

Telephone Girls

© Maria Dunn, 2019; Song commissioned by Alberta Labour History Institute to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Great Labour Uprising of 1919

All the skills we mastered while men were overseas
We've become breadwinners to meet our family needs
So many of our sweethearts are never coming home
We hear it all--the stoic grief--through the telephone

When, finally, the ceasefire broke that bloody war
That devil of a flu fought on, killing millions more
Imagine for a moment the horror we have seen
Imagine for a second going back to how it's been

Now May of 1919, living costs soar higher
Pooling our resources can't damp inflation's fire
Did you hear? in Winnipeg – thirty thousand in the street
Commerce at a halt, workers on their feet

*Chorus: So walk out you Telephone Girls! take every fuse
 Silence at the switchboard will get our message through
 Singing with our brothers, we deserve a living wage
 With all we sacrificed, we demand a better day*

(Now) waitresses earn little, shop girls even less
We're walking out for all whose work is more precarious
We're walking for the child who cannot stay in school
We're walking out to signal we no longer will be fooled

We've passed the ornate mansions, gardens so pristine
Called at humble hovels no rose is ever seen
Each dwelling lost a loved one – killed by flu or war
So why this great indifference of rich towards the poor?

How some could profit while death around us churned
Then fold down their factories as soldiers returned
No vision do they offer beyond their war machine
Yet will not stretch their minds to grasp a worker's dream

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INSTRUMENTAL – over chorus or verse

A month here in Alberta, we held the picket lines
At metal shops and railroads, rest'rants and mines
All for the right to bargain, through the union of our choice
For labour that allows us some tiny bit of joy

From Winnipeg the news, peaceful protest brought to blows
Strikebreaker drives a streetcar, the crowd then overthrows
So mounted forces charge, exploding with their shots
All trust we had in others to improve a worker's lot

Back to work we go or surely lose our posts
It's hard to keep our spirits up with nothing to show
But they'll never jail ideas, cannot shoot our hope
And in the next election, we working people spoke

*Chorus: So walk out you Telephone Girls! take every fuse
Silence at the switchboard will get our message through
Singing with our brothers, we deserve a living wage
With all we sacrificed, we demand a better day
Demand a better day
Demand a better day*