

A Look at the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919

Prairie Struggle

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Contents

The Story	3
The Lessons	4

The Story

Almost a century ago, one of Canada's largest-ever strike actions took place right here on the prairies. On May 15th of 1919, at least 30,000 workers in the city of Winnipeg refused to continue working. Thousands of non-organized workers (on their own initiative) joined the unionized workers who began the strike action that day. This was a general sympathetic strike called to stand in solidarity with the Builders and Metal Trades unions who had been on strike since early May after becoming frustrated during negotiations with their employers. It can be said that this city-wide strike had been quietly simmering for years until reaching a boiling point in May of 1919.

The entire city literally came to a halt that morning. Streetcars stayed put, factories went quiet, shops and stores were empty. The working class people of Winnipeg were taking a stand to demand an improvement of their daily lives.

The striking workers formed the Strike Committee, made up of three delegates from each union in the city. The purpose of this committee was to authoritatively direct the workers and their strike. One of the first acts of the Committee was to ask the city police to remain on duty, (even though they had also voted to also go on strike) so that they could maintain "law and order". This was a measure used to ensure that the strikers maintained as much public legitimacy or "moral high-ground" as possible. It also served to slow down the rise of tension between the workers and the forces of government and capital.

Another committee was also formed: The Citizens' Committee of 1000. Its members were the magnates of the city, the true capitalists and reactionaries. They held a considerable amount of power within the city, and their main objective was to crush the strike.

The Strike Committee ensured that certain essential services continued during the strike. The Citizens' Committee filled other, more or less 'essential' services with volunteers.

As the days wore on and the strike continued, three demands of the strikers came to the fore: 1. The right to collective bargaining, 2. A living wage, and 3. Re-employment of all strikers. These demands made sense, since all three were under great threat at the time. It was also a common sentiment among the pro-strikers that Canadian soldiers active in Russia should be withdrawn.

The government and capitalists used many strategies to try and break the strike. One was singling out immigrants, labeling them as "aliens", and trying to have them deported on the grounds that they were malicious agitators and infiltrators of the Canadian working class. The strike was also accused of being a Bolshevik-inspired attempt to overthrow the state and install a communist style of government. However, the strikers made it quite clear repeatedly that they were not at all interested in orchestrating a revolution, or in participating in any sort of disorder for that matter.

The strikers in Winnipeg received messages of support and solidarity from throughout Canada, especially in the form of a sympathetic strike in Vancouver and the endorsement of the Toronto Star newspaper. This improved the morale of the striking workers in Winnipeg.

Another major factor that affected the play-out of the strike was the mixed stances of the recently returned veterans from World War 1. Large numbers of these widely unemployed men supported the strike, and in reaction a large number also chose to oppose it. These two elements proved to be highly influential in the anti-/pro-strike debate.

Tensions continued to rise. The mayor of Winnipeg issued an ultimatum to the city's police force, which was unionized, demanding that within 24 hours they sign a contract stating they

will never be a member of a union. The entire police force refused to sign the contract, and in a surprising turn of events, they were all fired. The mayor then improvised a new policing force, the “Special Police”. Many of these men were returned soldiers. These “specials” would become notorious in the city for being unprofessional and reckless, patrolling the city armed with their wooden clubs and a limited grasp of the law.

On June 17th, a handful of strike leaders were arrested at night, many in their homes and all without a warrant. These men were immediately taken to Stony Mountain jail. It was announced that they would stand trial for seditious conspiracy, and it was clear that the authorities wished to deport them as soon as possible. This was an obvious attempt to “knock out the bottom” of the strike and topple it.

On June 21st, the animosity that had been festering in the city came to head. A mass parade was called to protest the arrest of the strike leaders. Outside City Hall, mounties and Specials attacked the parade by rushing into the crowd on horseback, firing revolvers and swinging bats. They killed two and injured thirty people. The Special Police continued the attack as the crowd began to disperse, with the violence mostly one-sided, though strikers did fight back somewhat. At some point a streetcar was toppled and set ablaze. The day ended with a military occupation of the city.

The independent labour press took a hard hit when the editors of the Western Labour News were all arrested. The strike leaders were let out of Stony Mountain on bail only after the widespread public outrage which stemmed from the arrests. However, the accused were all eventually tried. Seven were convicted of conspiracy and sent to prison.

The Strike Committee called off the strike on June 26th, hoping to avoid any further violence. They made a point to the workers that their struggle would go on, but now it would have to take place on the political scene. Many workers were jailed, deported, or fired. A large number of veterans filled in the vacant jobs left open by the fired strikers. A few pro-strike labour candidates were elected in the 1920 Manitoba provincial election. But essentially, the strike had been defeated. It would still be many years before collective bargaining would be recognized, and most of the living-wage demands made by the workers were not met. Only very minimal gains had been won.

