



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Canadian workers wage general strike in Winnipeg, Canada, 1919

Time period notes: Movement towards the strike began on 1 May, but the general strike did not begin until 15 May.

May 15,

1919

to: June 25,

1919

Country: Canada

Location City/State/Province: Winnipeg, Manitoba

Goals:

To establish secure workers' rights, specifically concerned with working conditions, wages, recognition, and collective bargaining rights.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 048. Protest meetings
- 051. Walk-outs
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 161. Nonviolent harassment
- 180. Alternative communication system › The Western Labour News (newspaper)
- 182. Stay-in strike › Police continued to report for duty, but officially remained on strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 161. Nonviolent harassment
- 180. Alternative communication system
- 182. Stay-in strike › Police continued to report for duty, but officially remained on strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 161. Nonviolent harassment
- 180. Alternative communication system
- 182. Stay-in strike › Police continued to report for duty, but officially remained on strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 142. Selective refusal of assistance by government aides › Refusal to sign no-strike agreement
- 161. Nonviolent harassment
- 180. Alternative communication system
- 182. Stay-in strike › Police continued to report for duty, but officially remained on strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 161. Nonviolent harassment
- 180. Alternative communication system

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 161. Nonviolent harassment
- 180. Alternative communication system

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Women
- city workers
- immigrants
- labourers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Metal Trades Council, Building Trades Council, Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council, Central Strike Committee, J.S. Woodsworth, Abram A. Heaps, Roger E. Bray, William E. Ivens, George Armstrong, Frederick J. Dixon, John Queen, Robert B. Russell, Richard J. Johns, Helen Armstrong

Partners:

Great War Veterans Association, A.E. Moore

External allies:

The Toronto Star, One Big Union, sympathetic workers elsewhere who struck in solidarity

Involvement of social elites:

not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- A.E. Moore
- Great War Veterans Association

Groups in 4th Segment:

- J.S. Woodsworth
- Police

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 6 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Manufacturers, employers, bankers and politicians; 'Citizens Committee of One Thousand,' federal, provincial, and municipal governments

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Published an anti-strike paper called the Citizen

Campaigner violence:

pulling Mounted Police off horses, throwing stones at police

Repressive Violence:

Arrests, beatings, imprisonment, two killings

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The general strike was crushed by the political power and violence of the federal government and employers. There is little account of any concessions made to the workers. Only decades after the strike ended did Canadian workers secure union recognition and collective bargaining. However, some claim the strike helped alter the political atmosphere for upcoming elections, out of which more liberal governments pledged to reform labor standards.

The strike committee and unions survived throughout the strike campaign, although they lost support in the years afterwards.

The campaign grew in support greatly until it was crushed. The strike spread throughout Winnipeg and then to other cities in Canada.

Following World War I, Canada was suffering massive unemployment and inflation. A wave of unsuccessful strikes across Canada, the 1917 overthrow of the Tsarist regime in Russia, and the growth of revolutionary industrial unionism created an atmosphere of labor unrest in a country that had almost no labor regulations.

In March 1919, diverse labor leaders met in Calgary in Western Canada to discuss the creation of an industrial union to be called the One Big Union to work for higher wages, improved working conditions, official union recognition and collective bargaining.

On 1 May 1919, when the Winnipeg Building Trades Council went on strike and then the Winnipeg Metal Trades Council struck the next day, the struggle reached a new level.

The Building Trades Council (BTC) and the Metal Trades Council (MTC) had been attempting to negotiate with their employers in the Builder's Exchange and the Metal Trades Contractors on the topic of collective bargaining but were making no headway. For one thing, the Contractors refused to recognize the MTC as a legitimate union.

On 6 May both unions met with leaders of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council who agreed to poll its other member unions on the idea of forcing the issues with a general strike. A week later, the final tally was 8,667 for and 645 against.

On Thursday, 15 May 1919 at 11:00 AM, over 22,000 workers walked off their jobs in Winnipeg.

Among the strikers were many women who worked as telephone operators, wholesale and retail clerks, and bakery workers. Telephone operators were notorious for unplugging fuses on their boards before walking out. The most well-known among striking women was Helen Armstrong, a leading figure in the women's rights movement in Winnipeg at the time. She was also the wife of strike leader George Armstrong.

The strikers's impact was widespread: trains and factories halted, postal workers and firefighters joined private industry strikers. Police officially joined the strike but continued to report to duty to keep the city from being placed under martial law. Delegates elected from each of the unions formed a Central Strike Committee to coordinate the mass movement. The Committee bargained on behalf of the workers to make sure essential services still operated in the city.

Winnipeg's most powerful manufacturers, employers, bankers, and politicians organized the Citizens Committee of One Thousand to coordinate opposition to a strike they feared might represent the beginning of a revolution. Mainstream newspapers were hostile to the strike, joining the Citizens Committee in calling the strikers "alien scum," "Bolsheviks," and "bohunks."

The day after the general strike began, workers who printed and distributed these papers shut them down by walking out. The popular newspaper Western Labour News, sponsored by the unions, distributed the Strike Committee's announcements and notification.

The Citizens Committee countered by establishing on 19 May its own anti-strike newspaper called the Citizen. By 3 June the mainstream newspapers restored their regular distribution and redoubled their condemnation of the strike.

RETURNED SOLDIERS AND NON-UNIONIZED WOMEN CHOOSE SIDES

Members of various veteran associations met on the first day of the strike to discuss their standing regarding the grievances being protested by the unions. The veterans' grievances were different from those of the initial strikers.

