Burt:

For a five or six year period before Dennis [McDermott] got elected [UAW Region 7 Vice-President] [...] there were about a dozen people who could control debate on our council [...] The guys who Burt was terrified of and Dennis had a great deal of respect for were Al [...] [Local 444 president] Charlie Brooks. Al was a smart guy, very measured (2006).

Campbell, and others like him, played an important role in the UAW Canadian council where he would have favoured policy positions like an independent Canadian autoworkers union—a policy widely associated with the Left caucus in the UAW (Yates 1993:114-5). The Left caucus' support at the council for greater national control over the auto industry was an example of a policy position in direct opposition to the UAW leadership's interest in seeing the industry more integrated between Canada and the United States. Gordon Wilson felt that "[t]he debate on what was then the UAW Canadian council was really great [...] it was one of the real strengths of the union" (2006). Convinced that Campbell embodied the Left in Local 27, George Burt had to carefully consider how to deal with him. After Campbell made critical comments about the union's organizing policy at a UAW council meeting in 1960, Burt erupted in a letter to staff representative George Specht about Campbell and the problems he perceived in the Canadian region, including Local 27's continued support of Campbell. Burt described Campbell as part of UAW council's "political opposition" and argued that we have "the right to use what methods we have at our disposal to see that our policies are exposed to our friends in London"(ALUA). Much to Burt's dismay, the local supported Campbell, insisting that he "has been one of our most conscientious workers and has served well on Recreation, as a delegate to London District Labour Council and as Editor of our Local Newspaper" (ALUA). Burt sent yet another letter to Specht on May 10, 1960, saying:

Having watched Brother Campbell at the recent C.L.C. convention I am more than ever convinced that something should be done with Local 27 and its political situation (ALUA).

Burt's correspondence, and the local's response, reveals much about the interaction between the UAW Canadian administration, staff representatives, and the union's main London area local. The local executive stood by Campbell despite the criticism from the national office (Campbell 2007). Specht, the UAW administration's representative in London, was caught between the UAW Canadian office and Local 27. The national union was his employer, but successfully fulfilling his duties meant getting along with Local 27's leaders and activists. He could not simply dictate policy to the local.

The UAW staff representatives who worked with Local 27 tried to influence who led the local because the national office had a clear interest in identifying leaders who would follow administration policy, and used a form that indicated who among the local executive was pro and anti-administration. Bob Nickerson said "that was a form that we used to use internally" (ALUA). Nine candidates for UAW Canadian Council delegate were listed on it. Campbell was identified as anti-administration (Seymour and Nickerson 2006). However, the fact that the remaining six candidates were viewed as pro-administration illustrates that the local was viewed as primarily friendly toward the UAW national office. Burt and his successor Dennis McDermott may have reasoned that, even if an active Left caucus enjoyed support in Local 27, the local still basically aligned with the UAW administration. There was thus little to be gained from actively purging the Left.

The relationship between the Left and the administration in Canada was more complex than in the United States. Burt resisted the politically motivated firing of staff members in 1947 (Gindin 2005). In the aftermath of that event, he undoubtedly felt a need to try to keep any remaining Left-leaning groups in the Canadian UAW quiet. On the other hand, Burt faced challenges from activists like Al Campbell. Burt also likely wanted to avoid drawing attention from Reuther. The UAW administration's grudging acceptance of Campbell's activity in Local 27 is noteworthy, and stands in contrast to what happened to the leftists described by Stephen Meyer (1992). In that case, leftist members of UAW Local 248 were harassed by the UAW administration as part of a general post-war anti-Communist hostility in the union. Similarly, in the case of United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Local 1005, activists were divided into two competing camps (Freeman 1982). There were clear political divisions in Local 27, but those divisions did not lead to aggressive exclusion or expulsion. Although the different factions were strong, their respect for one other's contributions allowed them to co-exist. The national union may have been frustrated over ongoing support for the Left in Local 27, but nonetheless overall found the local friendly toward the administration. The two Local 27 caucuses were thus mostly left to debate between themselves.

