

1919 Winnipeg General Strike

Six Weeks of Solidarity and Beyond

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A hundred years ago, at the end of the First World War, the country was trying to deal with a failing economy. As a result, inflation sky rocketed, money and food were scarce, living and work conditions were deplorable. What did the people of Winnipeg do to combat these issues? The workers fighting for change sent out a call for help. And help they got. The following account explains the workers plight, the government's reactions and the historic results that changed the state of Canadian workers.

It's June 21st, 1919, a Saturday morning. How could things go so wrong concerning negotiating decent pay for work, making food and clothing available, and providing livable housing? Does banding together for a cause create solidarity among workers? Did the lack of understanding or lack of willingness to understand collective bargaining cause fear and violence? It did and in order to understand why and how things evolved we must go back six weeks.

The war had just ended and soldiers came home to find the country in decline. Inflation was out of control. Factories were shutting down and bankruptcies were everywhere. Winnipeg's Building and Metal Workers were fed up, frustrated and angry with trying to bargain with owners. They thought they had collective bargaining rights but were stonewalled by management. The wages were inadequate and working conditions were appalling. The workers needed better wages and improved working conditions in order to survive.

Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council sent out an appeal for a general strike in support of the workers. A Strike Committee was formed with 300 members and on May 15th, 1919. By 11:00 A.M. 30,000 workers had walked off their jobs. To everyone's surprise, the first workers to walk out were the "Hello Girls" telephone operators (Bernhardt, 2019). The 30,000 included both women and men, union and non-union workers. This number has never been confirmed but

it is estimated to be one-sixth of the population of Winnipeg (Bernhardt, 2019). Paul Moist, former national president of CUPE described the number of people joining the strike massive. “It was massive, massive in scale” (Hoye, 2019). Think about this, in a city that had a population of approximately 175,000 an unprecedented 30,000 workers had walked off the job. The strike went on for six weeks and virtually the whole city grounded to a halt. Transportation, home deliveries, postal services all ceased. With the Hello Girls on strike even phone calls were not being patched through. Some essential services also chose to walk off. In response to the striking workers the city formed a Citizens’ Strike Committee made up of 1000 members of Winnipeg’s most prominent and influential residents. The Federal Government was watching closely what was happening in Winnipeg. They were becoming extremely nervous as they were afraid the unrest would spread to the rest of Canada. If strikers can shut down Winnipeg what would it be like if other cities did the same thing? Imagine what would happen if the country shut down? Afraid for what may happen the Federal Government sent Cabinet Ministers to meet with the Citizens’ Committee but they did not meet with the Strike Committee. After meeting with the cabinet ministers, the Federal government ordered federal employees back to work and ordered them to sign anti-union cards or be fired. (Canadian Public Health Association, 2019). The Mayor took matters into his own hands and fired the majority of the police department because he felt many of them were sympathetic to the strikers. He replaced them with an untrained police force referred to as the *specials*. On June 17th, the federal government ordered the arrest of ten strike leaders (Canadian Public Health Association, 2019). People were outrage about the arrests and had had enough.

On June 21st approximately 25,000 strikers assembled for a peaceful demonstration in front of city hall. The mayor ordered the Northwest Mounted Police and military to control the

crowds. At the same time a streetcar operated by what the protesters believed to be the Citizens' Committee volunteers, drove into the strikers. The angry strikers retaliated by overturning and setting the streetcar on fire (Reilly and Rielly, 2019). Fear rang through those in power and they decided the only way to control the demonstration was with violence. The *specials* along with the Northwest Mounted Police, rode on horseback into the crowd of protesters and attacked them with clubs, baseball bats and guns. Bloody Saturday had begun and in the end two people were dead and many more injured (CBC Learning, 2001).

It is June 21st, 1919 - Bloody Saturday. What started six weeks ago in peaceful protest, ended in violence. On June 25th, 1919 at 11:00 A.M. in fear of more violence and for the safety of everyone, the strikers decided to end the strike and return to work. What looked like a defeat, because the leaders were arrested and the workers went back to work without any resolution to their demands, actually laid the foundation for unions to build on in the coming years. Nolan Reilly, retired University of Winnipeg professor summarized the end of the strike "The workers may have been defeated in terms of their immediate objectives, but the work to change the world, certainly to change the city and their own neighborhoods—that didn't come to an end. In fact, one might say it intensified." (Lambert, 2019).

J.S. Woodsworth, one of the strike leaders who was arrested and sentenced to one year in jail, founded The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, (Canadian Public Health Association, 2019). This organization eventually became the New Democratic Party, ensuring Canadians would have representation in government to support their fight for fair and equitable working conditions by supporting the development of unions and the collective bargaining process.

We will continue the fight
In Solidarity

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