Between 1891 and 1921 the population of Winnipeg grew from 26,000 to 179,000, due largely to immigration. 40% of the immigrants came from Britain and parts of Eastern Europe. Soldiers returned home to find many jobs filled by these immigrant workers and some aggressively protested against the presence of these people.

The majority of veterans decided to support the strike, most notably the Great War Veterans Association. However, many veterans opposed the strike because of the large immigrant presence among the strikers. Some of them formed the Loyalists Veterans' Association which would later play a role in the conflict.

Many women also opposed the strike. Known by strikers as "daughters of the wealthy" these women were derogatorily referred to as "scabs," since they volunteered in roles vacated by strikers. They became distributors for the newspapers and resumed telephone services. A great deal of harassment from strikers was directed at these figures through abusive phone calls and targeting on the streets.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INTERVENES

On 22 May Arthur Meighen, Canadian Minister of Justice and future Prime Minister, and Senator Gideon Robertson, Minister of Labour, arrived in Winnipeg to meet with city officials as well as members of the Citizens Committee. They did not meet with representatives of the Strike Committee or its allies. On 25 May 25, these federal officials issued ultimatums to various groups striking from their jobs in federal institutions, then fired those who refused to go back to work.

A day later, on advice from Meighen, the Canadian House of Commons officially recognized the strike as a revolution and not a labour strike. In an attempt to keep veterans neutral, Premier Tobias C. Norris established the Alien Investigation Board, but its membership was generally supportive of the strike's ideals, such as A. E. Moore who represented pro-strike veterans, and they were more focussed on targeting the immigrant demographic.

On June 1, 10,000 veterans marched from City Hall to the Legislative Building to confront city officials and proclaim solidarity with the strike. Chief among these leaders was R. E. Bray, the most vocal member of the Strike Committee. Bray frequently led meetings of pro-strike veterans in Victoria Park

On June 6, PM Robert Borden's Manitoba government passed new legislation that allowed for immediate deportation of any immigrant deemed by Manitoba's Alien Investigation Board to be disloyal or seditious. This act was targeted directly at the

immigrant members of the strike.

In response to this threat, former Methodist minister J. S. Woodsworth returned to his hometown of Winnipeg from Vancouver and became a leading force behind the Winnipeg General Strike. Woodsworth was a massive advocate for socialist ideals and hugely supportive of workers' rights. Organizers from One Big Union also arrived to offer help to the threatened workers.

When a majority of the city's police officers refused to sign a no-strike pledge, they were immediately fired. In their place an 1800-man force was hired and supplied with horses and baseball bats; many of these were from the Loyalist Veterans' Association. The Citizens' Committee of One Thousand called them the "Special Police."

LEADERS ARRESTED; TENSION GROWS

During the night of June 16, the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, the Canadian national police force now known as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, broke into the homes and arrested strike leaders Bray and Armstrong as well as leaders John Queen, Robert B. Russell, future MP Abram A. Heaps, Richard J. Johns, William J. Pritchard and News editor William E. Ivens.

Word reached strikers that the leaders were being held for investigation and consideration for deportation. J.S. Woodsworth stepped forward to replace Ivens as editor of the News. When Woodsworth was arrested, strike leader Frederick J. Dixon took that position and was in turn arrested.

On 21 June, in response to the arrests of strike leaders, about 25,000 strikers assembled in front of City Hall. They were mostly pro-strike war veterans. Mayor Charles Gray read the crowd the Riot Act and ordered the area cleared with half an hour.

When the crowd failed to disperse the Mounted Police charged directly into the crowd on horseback. The crowd responded by throwing stones as the horses and officers passed through their midst. Upon the third charge, the riders began to open fire into the crowd and the strikers began to flee. However, members of the Special Police were waiting for strikers in the streets surrounding City Hall and set upon them with baseball bats and wagon spokes.

After the streets were cleared over 80 people had been arrested, 27 were injured, and two were dead. The day came to be known as Bloody Saturday.

Federal troops occupied the streets of Winnipeg. On 26 June, after hearing rumours of strikers organizing more gatherings and fearing further bloodshed, the Strike Committee declared the strike over at 11:00 AM and the workers went back to work. Many strikers lost their jobs and some were deported.

Strike leaders were put on trial. Dixon, Woodsworth, and Heaps were acquitted, Bray received 6 months, Pritchard, Johns, Queen, Armstrong, and Ivens were sentenced to 1 year, and Russell was given 2 years.

The general strike in Winnipeg was the largest labour strike in Canada's history to that point, involving solidarity strikes in other cities – a total of hundreds of thousands of workers across Canada. Unionism and labour actions continued to spread despite a Red Scare and other anti-union activity, and the 1921 election brought a new federal government pledged to reform labour standards in fear of the growing worker support for radical alternatives. It would, however, be decades before Canadian workers would secure union recognition and collective bargaining.

J.S. Woodsworth went on to become the founder of what is now the New Democratic Party through which he pushed for the introduction of worker benefits such as old age pension and unemployment insurance.

Research Notes

Influences:

General strike in Seattle, U.S.A. in February 1919 (1), 1918 Vancouver general strike (1), 1919 Boston police strike (2), 1919 Victoria general strike (2), 1919 Amherst general strike (2).

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Suggested reading:

David J. Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg* (1974); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries* (1977).

Additional Notes:

Some accounts of the strikers report them 'rioting.' Some claim that police 'fought with strikers.' While these accounts suggest campaigner violence, the descriptions weren't specific enough to include them in campaigner violence, above.

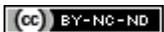
Edited by Max Rennebohm (12/04/2011); accounts of the two researchers merged and further edited by George Lakey (12/6/14).

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Brendan T. Wakeman, 28/11/13; Zein Nakhoda 14/03/2010

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