

## Labour Divided: Lessons from the Winnipeg General Strike

I must first admit that despite my history degree from the University of Manitoba, I knew little about the *Winnipeg General Strike*. It is 100 years old this year and a flurry of activities commemorating the events of 1919 are planned. Yet even now, the *Strike* and its aftermath seem historically undervalued, often perceived as a relic of its time and no longer relevant; a statue or mural should suffice. Not wanting to rehash the established narrative, I began this essay by consulting the newspapers of the day, many of which are available through the University of Manitoba's digital archives. Events primarily played out in two newspapers: the pro-strike *Western Labour News*, and the anti-strike *Winnipeg Citizen*. They present a day-by-day account of a city and a society in flux, overflowing with optimism, but with an undercurrent of danger. This essay will examine the *Strike* through perspectives in the news media and provide some insight into its current relevance. First it is necessary to set the scene.

In the spring of 1919, much of Europe and North America were in disarray. The First World War had just ended--after four years of seemingly endless carnage--and economies were in tatters. In Russia, Vladimir Lenin led a Bolshevik revolution, which overthrew Czar Nicholas II and sent a shudder throughout the capitalist world. Not only did Lenin pull Russia from the War in 1917--briefly upsetting the power balance--but the main capitalist social order was suddenly threatened internally by workers and peasants. With Great Britain victorious and rampant rumours of war profiteering,<sup>1</sup> labourers in North America started demanding better working conditions and a greater share of industrial wealth. Emboldened by events in Russia, labour organizers created the *One Big Union (OBU)*, which, as its title describes, combined all the major trade and labour unions under one umbrella. Their objectives were the right to collective bargaining and the right to a living wage.

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<sup>1</sup> "Turmoil on the Homefront: Profits for Lives," *CBC Learning. Canada: A People's History*, 2001. <https://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP12CH2PA5LE.html>

In May of 1919, Winnipeg became the epicenter of labour strife when the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council called a general strike. In the spirit of the *OBU*, other unions followed suit and within days some 30,000 people were on strike including city police, and the fire department.<sup>2</sup> A collection of prominent Winnipeg business leaders and lawyers formed the *Committee of 1000* to oppose the strike. They had two weapons at their disposal: a private police force (whom the *Western Labour News* called “thugs”), and a carefully organized propaganda campaign spun through their newspaper, the *Winnipeg Citizen*. The *Citizen's* primary focus was to label the strike as a Bolshevik revolution:

“It (*Winnipeg General Strike*) is a serious attempt to overturn British institutions in this Western country and to supplant them with the Russian Bolshevik system of Soviet rule.”<sup>3</sup>

This dovetailed with their other wedge issue: the dreaded “alien” who was working for Russia and had deep--yet mysterious--ties to Germany. The *Committee* aimed anti-alien propaganda at thousands of soldiers returning from Europe, many of whom struggled to find employment. These aliens, who were primarily Ukrainian and Jewish immigrants, had flooded into cities for war manufacturing, but after the war, some believed these immigrant workers should be cast aside and their jobs redistributed to unemployed veterans. The *Committee of 1000* appealed to anti-alien veterans by claiming that the *OBU* sought to protect “alien enemies.”<sup>4</sup> On June 12th, the *Committee's* police raided the Swift-Canadian meatpacking plant in St. Boniface and arrested two immigrant workers, allegedly for subversive behaviour. The *Winnipeg Telegram* headline proclaimed: “Arrest Dangerous Aliens!”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Reilly, J. Nolan. “Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, February 17, 2006, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/winnipeg-general-strike>

<sup>3</sup> *Winnipeg Citizen*. Winnipeg, MB: Citizen's Committee of One Thousand. Vol. 1, No. 1, May 19, 1919, <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/2758817>

<sup>4</sup> *Winnipeg Citizen*. Winnipeg, MB: Citizen's Committee of One Thousand. Vol. 1, No. 7, May 26, 1919, <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/2758797>

