



# The Great Labour Revolt, 1919

By Alvin Finkel

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Designed by Erika Olbey

# The Great Labour Revolt, 1919

by Alvin Finkel

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*“From the Rhine to the Yellow River, the world is in a state of unrest and revolution.”*

THE SOVIET, EDMONTON ONE BIG UNION PUBLICATION, MARCH 27, 1919

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*One little girl got into trouble and her baby was born three months after she was married. That baby was only four pounds in weight because the girl was almost starved to death. These are the kind of conditions we find here. That little girl's baby died on the 14th of this month from malnutrition or starvation...if they ask us “are you in favour of a bloody revolution” why any kind of revolution would be better than conditions as they are now.*

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*So proclaimed Calgary labour organizer Jean MacWilliams in early May, 1919, before a commission headed by Manitoba Chief Justice Thomas Mathers appointed by the federal government to investigate and make recommendations regarding the causes of labour unrest in Canada. Three weeks later MacWilliams became an organizer of the Calgary General Strike, part of the wave of general strikes and working-class rebellion that characterized the year after World War I ended.*

## The Great Labour Revolt, 1919

The workers' uprising in 1919 and the contrasting ways that workers and employers understood the strike issues reverberate a century later. While workers focused on widespread misery and the need for collective solutions, employers blamed poverty on individual's decisions and insisted the solutions were individual. While workers demanded that employers bargain with them collectively through unions, the owners claimed they could better assist workers as individuals. Employers attempted to divide workers on the basis of their national origins, language, skin colour, gender, and anything else that might undermine worker solidarity. That often worked.

Over 66,000 Canadians in a population of 7.2 million were wartime casualties and almost as many died of the "Spanish influenza" that spread across the nation with returning soldiers. While Canadians were told that they were fighting for decency in the world, they were in fact fighting to defend the British Empire that oppressed millions, including Indigenous peoples living in what is today known as Canada, on behalf of British capitalists and settlers. Many working people resisted the conscription that the Canadian government imposed in 1917 to find sufficient cannon fodder for the Mother Country. Both the Calgary Trades and Labour Council (CTLC) and the Edmonton Trades and Labour Council (ETLC) formed Labour Representation Leagues in 1917 to demand conscription of wealth, meaning an end to profits for all war industries, before conscription of men could be considered. Coal miners were particularly anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist. They had rebelled frequently against profiteering bosses whose victims included 189 miners who died in the Hillcrest Mining Disaster of 1914. Though a coroner's inquest accused the owners of violating safety rules in the provincial Coal Mines Act, no one was prosecuted.

Even many supporters of imperialism among workers became disillusioned as they observed a capitalist clique making fabulous profits during wartime while workers' wages lost value thanks to profit-driven inflation. The national inflation rate was 18 percent in 1917 and 13.5 percent in 1918. By 1916, the war had ended a pre-war recession on the Prairies and workers, faced with cost increases vastly exceeding wage increases, unionized in large numbers. With unemployed workers temporarily scarce, few employers could dismiss workers who unionized and went on strike. There were 2196 union members affiliated to the CLTC in January 1916 and 2936 one year later. Firefighters, police, and city hall employees in both Edmonton and Calgary, as well as some smaller towns, organized for the first time. The Alberta Teachers' Alliance formed in 1917. In 1919 provincial government workers created the Civil Service Association, predecessor of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees.

## How to Make Mask for Prevention of Influenza

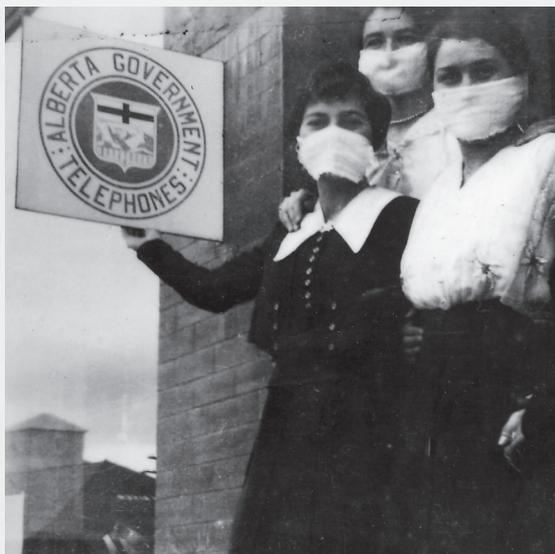


Instructions as to the making and use of masks have been sent out by the provincial board of health. These are to be used when taking care of influenza patients, and beginning on Thursday morning on all trains and street cars in the province. Here is the method of making the mask, published in *The Bulletin* some days ago and here repeated by request.

