



Global Nonviolent Action Database

Published on *Global Nonviolent Action Database* (<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>)

Seattle workers general strike for fair wages, 1919

21 January

1919

to: 11 February

1919

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Washington*

Goals:

The raising of wages for shipyard workers and the abolition of wage labor in the city.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Nearly all unionized workers in the city of Seattle

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Metal Trades Council, Seattle Central Labor Council (SCLC), the General Strike Committee

Partners:

Other unions within the SCLC

External allies:

Small business owners

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Other labor unions
- Seattle Central Labor Council

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- General Strike Committee

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 4 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Company owners, Mayor Hanson, the EFC (Emergency Fleet Corporation) - created by the US gov. during the war

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Arrests, disturbances, and disruption of IWW offices.

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

The Seattle General Strike was the first general strike in the U.S. and marked the beginning of a post-WWI era of labor conflict.

Conditions for a general strike in Seattle had been building for decades. Seattle had a strong labor history with much emphasis on workplace democracy. Also, the Knights of Labor had been active in the area in the late 1800's, and by the early 1900's there were radical labor factions within the mining and lumber workforce, many of whom were members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical labor union that advocated the abolition of the wage labor system. By 1910, the IWW had a strong presence in the Seattle area. In 1915, the U.S. Employment Service even encouraged unionization in exchange for the agreement that they would not strike during wartime. Hence, by 1919, there were over 60,000 unionized workers in Seattle. Shipbuilding and other wartime industries were exempt from getting drafted into fighting in World War One (WWI), so their unions attracted many radicals who opposed the war. The lasting influence of the Knights of Labor, the IWW, swift wartime industrialization, and a high density of workers allowed for a strong culture advocating workplace democracy and, for some, creating worker owned industries. Some moved toward this vision through creating worker-owned cooperatives such as workers colleges, meeting houses, and food markets.

Although there was much solidarity within the labor community, there were three main factions within the movement: moderates, progressives, and radicals. The moderates conceded the right of the non-laboring class to profit from their work, but they wanted a fair wage for it. The progressives were reform socialists who advocated projects like the cooperatives. Radicals were mostly metal workers and shipbuilders who wanted to use direct action to take control of industry.

The combination of growing radicalism within the city, as well as the successful Bolshevik revolution in the USSR two years earlier alarmed the middle and owning classes. Additionally, reactionary patriotism was on the rise due to the polarization following WWI. Hence, the city was primed for conflict.

Once the war ended, the Macy Board and the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC) decided to raise wages in shipyards across the country, except in the Seattle area, where some wages were lowered. The labor community saw this as an effort to undermine the power of unions by making their wages the same as non-union shipyards in other areas. The Metal Trades Council (the union of shipyard workers) approved a strike vote on December 10, 1918. After failed negotiations with employers, the metal workers began a strike on January 21, 1919. 35,000 metal trades employees participated. Most of the press on the strike portrayed the strikers negatively, and some claimed that the workers were coerced to go on strike by a minority of radicals.

On January 22, 1919, the Seattle Central Labor Council (SCLC), the presiding union body in Seattle, voted to hold a

referendum, allowing affiliated unions to vote on whether or not to join in a general strike. This would be 130 locals, representing over 30,000 workers. The motion was passed, and support for the general strike grew among labor groups throughout the city. Only the Gas Workers and Federal Employees opposed the strike (on the grounds that it was too radical). The SCLC did make it clear that it was a “sympathetic strike,” not a “mass strike” in which each union lists its grievances and stays on strike until all demands are met.

The SCLC called for another mass meeting on January 26. The motion to endorse the strike was carried by a unanimous vote. The SCLC used the Seattle Union Record, a labor publication, to appeal to the public based on arguments about the benefits that high wages give to the community (particularly small businesses), and the injustice of exorbitant profits made by shipowners.

As union after union voted to join, the city began to worry. Newspapers began picking up on the developments, warning about the pending difficulties of obtaining “the necessities of life” like food, heat, and electricity. A local citizens committee attempted to facilitate arbitration, but the government refused to settle. They argued that if they made exceptions for some workers, no contract would ever be respected again. Rumors also began spreading that radicals and Bolsheviks were planning on taking over the city. The Seattle Chief of Police temporarily deputized 3000 soldiers, sailors, guards, and a machine gun squad, while urging civilians to stay out of the streets. Union publications, on the other hand, did not advocate a revolutionary agenda, though they did call for a democratic management of their own labor.

