On 24 May 1919, 8,000 coal miners in Alberta and British Columbia walked off the job. The official rationale for the strike was to reverse a small pay cut, but the action was timed to coincide with the Winnipeg General Strike. 90 percent of miners had just voted in favour of leaving the United Mine Workers (UMW) in favour of the One Big Union (OBU). Calling a strike over a small grievance capitalized on coal miners’ enthusiasm for the OBU’s claim that workers’ well-being could best be advanced using the weapon of the mass strike.

Coal bosses relied on anti-immigrant sentiment and violence to break the strike. Some veterans were angry that new settlers could find work in the coal mines while veterans were unemployed. Thirteen different mining companies were given permission to hire returned veterans as “special constables” to “convince” miners to return to work.

In Drumheller, “specials” patrolled the valley and accosted miners. OBU supporters were given a ride forty miles out of the valley, beaten badly, and left to find their way home.

At the end of the Winnipeg General Strike, the miners tried to end their strike through negotiations but found themselves locked out and facing a “triple alliance” of coal companies, the federal government, and the UMW. The union unilaterally removed the OBU sympathizers from their elected leadership positions. In August 1919, workers were allowed to return to the mines, but OBU activists were refused work and blacklisted across coal country.