**To Make a Mask**—Take a piece of ordinary cheesecloth, 8x16 inches. Next fold this to make it 8x4 inches. Tie cord about 10 inches long at each corner. Apply over mouth and nose as shown in the picture.

To be worn in the sick room when taking care of the patient and on street cars and railway trains.

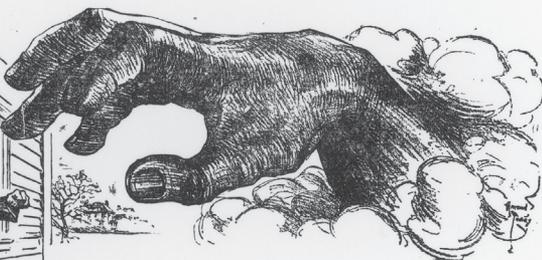
Keep the nose and mouth covered while coughing or sneezing.



HOW TO MAKE A MASK FOR PREVENTION OF INFLUENZA  
PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, AI3187

AGT EMPLOYEES WEARING MASKS TO WARD OFF  
INFLUENZA. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, GL NA-3452-2.

# Canadianize Our Alien Workers



## The Grasping Hand of the I.W.W.

It is antagonistic to the ideals of honest labor

Bolshevism offers no possibility of advance for labor. It is an imported theory fomented by foreigners, which is impracticable and incompetent. Men that never knew how to get money will never know how to keep it.

Bolshevism, though doomed to extinction, may not die before several nations of the earth have had a big dose of it. Russian industry is turning somersaults and breaking its neck by turning the factories over to workmen without any directing boss or head. The equitable distribution is of little value if little is produced.

In Russia, Bolshevism must be left to burn itself out. In Canada, it must be fought with the ancient weapons of a free people—the applied principles of law and order under a government of the people by the people.

The average normal man believes that the toilers will see ultimately that there is nothing in the false doctrines of Bolshevism.

The war has revealed that everything depends on the loyal and continuous support of labor. Employer and employee came together on one plane of common interest and common effort. The good spirit then developed should never be lost.

Democracy does not always get the best, but it always gets what it wants. It reserves for people the right to make their own mistakes. We do not believe in the class idea, but that one man is as good as another.

The Canadian laborer does not hate millionaires. He may be a millionaire himself some day. Most men of success have labored with their hands and have begun small and raised themselves above the other fellow.

# The Man Promoted Is The Coming Business Man

One of a Series of Articles Published by The Canada Vigilance Publicity Association

## Wartime and Post-War Worker Resistance

Between January 1, 1917 and June 30, 1919, strikes, including general strikes, accounted for 600,000 work days in Alberta. In January, 1918, most Edmonton unions supported Edmonton firefighters' call for a sympathy strike if city council refused to hire the senior firefighter as the new fire chief. The city relented. In October, 1918, half of Calgary's unionists hit the pavement to support the CTLC call for a general strike to support striking freight handlers. The federal government initially responded with five arrests of unionists for violating the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (IDIA), federal legislation passed in 1907 that imposed compulsory mediation before workers in "essential industries" could strike. That effectively allowed companies to stock inventories for a strike, which was difficult when workers struck spontaneously. But shortly thereafter the government made concessions to the freight handlers.

The federal government and capitalists were determined to crush growing worker militancy. First, they tried to drive a wedge between British-descended workers and more recent immigrants in September, 1918, with an order-in-council banning all publications in "enemy languages." They also banned 14 socialist organizations, mainly those of non-English-speakers but also the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) which championed worker unity across workplaces including sympathy strikes of all workers when any group of workers struck. In October, 1918, all strikes and lockouts were made illegal, with compulsory arbitration imposed when worker-owner negotiations collapsed. Each new law provided steep fines and jail sentences for resisters. The Royal Northwest Mounted Police and the Dominion Police, the agents of federal government suppression of radicals, enforced these laws brutally, particularly in ethnic communities. Individuals were often arrested and jailed purely for owning literature that federal police agents deemed subversive.