“WE HAVE ALL THE FAITH IN HIM”

Local 27 activists made contributions to the broader London labour movement. Bob Nickerson noted that while Campbell was careful about being overly vocal in expressing his political views within Local 27, he expressed his beliefs at London Labour Council meetings and UAW Canadian Council meetings (Seymour and Nickerson 2006). He may have felt that labour council was less contested terrain than the local hall, and that national gatherings were an appropriate venue in which to challenge the administration. Broader social issues were often on the agenda at labour council meetings. For example, Local 27 activist Bob Sexsmith remembered how there was a major debate within the London Labour Council in the 1960s over support for charities like the United Way, with the Right urging support and Left arguing that the state should provide citizens with a living wage (Sexsmith 2006).

The national office was aware of Campbell's activism beyond the local, and supported him when he faced criticism outside the union. For instance, London's Northern Electric (later Northern Telecom) plant was organized by Local 27 in 1968. Organizing the plant led to competition between different unions, including the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), the UAW, and the United Electrical Workers (UE). As Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003) have shown, the UE was widely considered to be a Communist-led union. This consequently led the CLC to expel the union. The UE attempted to organize Northern Electric prior to the UAW's effort, and Al Campbell supported the drive. In 1966 a rank-and-file member named Joe Abela complained directly to Burt about Campbell (Seymour and Nickerson 2006). He and four co-signers of his letter to Burt requested that the entire Local 27 executive be put on trial over their support for Campbell during the UE's effort to organize Northern Electric (ALUA). The main crux of Abela's argument was that Campbell was supporting a union—the UE—which had been expelled from the Canadian Labour Congress.

Burt, following consultation with George Specht, informed Abela that “your suggestion that we institute trial proceedings against the Executive Board of Local 27 is without foundation and is utterly nonsense” (ALUA). Abela, displeased with Burt's reply, appealed directly to UAW president Walter Reuther (ALUA). Reuther's reply is unknown, but Abela's letter would have at least alerted Solidarity House to the political situation in London. Burt would have surely preferred that Reuther not know about this issue, but probably did not actively question the local executive's decision to support Campbell. He would have also known that Campbell threw his support behind the UAW's organizing drive at Northern Electric after the UE's failed (ALUA).

It is also noteworthy that Local 27's leaders and members stood by Campbell when he faced external criticism. In 1966, he was attacked by building trades representatives on the London Labour Council over his initial support of the UE.

Although the minutes of labour council and Local 27 meetings were not often detailed, there is a comprehensive entry from the local's meeting on October 27, 1966. A motion was passed to send a letter to the London Labour Council declaring that:

Brother Campbell was a delegate from Local 27. That we of Local 27 sent him down there and we have all the faith in him that 2300 members have in a man [...] and we don't like what Bro. Reader (another council delegate who criticized Campbell) did [...] He's not just fighting Bro. Campbell, he's fighting Local 27 and the London Labour Council (ALUA).

Other unions at labour council did not successfully pursue the issue any further. Local 27's response to this episode showed that the executive would not stand for anyone outside of the local union attacking one of their members, and that Campbell's skills as a union representative and activist was recognized by the local.

Campbell was elected Local 27 president between 1969 and 1971, following the closure of the Kelvinator plant. He replaced Froude, who was a member of the Kelvinator unit and could not continue as president once his bargaining unit closed. Campbell likely would not have won election as local president had he faced major opposition from large bargaining units like General Motors and Northern Telecom, and would have needed wide electoral support. Local 27 members likely felt that he had shown himself to be a very capable local leader and good choice for president regardless of his political beliefs. Distinctions were made between a person and the ideology that s/he espoused. For instance, a left-leaning political group called the Militant Co-Op picketed the Eaton Automotive plant to protest its closure in 1971. Rank-and-file Eaton Automotive workers were concerned that the protest might jeopardize their severance packages. On the other hand, rank-and-file members may not have agreed with Campbell's politics, but would have noted his relentless efforts to defend their interests. For example, Eaton Auto workers doubtlessly approved of the "Why Campaign" that was led by Campbell and other activists to publicly challenge Eaton Auto management's decision to close the plant when it was supposedly profitable. Signs were placed around the community asking why the plant was closing (*London Free Press*).

