

On the morning of May 15, 1919, the operators of the Manitoba Government Telephone System didn't show up for their 7am shift. These women, dubbed the "Hello Girls", were the first workers to walk off the job during Winnipeg's General Strike of 1919. The strike is the most famous labour protest in Canadian history. The following is an imaginary journal entry by one of the 'Hello Girls', whom I've called Josephine Fitzgerald.

May 14th, 1919 – Winnipeg, Manitoba

Dear Diary:

It's been a hard go this May, what with all the ruckus about the City denying the metal workers' demands. Before all this union business started, I didn't know one whit about unions or the Building Trades Council or even that we girls had rights whatsoever. Peggy was the one who told me all about it.

Peg's my best friend in the world, and she knows about such things. She's smart, plus she's the one who got me the job here at the MGTS in the first place, for which I'm ever so grateful. We work answering telephones at the Garry Exchange on Charlotte Street. They call us "Hello Girls", which I used to like because it sounded kind of posh. That was, until Peggy explained things.

Peggy says Mrs. Armstrong is right: we women workers (well, workers in general) must unite if we are ever to get ahead. God's truth, I wouldn't have known dear Mrs. Helen Armstrong if she'd smacked right into me on Portage Avenue. Not 'till Peg told me about her.

Peg says Mrs. A. is the only woman out there fighting for us girls, and we should back her. I figure Peg must be right. Her brother, Peter, works at Vulcan Iron Works over in Point Douglas. She says he talks about union business all the time. Peter makes sure we understand the importance of worker's rights and fair pay. Right now, Peg says he works 10 hours a day for a half dollar an hour. It doesn't sound very fair, considering how poor conditions are over there. All that coal dust and soot. It's a wonder he doesn't have

some sort of lung problems. Peter says the only way for things to change is for the workers to unite. That way, the bosses will be forced to treat all of us better.

Yes, Peg and me are all for fair pay. "Josephine, we need to do what needs must," Peg said to me the other day, and it sounded like good sense to me.

The plan is for us to walk off the job at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning. The rest are to join in at 11 o'clock. I must say, I'm more than a bit frightened about what might happen out there. The men are certainly steamed up, as they usually are when it comes to a fight, especially when drink is involved. All I want to know is if I'll still have a job after this is done and dusted. I'm afraid I won't, and that is what scares me. What scares me more is the thought of ending up in the hoosegow. My dear mother, rest her soul, would never forgive me for such a thing.

I'm worried about my living arrangements, too. I've been renting a room in Mrs. Eccles' boarding house over on Dufferin, but what shall I do without a wage to pay my rent? I'm no welcher, and that's the truth. Peggy says she and Peter and Mrs. Davies will take me in. I'm sure I don't see how that will help if all three of us are out of work.

Yesterday in the Tribune, the owners of Vulcan were quoted as saying they'll never be told what to do by their workers. I say the Messrs. Barret needs must learn their Bible better and remember what the Book of Proverbs tell us: 'Pride goeth before a fall'. Who's to say those posh gents know best about how to run their company? Peter says he'd give a days' wages just to see those two on the shop floor, amidst all the soot and smoke.

Peter says the workers will walk out all at once tomorrow, that the vote to strike had 11,000 'ayes' and only 500 'nays'. I suppose that must give us comfort. At least we won't be alone out there. Mayor Gray says he won't stand for any strikes, but I don't know how he supposes he'll stop us. And that means the

streetcar drivers, the mailmen, even the fellows who deliver bread and ice! I expect the whole of Winnipeg will be shut down right quick, if everything goes to plan.

Peg told me what happened last year, when the city workers went on strike. Teamsters, electricians and firefighters all walked off. Then another 8,000 railway and other works walked out, and that made the city come to the bargaining table. Peter says that's what discussions about wages and work weeks are called: the bargaining table. All I know is, I hope that I get to that table. I want to know that I'll be paid a fair wage, so as I can afford to pay my rent and save a bit for my future. Peggy says that's what we're fighting for: our future and the future of all those who come after us.

To be sure, tomorrow is a big day.

Yours faithfully,

Josie