Similar scenarios occurred across the capitalist world. The workers who had forced the Kaiser to flee Germany formed workers' councils, in imitation of the early Soviets in revolutionary Russia, to transfer workplace power from owners to workers. The Social Democrats, the established German socialist party to whom the Kaiser had abdicated, split definitively between revolutionaries and reformists with the latter collaborating with employer-funded militias that murdered the revolutionary leaders and suppressed the revolutionary worker councils. In Italy, workers struck for eight-hour days, improved wages, and for factory committees that included workers to replace unilateral capitalist

## A CALGARY WORKER'S LIFE:

*Clifford Nichols, Calgary Postal Worker, before Mathers Commission, May, 1919*

*Any bitterly cold morning in this city, what will you see? You will see miserable, pale-faced men with drunken, weary looking eyes, crawling out of their beds in the early hours of the morning, sitting down to an almost bare breakfast table and then crawling off to work with their dinner pails with a few little sandwiches in them, crawling off to the mills, where is the grime and the misery and turmoil all day long. He is worked like a beast from 7 in the morning until 5 or 6 at night. At night time it is dark again, cold and dreary and he comes out with his dinner pail and stands in the snow and sleet shivering at the corner until he may get a car where he usually again has to stand on tired, weary, blistered feet until he gets to his home, twenty minutes ride maybe away. He crawls into his home to meet his pale-faced wife, absolutely worn out with her exertions at the wash tub. They talk about finances but he finds out by the time he has paid everything which is to be paid there will be nothing left of his cheque and the consequence is that he realizes that if for some reason he fails to appear at his work he will instantly be in debt.*

*On the other hand, he happened to be sick one day or for some reason or other he does not go to work and what does he see then? He looks around the city and he sees men with their collars and ties on, with their fine women driving around in large McLaughlin or Studebaker cars, men that he knows do not get up before 7:30, then get up to a comfortable meal and get the morning's paper and then go down and recline in an office chair for four or five hours a day and then go home. He sees these men who can go to California or anywhere to escape the cold of the winter.*

*He says to himself, as Gladstone said years ago when the Educational Bill was being passed, he said to the classes, "You have given the weapon to the masses with which they someday rise and crush the classes." Well, his words were very true and it is happening today. The working man is beginning to think for himself that something is wrong.*



management. Meanwhile, Italian peasants organized to demand their own land rather than continued servitude to huge landowners. Capitalists and landowners united to hire organized thugs to repress worker and peasant revolts and in 1922 overthrew the elected legislature to impose rule by the thug organization, the Fascist Party. Building trades workers in France engaged in a general strike in 1919, also facing mass repression, as did rioting rice growers in Sierra Leone.

American workers also joined the worldwide uprising for social justice for workers. The reply was repression, led by the country's Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. The Palmer raids in 1919 and 1920 yielded over 4000 arrests. The radicalism that Palmer condemned included a general strike in Seattle in February, 1919, in support of 35,000 striking shipyard workers. The shipyard workers had created the Seattle Metal Trades Council, an alliance of over 20 unions representing skilled and unskilled workers alike, to strengthen their demands for wage increases. The employers tried to divide the workers by offering mechanics their wage increase while freezing labourers' wages. The mechanics declined and the employers refused further negotiations. That produced a worker walkout of 65,000 in a city of 315,000 that effectively shuttered the city. The Strike Committee established by the labour movement to ensure continuation of essential services proved effective. Though the strike only lasted five days, it outraged American capitalists. They ensured that the shipyard workers, who struck for another full month, gained nothing. Then, supported by the American government, they employed thugs to stifle efforts to organize 350,000 steelworkers and to resist coalminer and railway worker demands.



WELCOME HOME FOR 50TH BATTALION OF THE CANADIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, CALGARY, GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA 3965-8.

When the Alberta Federation of Labour held its first post-war convention from January 6 to 11, 1919, both the international uprising of workers and repression at home influenced a radical mindset. Led by the miners, the AFL declared “full accord and sympathy with the aims and purposes of the Russian and German revolutions.” Support for the Russian Revolution was significant because Canada had joined Britain, France, and the United States in a military effort to support Russian aristocrats fighting to overthrow the Communist government. Local 357 of the International Association of Machinists, a union where Socialist influence abounded, introduced a successful resolution calling for all unionists to belong to one organization. They suggested that “the present state of unionism with their craft autonomy is a menace to class solidarity and united action.” They envisioned the new unions operating “industrially and politically towards freedom, industrial democracy, and the control of their own lives.”

Similar, radical sentiments prevailed throughout Western Canada. In September, 1918, when the TLC convention was held in Quebec City, delegates from central and Atlantic Canada provided the votes that replaced James Watters, a socialist from Victoria and TLC president since 1911, with Tom Moore, an Ontario Conservative defender of crafts unions over industrial unions. That conference ignored resolutions generally favoured by Western delegates that demanded



that the federal government remove Canadian troops from Russia, end conscription, and release detained conscientious objectors. Many unionists east of Manitoba supported the Western delegates. But the Western radicals responded with a regional strategy: they would hold their own conference to

counter TLC conservatism. Once Calgary was chosen as the conference site, the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) made the unusual decision to hold their annual convention in Calgary just before the conference of all four western provinces took place. The BCFL convention supported international revolutionaries just as the AFL convention did and called for the creation of One Big Union for Western and eventually all Canadian workers.