February 4, 1919, was the first meeting of the General Strike Committee. Power to make decisions were passed from the SCLC to a committee of more than 300 members elected by 110 unions. This group decided to delegate power to 15 individuals in order to keep the decision making process efficient, as well as to put the decision making power in the hands of a body that was not affiliated with national organizations that might disapprove of the general strike.

On the morning of February 6, 1919, Seattle, a city of 315,00 people, was shut down. 25,000 union members joined 35,000 already on strike. Most of the remaining workforce was idled as stores closed and streetcars stopped. The General Strike Committee ensured that vital services were available. No one went without food, lights, or heat, and there was no violence throughout the strike.

Even from before the strike began, newspapers, politicians, and the AFL denounced the radicals and said that the strike was a Bolshevik revolutionary plot. Mayor Ole Hanson, who had won the election on a hyperpatriotic platform, armed new police and brought in the army’s First Infantry Division. There were also groups of vigilantes running around rounding up “reds.” International officers of the AFL began flocking to the city to try to end the strike.

Despite threats of repression, the strikers remained orderly. The SCLC published a bulletin that said “The Workers Can Only Win Through Order.” However, it swiftly became clear that there was not enough revolutionary intent and action to push the general strike into a spark for sweeping political change. Enthusiasm quickly waned, largely due to the orderly nature of the strike. The sense of solidarity and camaraderie that was so vibrant before the strike was crushed, largely due to the lack of activity and gatherings during the strike itself. By the morning of the third day (February 8), some streetcar drivers went back to work, as well as some restaurant and shop workers. There was also tension between the progressives and the radicals as to whether or not the strike should keep going.

That evening, the Committee of Fifteen presented a resolution to the General Strike Committee calling off the strike, but this was voted down.

By the fourth day (February 9), only longshoremen and cooks continued the sympathy strike with the metal workers. The next day a resolution was presented by the SCLC to suspend the strike, but the metal workers voted it down. Finally, on February 11, the SCLC declared an end to the strike. Their demands had not been met, but the mayor had continued to increase military presence in the city, and union leaders questioned the effectiveness of the general strike in the face of such repressive measures. Union confidence and solidarity waned, ushering in the end of the strike.

After the strike ended, reactionary responses grew and spread. National headlines declared that Seattle had been saved from

revolution. The mayor said that “Americanism” had won out over “Bolshevism.”

Anti-syndicalism legislation that had passed earlier that year in the state legislature was used as the basis for numerous raids on Socialist and IWW headquarters, police disruption of meetings, and arrests of suspected revolutionaries. Mayor Hanson capitalized on the repression, declaring that “anarchists in this community shall not rule its affairs,” and immediately resigned and launched a speaking tour in the hope of getting a Republican presidential nomination.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by the Bolshevik revolution in the USSR, and general strikes in Peru, Chile, and Argentina. (1)

This campaign influenced the San Francisco General Strike (see U.S. west coast longshoremen strike for union recognition and San Francisco general strike, 1934), as well as numerous other strikes across the country. (2)

Notes: Although this case did not achieve its goals, it did mark the beginning of an era of radical labor conflict that influenced unions across the country.

Sources:

Boswell, Sharon and Lorraine McConaghy. “Strike! Labor Unites for Rights.” 21 March, 1996. The Seattle Times. 14 April 2010. <<http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/special/centennial/march/labor.html>>.

Johnson, Victoria. How Many Machine Guns Does it Take to Cook One Meal?: The Seattle and San Francisco General Strikes. University of Washington Press: Seattle, 2008.

“Strike: Seattle General Strike Project.” 1999. Pacific Northwest Labor and Civil Rights History Project. <<http://depts.washington.edu/labhist/strike/>>.

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

Hannah Jones, 16/04/2010

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.



Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Original website design and artwork created by [Daniel Hunter](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>.

Registered users can [login](#) to the website.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/24/2020 - 22:30): <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/seattle-workers-general-strike-fair-wages-1919>