<sup>5</sup> *Winnipeg Telegram Strike Editions*. Winnipeg, MB: Winnipeg Telegram. Vol. 26, No. 105, June 12, 1919, <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/2767806>

The *Western Labour News* disputed these claims, saying any connection to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia was fear-mongering by the *Committee of 1000*.<sup>6</sup> They argued that the principle tenets of the League of Nations (the failed precursor to the U.N.) included labour rights, such as a living wage and the right to free association. Later in their June 13th edition they attacked the *Committee of 1000* for their anti-alien rhetoric:

“The only conclusion to be drawn... is that the anti-alien campaign of the ‘Citizens Committee’ is a desperate expedient, deliberately waged to confuse the issue, to disrupt the ranks of organized labor [sic], to deceive the public and to distract attention from the misdeeds of the exploiting class.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Strike* reached its apogee on June 21<sup>st</sup> with a riot in downtown Winnipeg and the iconic photograph of strikers attempting to flip a streetcar, but a brutal crackdown by the *Committee’s* private militia and mass arrests of both strike leaders and immigrants eventually broke the will of strikers. Many immigrants were detained without trial and threatened with deportation, although most were not involved in the *Strike*.<sup>8</sup>

While the *Strike* may have failed in 1919, it spurred the rise of the labour movement in Canada. Unfortunately, the objectives of the *OBU* have never been fully realized, as new legislation in Manitoba seeks to undermine collective bargaining,<sup>9</sup> while a simple increase in the minimum wage is met with apocalyptic fear-mongering.<sup>10</sup> Yet, between 1984 and 2014, the

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<sup>6</sup> *Western Labor News*. Winnipeg: Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council. No. 24, June 13, 1919, <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/2758639>

<sup>7</sup> *Western Labor News*. Winnipeg: Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council. No. 24, June 13, 1919, <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/2758639>

<sup>8</sup> *Strikers Defense Bulletin*. Winnipeg, Man:s.n., No. 4, August 27, 1919, <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/2746968>

<sup>9</sup> Geary, Aidan. “Unions, government duke it out on Bill 7,” *CBC News*, October, 27, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/unions-government-duke-it-out-on-bill-7-1.3825325>

<sup>10</sup> Evans, Pete. “Minimum wage hikes could cost Canada's economy 60,000 jobs by 2019,” *CBC News*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/bank-of-canada-minimum-wage-1.4469912>

upper 0.01% of wage earners have seen their salaries increase by over 130%, while the bottom 50% of wages earners have seen their income decrease by almost 30%.<sup>11</sup>

Just as the *Committee of 1000* found a scapegoat in focusing veterans' rage on the "enemy alien," today anti-immigrant political messaging--disguised as pragmatism and protecting borders--is mainstream discourse. Polls show that Canadians are increasingly racist<sup>12</sup> and throughout the World, the working class is fueling right-wing, anti-immigrant, populism.<sup>13</sup> This should be vexing to anyone who has studied the *Winnipeg General Strike*, because the salient lesson from this event is that unity and inclusivity are crucial to labour's success. Immigrants and refugees must be viewed as allies and not "enemy aliens." The exploiting class still uses the media to spread propaganda and stoke division among the working class. They understand that a divided labour movement is weak. We need the spirit of the *OBU* to rise again.

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<sup>11</sup> *Statistics Canada*. "The fall and rise of Canada top income earners." May 17, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016009-eng.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Graves, Frank. "The EKOS poll: Are Canadians getting more racist?" *iPolitics*, March 12, 2015, <https://ipolitics.ca/2015/03/12/the-ekos-poll-are-canadians-getting-more-racist/>

<sup>13</sup> Gidron, Noam and Peter A. Hall. "The Politics of Social Status: Economic and Cultural Roots of the Populist Right," *Harvard: Mass.*, 2017, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/hall/files/gidronhall2017bjs.pdf> (pg. 1)