## Western Canadian Labour Conference

After the BCFL conference ended, the Western Canadian Labour Conference convened in Calgary from March 13 to 15, to discuss common plans of action for union locals across the Western provinces. The 239 voting delegates from labour councils were in an angry mood. Unemployment was deepening across Canada. The Canadian state, after assuming control over the economy in wartime, made no effort to plan the postwar economy. Munitions plants were abandoned rather than converted to peacetime use. Spooked by wartime debts, the federal government rejected spending to build infrastructure to provide peacetime jobs. As soldiers returned and competed with non-combatants for scarce employments, the joblessness rate skyrocketed. Meanwhile, those in work, now dealing with employers who could easily replace them, failed to win wage increases to match inflation. A majority of workers had lived in poverty in the best of times while the corporate elite lived in opulence. Now conditions seemed worse than ever. So revolution was in the air.

Members of the Marxist but largely Anglo-Celtic Socialist Party—socialists of other ethnicities found them so exclusive and education-oriented that before the war they formed the Social Democratic Party as a more inclusive and action-oriented Marxist party—played prominent roles in Calgary and socialist revolutionary ideas dominated the convention. One resolution that carried easily demanded “the abolition of the present system of production for profit, and the substituting therefore, production for use, and that a system of propaganda to this end be carried on.”

The Calgary conference delegates wanted to change both the political and economic systems. They resolved that “the system of industrial soviet control by selection of representatives from industries is more efficient and of greater political value than the present system of government by selection from districts.” Indeed they expressed “full acceptance of the principle of ‘Proletarian Dictatorship’ as being absolute and efficient for the transformation of capitalist private property to communal wealth.”

To strengthen the working class in its battle with capital the conference supported replacement of the “utter futility” of craft organization with “the immediate organization of the workers along industrial lines, so that by virtue of their industrial strength, the workers may be better prepared to enforce any demand they consider essential to their maintenance and wellbeing.”

The most radical proposal of the Western Labour Conference was to go beyond industrial organization and create “One Big Union.” Replacing separate unions with one organization, however that might be subdivided in practice, would create organizational solidarity of the working class and make sympathy strikes the norm for all strikes until capitalism was overthrown. The IWW, founded in Chicago in 1905, pioneered the idea in their efforts to create an inclusive and revolutionary unionism. It had been adopted in wartime by the Socialists, who previously had focused more on education and voting than on workplace strategies in their advocacy of a socialist alternative to capitalism. While the Socialists remained committed to an electoral path to socialism, they increasingly viewed one big union (OBU) as a valid response by workers to state repression of both trade unionism and free speech.

The Western Canadian Labour Conference was somewhat ambivalent about the value of participating in the parliamentary system before it was replaced by a Soviet-style, industrial-based assembly. A resolution was titled in the official minutes, “Labour Unions Not to Take Part in Political Matters.” That resolution declared the conference “opposed to the innocuity of labour leaders lobbying parliament for palliatives which do not palliate.” Such condemnation of reformist labour politicians could be construed as excluding Socialist candidates who called for the replacement of capitalism with socialism. It was a resolution that discomfited many Calgary and Edmonton delegates who were committed to electoral politics with a view to seeking reforms of benefit to working people within the capitalist system. A quarter of all delegates voted against motions that condemned electoral participation.

Though opponents of the general strikes that occurred in May, 1919, would label them an OBU-led conspiracy, OBU organization did not precede their outbreak. The Conference merely endorsed the idea and supported a referendum among union members along with election of a committee for “carrying out the necessary propaganda to make the referendum a success.” The referendum was held throughout April by 188 union locals, mostly in western Canada, who enrolled 41,365 workers. The votes went 24,239 to 5975 in favour of creating the OBU. Arrangements were made for a founding convention on June 4. But well before that convention, the OBU idea inspired workers who believed that organizational class solidarity was required to win social justice for workers.