Campbell was also well-known as an activist in the New Democratic Party (NDP) Waffle movement, which was committed to a left-wing program for the party. Campbell's involvement in the Waffle was important because, as Yates noted, it was a movement that was largely opposed by the UAW's Canadian leadership. He and Bill Harrington were near the end of their membership in Local 27 by the time that the Waffle's influence peaked in the NDP in 1970 but, despite the absence of references to the Waffle in Local 27 literature, they were

likely not the movement's only supporters in the local. Supporting policies like nationalization of key industries and advocating Quebec nationalism—both part of the Waffle manifesto—would have put Campbell and other activists in further political opposition to groups in Local 27 and elsewhere who endorsed the UAW's official support of the NDP and opposition to the Waffle (Yates 1993).

SUPPORTING WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

It is widely known that women faced considerable challenges when entering industrial unionized jobs in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, Pamela Sugiman (1997:195) has argued that the "UAW remained a patriarchal union whose leaders and members did not respect gender difference" while also noting that the union had made efforts to advance women's issues. The women who were the focus of studies like Sugiman's often relied on one another for support in the UAW. The situation in Local 27 was somewhat different, largely because of efforts by people on the Left like Campbell who inspired rank-and-file women to move into leadership roles. Former activist and UAW staff member Edith Johnston, who was one of the first women to join the union's Canadian staff, commented on men in Local 27 in comparison to others in the UAW, saying:

(It was) probably the different type of people that they (Local 27) had in leadership roles. If I think of Local 222 and 195 and 444 [...] macho, bigtime men, fulltime [...] always at the mic shouting away about stuff, and when I look at Gordon Parker and Bill Froude and Al Campbell; very intelligent people but much quieter.

She recalled being actively encouraged to become involved in union activity shortly after finding work at 3M in London. She also felt that both Froude and Campbell had made deliberate efforts to encourage women to become union activists. She, in turn, eventually inspired other women in Local 27 to become involved in the union (Johnston 2006).

Al Campbell believed that workers should involve their families in union activities, and involved his own family in Local 27. The Local 27 ladies auxiliary was initially led by Mary Campbell, Al's wife at the time and a fellow leftist. It was not a marginal organization despite its emphasis on domesticity. For example, guest speakers were invited to address the auxiliary's 1960 and 1961 on topics like the UAW's history, the New Party Initiative (which would lead to the formation of the New Democratic Party), and school textbooks. Auxiliary members were also able to attend CLC education sessions (L27A). Although the auxiliary was officially separate from the rest of the local, its activities were still aligned with Al Campbell's interest in seeing more women involved in the union.

Campbell's interest in advancing women in the union supports what is currently known about the role of Communists in unions like the UAW that were originally part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003) found that Communist-led international unions more often supported women's concerns—like equal pay—in comparison to their non-Communist counterparts. Sugiman (1997) found a general pattern of indifference to women's issues in the UAW, but noted that those who were members of Local 199 in St. Catharines, which represented McKinnon's workers, had fond memories of Gordon Lambert's support of women in the union. Lambert was also a well-known Communist (Yates 1993). Campbell's attitude toward women was congruent with what other Communists were doing to support women; especially in comparison to Lambert, who supported women on the shop floor.

CREATING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Local 27's main method of creating a sense of community among members, aside from the union hall and committees, was through a monthly newsletter that began in 1957. Initially a simple typewritten and handwritten newsletter, it eventually grew into a more sophisticated publication by the 1970s. The newspaper was another example of the important contribution of the Left caucus within the local as it was largely Campbell's creation. He edited and published it in its early years, and drew many of its editorial cartoons. The newsletter did not always overtly reflect Campbell's personal political orientation, but it did discuss a wide range of topics, some of which were not related to the work process or collective bargaining. At other times, Campbell drew cartoon images that humorously commented on working-class domestic life.