The Lessons

The strike is often remembered only as a historical spectacle, an event in Winnipeg’s past that lends it some character. It may be easy to look at it as a failure, considering what it set out to do and what it actually accomplished. But the most important aspects of this story are the ones that seem to be often overlooked. The learnable lessons from this story can be immensely valuable to us now.

What started out as a single union on strike became a city-wide general strike in sympathy. This demonstrates a strong sense of solidarity among the workers of the time, something that we need to work towards now if we are serious about attacking capitalism and the state from a working class base.

The strike of 1919 also occurred during a time of great oppression on behalf of the Canadian government. With the World War just finished, and communism bursting onto the world scene in Russia, governments everywhere began to fear and crackdown on all forms of dissent within

their borders. In such a harsh climate, it is admirable to see such a considerable mobilization of organized labour, within which the authorities were constantly searching out and snatching up supposed 'Reds'.

The true nature of the state and capital was revealed when they feared losing the upper hand in the social landscape. As shown during the events of June 21st, 1919 they will resort to violent, underhanded tactics to put down any dangerous (i.e., effective) resistance by the working class. This is no less true today. In fact, conspiracy charges and heavy-handed political repression have been revived recently, particularly during the arrests of protesters during the anti-G20 mobilizations in the summer of 2010 at Toronto. This is something we must never forget for our current battles and the battles to come.

There was an obvious tendency towards centralization in the labour movement in the Winnipeg of 1919, and this is clearly the same today. The Strike Committee (perhaps completely unchallenged) dictated the strike, deciding everything from calling it to calling it off. What could the workers of Winnipeg have been capable of without the shackles of this central authority? Perhaps they might have been less unified, but the resulting more dynamic resistance might have been more effective in actually winning some gains from the capitalists. Remember, the Committee continually espoused Law and Order like a holy creed. They literally instructed the workers to "do nothing" during the strike. Meanwhile, they could have been building dual power or putting all that freed-up time to something useful and lasting.

The anti-globalization protests of recent years have shown that there are many downsides to massive demonstrations. Instead of strikers only taking part in 'authorized activities', such as participating in mass parades, they could have put to work a more spontaneous, creative, decentralized strategy. Mass demonstrations can be powerful, but they are just one tactic of many and there needs to be a diversity of tactics if the working class is going to create an effective resistance movement.

It has been said that the workers were too confident about their strike, that they overestimated the righteousness of their action. This is clear in how they figured that all they had to do during the strike was 'nothing'. This attitude resulted in a lack of pragmatic thinking that ultimately led to the strike's failure.

The Strike Committee wanted to be sure that the strike could last as long as possible, so they ensured that certain essential services remained functional during the strike. This is an illustration of a lack of revolutionary character to the strike. They wanted business as usual to continue, but with a living wage in their pockets. In his book *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, David Jay Brewson wrote: "The workers themselves became the chief strikebreakers when they accepted a responsibility to keep society functioning at the very beginning of the walkout." In other words, had the workers shut down the city completely, they could have had more leverage for the fight.

The strike of 1919 condemned itself to reformism from the beginning, with their insistence that they were not revolutionaries. While certainly there may have been revolutionaries in their ranks, the majority of the workers simply wanted their unions to be recognized, and to be paid a living wage. While these are admirable demands, they would fail to do away with the system which was exploiting them in the first place.

The strikers aimed to use the general strike as an industrial weapon rather than a political one, when in reality it can only truly be a political weapon. Sure, a strike can be an effective tactic to win some gains, but at the heart, the general strike is a means to revolution. A true general

strike seeks to shut down the reigning system completely—in order to dismantle it and then begin building up a new, better one.

In the end, looking back, this strike can be looked at as a failure. But to do so would be missing a large part of the picture. It was one of the longest and largest strikes in North American history. In sheer scope, it is an impressive accomplishment. Perhaps we should be grateful then, for it's mistakes as well. We can learn from them now, and apply these lessons whenever we might find ourselves in such an electric situation.

It could also be said that general strikes are simmering in Canadian cities today as it did in the years leading up to 1919 in Winnipeg. There is certainly no shortage of reasons to take strike actions. But if these potential situations are going to take on a revolutionary character, there is a lot of work to be done. Nearly all unions are bureaucratic nightmares these days, and it's common knowledge that the original spirit of working class resistance is dead. The unions need to be taken over and re-purposed in the interests of their members, and anti-capitalist class consciousness needs to be cultivated among the workers of today if we are to pose any threat to the current exploitative system.

By the Brandon PSO Branch

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