The Calgary Conference praised revolutionary workers' organizations everywhere, sending "fraternal greetings to the Russian Soviet government, the Spartacans in Germany and all definite working class movements in Europe and the world recognizing they have won first place in the history of the class struggle." Just as importantly, the conference attacked federal government efforts to sow ethnic divisions in the working class. This was tricky because the Canadian labour movement had a long history of xenophobia, partly simply a fear of immigration that flooded labour markets but also a reflection of racial prejudices within established Euro-Canadian working-class circles. Those prejudices were directed against southern and eastern Europeans almost as much as against non-whites whose entry into Canada was severely restricted by legislation and government administrative policies alike. Though the conference minutes entitled the resolution, "No Alien but the Capitalist," it retained some standard fears of immigration

policy under capitalism. It read: "That the interests of all members of the international working class being identical, that this body of workers recognizes no alien but the capitalist. At the same time we are opposed to any wholesale immigration of workers from other parts of the world who would be brought here at the request of the ruling class." The conference specifically denounced a resolution that the Trades and Labour Council of Lethbridge had passed that favoured deporting unnaturalized "aliens."

## **Aims of the Strike Leaders**

as Set Forth in the

### **Report of Proceedings**

of the

## **Western Canada Labor Conference**

Held at Calgary, Alberta, March 13, 14, 15, 1919

Craft union officials whose jobs faced potential extinction rebuffed suggestions that their unions were ineffective or opposed to the broader interests of the working class. The non-revolutionary delegates included both conservative-minded individuals and social democrats who wanted to follow British Labour Party goals of improving the lives of workers through a combination of legislative and workplace victories without resorting to general strikes. They balked at resolutions such as one that passed but was not implemented that called for the "Western Interprovincial congress" to "immediately organize a general strike, and a permanent and efficient industrial organization, based upon class lines of the four provinces as one department of a world organization."

## The Winnipeg General Strike

In practice, more cautious labour leaders, responding to capitalist and government solidarity against concessions to unions, played as large a role in invoking general strikes as the socialists and anarchists who advocated OBU ideas. The building trades and metal trades unions in Winnipeg, led by officials unwilling to fold their separate unions into one big union, had both formed trades councils that paralleled employer councils in their industries. The employers' councils, recognizing an attack on their divide-and-rule tactics, refused negotiation with workers' councils. The metal trades and building trades workers approached the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council (WTLC) to consider a general strike to support workers' rights to negotiate industry-wide collective agreements.



The WTLC called a referendum of members of all union affiliates. An overwhelming majority favoured a general strike. That would begin on May 15 and continue until the two employer councils conceded their employees' right to industrial bargaining. In a city where Socialists, Social Democrats, and labourites all strengthened their support during the war, the view that a successful general strike might create gains for all workers proved contagious beyond trade union circles.

There were about 12,000 trade unionists in Greater Winnipeg in a population of 200,000. But about 35,000 workers joined the strike on May 15, including virtually all workers in major companies, civic workers, and a smattering of provincial and federal government employees. First to strike were unionized telephone operators, all women. Non-unionized women workers in department stores and other retail outlets, and the clothing industry joined the telephone operators in jeopardizing their jobs to support the general strike in hopes of achieving

fundamental social change. Helen Armstrong, president of the Women's Labour League, and seamstress Kitty Harris, an Industrial Workers of the World activist who became a leading OBU figure, played prominent roles in the Winnipeg Strike.

The strikers formed a Strike Committee to provide strike coordination, keep the peace, and negotiate essential services with the mayor and city council. The Strike Committee agreed to keep utility workers and workers who delivered bread and milk on the job. The city council requested that they post clearly on the vehicles of essential workers that they were working with "permission of the Strike Committee."

An anti-strike committee was quickly created by leading members of Winnipeg's bourgeoisie. It called itself the Citizens' Committee of 1000 though its active participants numbered far fewer. Its choice of the word "Citizens" in its name implied that working-class strikers, who represented a majority of city households, were not "citizens;" only elite members were. The Citizens' Committee claimed the strikers were led by "aliens," which to them meant non-British immigrants whose origins were in countries that Canada had recently fought. In reality, all the strike leaders were of British descent and while non-British immigrants joined with British-origin workers to call for social justice for workers, the implication that they supported a foreign takeover of Canada was claptrap meant to promote division among workers that would allow capitalists to maintain the status quo.

The Winnipeg strikers, faced with intransigent employers, and a hostile police presence organized by the state, recognized their need for a strong national movement in their favour. They called on workers in other cities to organize sympathy strikes.

Five days after the Winnipeg strike began, the second general strike of 1919 occurred in Canada: in Amherst, Nova Scotia. While the Amherst strikers were inspired by the Winnipeg strikers, their strike was their own rather than a sympathy strike with Winnipeg workers. Once the major manufacturing centre in the Maritime provinces, Amherst had declined throughout the 1910s. Workers in the town's foundries, mills, and factories endured wage cuts and worsening working conditions and their three-week general strike was an effort to reverse their losses and win reduced hours of work so as to create more jobs and provide leisure time for employed workers.

