

WHY THE 1919 WINNIPEG GENERAL STRIKE MATTERS TO CANADIANS

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The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike is one of the most influential strikes in all of Canada, or so we are told. While the Winnipeg Strike of 1919 may be increasingly known, Canadians still need to be better aware of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike's impact in shaping Canada through its influence on labour, women's rights and government.

Within post-WWI economic disparity, the 1919 Winnipeg Strike provided a platform for workers to voice dissatisfaction. What started out as a walkout in early May by Building Trades Council members, culminated on May 15, 1919 when 30,000 Manitobans in support of the metalworkers strike walked off their jobs.¹ Historian Allan Levine's article "The 1919 General Strike was a battle for Winnipeg's soul" refers to the breakdown between classes:

The General Strike was "one of the greatest ruptures between the workers and the upper class in the history of commercial society (second only to the Paris Commune of 1871), write Brandon University professors Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchel in their 2010 study of the strike, *When the State Trembled*.²

As job walkouts increased, protests between workers and anti-strikers continued. Economic disparity fed by lack of improved wages against rising inflation as well as influence by Russian worker uprising fueled protests. Loss of life by two Winnipeg workers on June 21, 1919, Bloody Saturday added to the discord. Kevin Rebeck, president of the Manitoba Federation of Labour, sums all that Canadians should take note in the strike's cry for labour justice.

The strike and its aftermath saw changes in governments, forced the federal government to review living and working conditions, led to the first minimum wage in Canada and set the stage for things like employment standards, health and safety laws and many of the other fundamental rules that protect Canadians on the job today.³

¹ Kenneth McNaught and David J. Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike: 1919*, (Don Mills: Longman Canada Limited, 1974), 34.

² Allan Levine, "The 1919 General Strike was a battle for Winnipeg's soul," *The Globe and Mail*, (2019), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-1919-general-strike-was-a-battle-for-winnipegs-soul/>.

³ Levine, "The 1919 General Strike."

The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike encouraged women to voice their discontent regarding working conditions and become active contributors which influenced how women viewed their roles as demonstrated by the “hello girls” telephone operators. Unfortunately recognition of women’s contributions within the strike need improvement as indicated in “Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919” by Mary Horodyski.

Gerda Lerner, one of the founding mothers of women’s history, has stated “the excuse of traditional historians for their neglect of women in history - that this reflected nothing more than a dearth of sources - has long since become untenable.”⁴

Horodyski points out women’s participation demonstrated in newspapers such as the *Citizen*, the *Winnipeg Tribune*, reveal they were active within the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Helen Armstrong for instance, born in 1875, president of the Women’s Labour League Helen was a public supporter of the strike as noted in Paula Kelly’s article “Looking for Mrs. Armstrong:”⁵

In 1919, during the six week Winnipeg General Strike, she (Helen Armstrong) was front- and -centre organizing female workers, picketing, managing a striker’s soup kitchen, signing up new union members, speaking, and marching until she ended up in jail on June 24...After the strike she continued to advocate for working women...⁶

Contributions by women in the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike mattered, from standing in food - lines, to actively supporting the strikers, to even working as “scabs” against the strikers’ in shaping the social and economic landscape of Canadian society. We as Canadians are indebted in our awareness to the strike’s influence and call-out regarding women’s rights.

The impact of the Winnipeg General Strike on the Canadian government in addressing labour discord changed the face of labour. Communication by the citizen’s committee who opposed the strikers was often negative. Those in government, business and within the upper

⁴ Mary Horodyski, “Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919,” *Manitoba History* 11, (1986), https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/11/women1919_strike.shtml

⁵ Paula Kelly, “Looking for Mrs. Armstrong,” *The Beaver* 82, no. 3 (2002): 20-26, <https://go.galegroup.com.uml.idm.oclc.org/>.

⁶ Kelly, “Looking,” 20.

class who made up the citizen's committee as opponents of the strikers, falsely accused Winnipeg labour unions of seeking government anarchy in imitation of the Russian Bolsheviks. According to McNaught and Bercuson in their book *The Winnipeg Strike: 1919* the accusation by the citizen's committee towards the strikers was false as most Winnipeg labourers walked out because of their frustration due to poor working conditions, low wages and lack of union bargaining rights.

...the strikers categorically denied there had been any attempt to overthrow legally constituted authority at Winnipeg and maintained, as they had during the strike, the central issues were union recognition and collective bargaining rights.⁷

McNaught and Bercuson also state that Canadian workers while discouraged by the current capitalist system, were adamant that their intent was not to support the overthrow of the government as falsely claimed by the citizen's committee.

The strikers, they maintained wished to see workers controlling Canadian industries to reap the full product of their toil and eliminate production for profit. They denied however, any violent revolutionary intent in the strike and maintained that the workers would have opposed the strike if they had believed it was a concealed attempt to overthrow the government.⁸

The effects of the Winnipeg labour dispute had repercussions within both the labour movement as well as government as described by author W. L. Morton in his book *Manitoba: A History*.

...the strike had several long-term results. It immediately weakened and divided labour in the period following the disastrous collapse of the strike, but ultimately established labour as a force to be reckoned with in the community. It also split the city into two bitterly opposed political camps.⁹

The final outcome of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike impacted the Canadian government not only in its dealings with the labour movement but as well within the political shaping of the

⁷ McNaught and Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike*, 100.

⁸ McNaught and Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike*, 101.

⁹ McNaught and Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike*, 114.

development of a more fortified voice within the Canadian labour movement that demanded to be taken seriously. Canadian labourers take note!

The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike without question is one of the most influential strikes in Canada. The relevancy and importance of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike matters in its influence on labour, government and women rights within Canada. The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike's fight against lack in wages, worker rights and union recognition, reminds Canadians to never take for granted their rights as labourers and unions.

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