The newsletters always included reports on the local's various bargaining units. There was also often commentary on broader social issues. For instance, a 1959 edition of the newspaper began with a warning about the presence of Strontium 90 in the nation's milk supply (L27A). The local was founded and grew during the Cold War decades, and issues relating to that ideological struggle were covered. Concerns about nuclear war occasionally appeared, such as a 1962 editorial which discussed a Canadian Peace Research Institute (L27A). Such an article may have quietly revealed the political sympathies of activists like Al Campbell. As Reg Whittaker and Gary Marcuse (1994) have noted, the anti-nuclear movement in Canada began with efforts by Communists. The *Local 27 News* was a visible symbol of the impact that Campbell had on the local, and members in all bargaining units would have seen how committed he was to the union.

ACTIVISM AFTER THE UAW

Both Bill Harrington and Al Campbell lost their union membership with the Eaton-Rich closure in 1971, as did Froude when Kelvinator closed in 1969. Plant closures affected Local 27 activists regardless of their political orientation. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the political orientation of their workers influenced Kelvinator and Eaton Auto management to close their London factories. However, regardless of corporate motivations, the Left was gradually diminished through plant closures. Campbell's involvement in the union had sometimes taken a toll on his family. One of his sons recounted how he and his siblings had gone to Communist summer camp, yet came home to read comic books such as *Black Hawk* that included references to "Dirty Commies." He also remembered how other parents would not let their children play with him and his siblings because their father was a known Communist. Some of his children either became union members or were involved in social activism, but Campbell was surely aware of the effect that anti-Communism had on them as children, and it would have made activism a burden as much as it was a calling (Campbell 2007).

Campbell could have joined the UAW as a staff representative, but instead joined the staff of the service employees union (Campbell 2007). In this capacity, he organized a large number of nursing homes, and workers at the Stratford Festival. He continued to walk picket lines in support of workers' rights. For instance, the 1976 Garage Restaurant strike was one of the higher profile labour disputes that occurred in London in the 1970s and Campbell picketed along with the strikers (L27A). He recognized a man entering the restaurant as being a descendant of one of the Tolpuddle Martyrs (Campbell 2007). The Tolpuddle Martyrs were a group of six farm labourers who met to form a union in 1834 (Tolpuddle Martyrs' Museum n.d.). They were convicted of conspiracy and transported to Australia for seven years. Five of them settled just north of London, Ontario after their release in 1844. Campbell harangued the man entering the restaurant, telling him that his ancestor would be turning in his grave if he knew that his descendant was crossing a picket line.

A LASTING LEGACY

Al Campbell retired to Cape Breton in 1984 at age 65, and only once came out of retirement to lead a strike by workers at the London Hospital Linen Service in London, Ontario. He died suddenly in 1995. He was the first recipient of the Tolpuddle Martyrs Award that is given annually to a union activist by the London and District Labour Council (Campbell 2007). Campbell's involvement with Local 27 shows the extent to which one committed Communist activist was able to help shape the development of a large composite local union from the

mid-1950s to the early 1970s. He effectively represented workers, challenged the UAW leadership, and was active in the wider London, Ontario labour movement. Although a Communist, he was not marginalized like activists at other locals. Campbell helped build the Left in the local and supported women's activism in a period when women struggled for acceptance at all levels of the Canadian labour movement.

Campbell's experience in Local 27 raises a particularly important question: how many other people were there like him throughout local unions in Canada in the post-war years and how are they remembered? How many became Communists after facing economic deprivation? Did other activists like Campbell also embrace women's activism at a time when so many other men in the labour movement resisted the efforts made by their union sisters to achieve equality? It is clear, at least in the case of Local 27, that Left activists like Campbell were the people who did the essential work of building unions. There were surely others like him who were instrumental in creating the labour movement across Canada. Their stories must become more central to our understanding of how unions developed in the post-war years.

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