The day that workers struck in Amherst, most unionists outside the railway running trades in Brandon, Manitoba's second largest city, staged a sympathy strike with Winnipeg strikers. They stayed out the full six weeks till Winnipeg workers returned to work. But the Brandon strike, like about 11 other sympathy strikes, was strictly a trade union affair. Unlike the Winnipeg Strike, it attracted little non-union worker support. By June 1, workers in Regina, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Prince Albert, Calgary, and Edmonton, among other cities and towns, were on strike. Their cause was solidarity with the Winnipeg strikers' call for industry-wide bargaining which they expected would spread everywhere if won in Winnipeg.

## Alberta Strikes: The Coal Miners

As workers shut down Winnipeg, coal miners throughout southern Alberta prepared for their own strikes, including a sympathy strike with British Columbia Crowsnest Pass miners, members of District 18, the sprawling United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) local which included a majority of Alberta's miners, Vancouver Island miners, Nicola Valley miners in BC, and miners in Saskatchewan's Estevan Valley. The mine operators had reduced hours while cutting wages. Alberta Crowsnest miners and Lethbridge area miners saw the writing on the wall and began their strike on May 24. Most would remain on strike until October 15. These were workers whose ethnicity reflected the diverse migration of the two decades before the war. The 1911 census reported that for seven towns in the Alberta Crowsnest Pass region whose total population was 5051 people, 47 percent were of British descent, 22.5 percent East European, 16.5 percent West European, 13.5 percent Italian, and 1 percent Asian. Indigenous people were either not counted or were lumped into the "other" category that made up .5 percent of the population.

Miners in the Drumheller Valley also went on strike on May 24, making demands for an end to piecework pay in favour of a guaranteed daily wage as well as improvements in their living and working conditions. By May 31, 8000 miners in Alberta and eastern British Columbia were on strike. Forty-one of 42 mines in Alberta, employing about 6500 workers, had been shut down.

Alberta miners reflected the multi-cultural character of pre-war immigration to the province. Ukrainian, Hungarian, and Italian immigrants were lured into the mines with promises of clean company housing and good wages. But, "when the workers arrived, they discovered overcrowded canvas tents infested with bedbugs.



There were no medical facilities or clean drinking water, and diseases like typhoid spread like a prairie fire. The bosses grouped immigrant workers who spoke different languages on the same work teams to prevent them from organizing. Living conditions in the valley were so bad that soldiers returning from the First World War began calling Drumheller the ‘Western Front,’ claiming that ‘conditions in the valley’s mining towns were worse than those in the trenches.’” (Jacobson)

By 1919, the miners throughout District 18 were fed up with the UMWA. Once a moderately responsive union, it had become too entangled with the bosses to represent members’ interests. District 18 members complained that their dues went to Indianapolis but no help came from the international union when the miners wanted to strike. The international sided with mine operators against their own members in Drumheller on the piece rate issue despite evidence that companies under-counted the loads that workers mined, and opposed sympathy strikes of miners with their fellows in other operations. Unsurprisingly, 96 percent of miners who voted in the OBU referendum chose the new union over the UMWA. The vote was 5500 to 256. Philip Martin Christophers, who had been elected by District 18 miners as their president, led the pro-OBU campaign and was chosen as their OBU leader.

The Drumheller mine operators exemplified the racism that the ruling class used in 1919 to prevent workers from focusing on capitalists as the “alien.” They hired returning Anglo-Canadian troops, angry that they could not find work, as constables, persuading them that the cause of their grim situation was “enemy” workers. The constables accepted the mineowner fiction that miners of Ukrainian

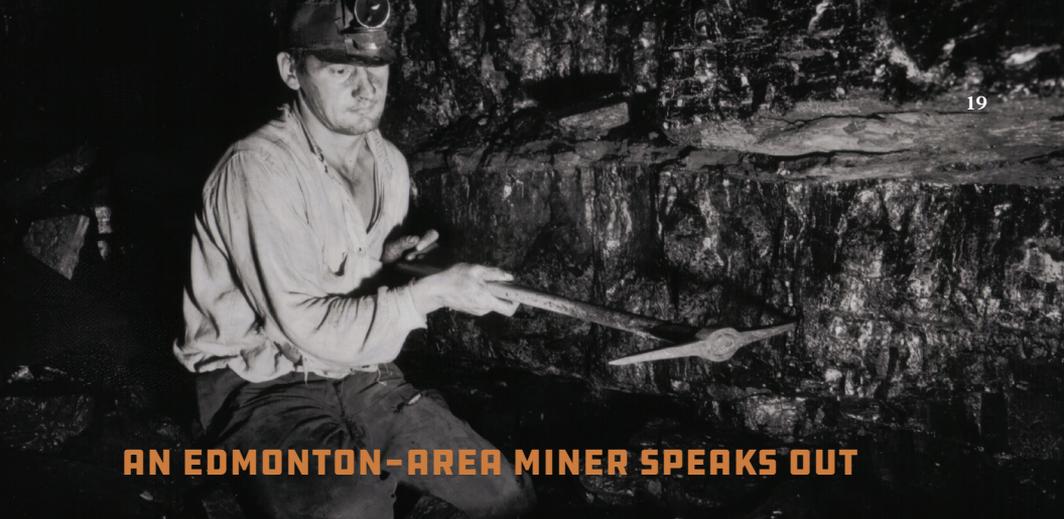
and Hungarian origin were agents of Canada's recent war "enemies" who were striking to undermine Canada's economy and deprive Anglo-Canadians of their essential heating source. Constables dragged striking workers back to the mines, threatening to hang them if they refused to work. Miners formed self-defence militias but they lacked the arms of the constables. Holdout strikers who stepped out of their homes alone were beaten or tarred and feathered and many fled the Drumheller Valley altogether rather than become slaves to the operators. P.M. Christophers and other union leaders were run out of town at gunpoint. On August 21, three days short of three months after the strike began, the remaining strikers returned to work, and were forced by the employers to rejoin the UMWA and renounce the OBU.



In the Crowsnest, many miners held out for five months until October 15 before either abandoning the mines or returning to work without gains, forced to rejoin the UMWA while agreeing to their sweetheart agreement with the bosses and severing all ties with the OBU. Five days earlier the Supreme Court had ruled that the UMWA contracts with mine operators were legitimate even though virtually every miner rejected those contracts. The Court also ruled that the OBU's efforts to represent striking miners who opposed the contracts violated the IDIA. By October, the Crowsnest workers were desperate. The cratering post-war economy offered few employment options and facilitated operator efforts to find scabs to take their jobs. Some were rehired because they were better miners than the scabs but leaders were blacklisted. In both the Crowsnest and the Drumheller Valley, submission of the striking miners in 1919 resolved little and their enmity with the UMWA and its chummy relationship with mine owners would soon erupt again.

Noticeable throughout the miners' strikes was the virtual blackout in Alberta on news reporting strike developments. The corporate-owned newspapers supported the mine operators editorially against the workers and through silence in news reporting about why the miners had struck and the intimidation they faced to return to work. Once the miners' strikes started, for example, the *Lethbridge Herald* ignored them except to report on June 9 that "Dynamite Is Used to Scare Working Coalhurst Miner." The implication of such reporting was that miners were responsible for whatever violence occurred during the strikes. The opposite was true, as the Drumheller story reveals.

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## AN EDMONTON-AREA MINER SPEAKS OUT

Joe Cavazzi was an Italian immigrant and working miner whose 15-year mining career by 1919 spanned much of Alberta. He joined the OBU that year and led the Humberstone Mine miners (in an area now within Edmonton's Rundle Park Golf Course) during the Edmonton General Strike. After the strike all Alberta mine operators blacklisted him, and he worked precarious jobs. He was unemployed when he spoke to the Alberta Coal Commission on November 26, 1919. He told the commissioners that mines in the Edmonton region often lacked washhouses and none provided a dependable supply of water to the workers. They were often forced to work well over 8 hours a day. He also noted:

*We have cold weather in this country; sometime around 45 below zero, and the miners get to stand outside there waiting for the fire boss to put the lamp—examine the lamp. The miners have to stay there 15 to 20 minutes in some mines where there's a big crew. It seems to me, speaking humanly, there should be a big room there so the miners can go in and warm themselves instead of stay in the cold weather outside...*

*Some time we have a cave or the lamp run out. Probably fire boss isn't there. Well, anything took place there the miner lose his life, because he ain't no key to open the lamp, but if he has the small lamp in his pocket, just to use for emergency, save his life...*

*There should be in each mine—inside the mine—in every section or two sections a couple of blankets and an ambulance [meaning “stretcher”]...A miner can go there and take the blankets and the ambulance to support that fellow miner that has been hurt. It happened to me in Drumheller field last year, a man be shot and I had to go and take a board—was full of nails—and take the nails out and then carry him out on that board. That should be in the mine in case of accidents, and support men being hurt.*

# 1919

## Timeline of the Great Labour Revolt

### 1918

#### JANUARY

Edmonton unions vote to strike in sympathy with firefighters

#### OCTOBER

Calgary unionists strike in concert to support striking freight handlers; federal government bans 14 socialist organizations and all strikes

### 1919

#### JANUARY

Alberta Federation of Labour votes support for Russian and German revolutions and One Big Union

#### FEBRUARY

Seattle General Strike

#### MARCH

Western Canadian Labour Conference

#### APRIL

Voting occurs in many union locals regarding joining One Big Union

**MAY 15**

Winnipeg General Strike begins

**MAY 24**

District 18 miners begin sympathy strike with BC Crowsnest Pass miners; Drumheller Valley miners begin strike

**MAY 26**

Edmonton and Calgary General Strikes begin

**JUNE 21**

Bloody Saturday

**JUNE 25**

Edmonton and Calgary General Strikes end

**JUNE 26**

Winnipeg General Strike ends

**JUNE 30**

RNWMP raid Calgary Labour Temple and homes of labour leaders looking for evidence of a revolutionary conspiracy

**JULY**

Unionists across Canada lobby for dropping of charges against Winnipeg strike leaders

**AUGUST 21**

Drumheller coal miners' strike ends

**OCTOBER 15**

District 18 strike ends

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## Alberta Strikes: The Edmonton General Strike

Winnipeg's request to labour councils across Canada to stage sympathy strikes struck a chord with unionized workers across Alberta. If Winnipeg workers won their demands, it would establish the right of workers to negotiate cross-industry contracts and more generally make general strikes an effective tool to win labour demands.

For Alberta's craft union leaders however, supporting the Winnipeg workers was fraught with dangers. The OBU had won a four to one vote among all unionists across western Canada whose locals held referenda, and the Alberta vote was similar thanks to the overwhelming support of miners. Outside the mines the vote approximated a tie: 1,633 votes to 1,611 favouring the OBU while 32 locals against the OBU trumped 27 locals that supported the revolutionary proposal. Some crafts unionists in the ETLC supported a schism within labour over any cooperation with the proposed OBU. On March 17, at a meeting with confusing procedural debates, the Council proved bitterly divided on the Western Labour Conference resolutions. On April 7, by a vote of 20 to 19, they expelled Federated Labour Union, No. 49, the United Mine Workers of America, Local 4070, and the Edmonton local of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters for supporting the OBU. The Machinists and Street Railway Workers resigned from the council in protest.

MISS FAGAN, SCHOOL TEACHER IN CASTOR, ALBERTA, CA. 1920,  
PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 13379.

But 34 of the remaining 38 ETLC locals that agreed to call a strike vote (11 local leaders refused to allow a vote) plus all the expelled and secessionist locals agreed to support the Winnipeg strikers. The overall vote was 1676 to 506. The city's mine locals voted 149 to 2 to strike; railway locals and most trades also voted overwhelmingly to strike. Among the four dissenting unions were the Federation of Postal Workers, whose members had been guaranteed dismissal by the federal government should they join the strike and Garment Workers 120, which represented the mainly women workers at GWG Garments. While women workers in Winnipeg, even including most non-unionized workers, had joined the strike, the Edmonton trade union movement, so overwhelmingly dominated by men, failed to make its case to women workers that a general strike might benefit them. Most women in paid labour were domestics, private nurses, and elementary school teachers on one year contracts, all of whom rightly feared that they would be easily replaced. Though the ETLC had also done nothing to organize non-white workers, the city's Chinese laundry workers decided to join the strike.

The strike began on May 26 with about 2000 workers striking in a city of 72,000 souls. During the first week, the Edmonton strike, like its Winnipeg counterpart, gave temporary power over city services to the Strike Committee formed to coordinate the strike. Only one committee member, Carl Berg, was a Socialist and OBU supporter. But the entire committee, wanting an effective strike, limited full water services to hospitals and people on the first floor of buildings. As in Winnipeg, a Citizens' Committee representing the bourgeoisie formed to oppose what they regarded as a proletarian seizure of power. But Mayor Joe Clarke, who had earlier feigned support for the workers' cause, soon declared that civic workers who did not immediately return to work would lose their jobs and began advertising for replacements. By May 31, the utility workers, along with most other city workers, were back at work. Only the street railway workers stayed out.

On June 1, the CPR, Grand Trunk Pacific, Canadian Northern, E.D. and BC Federated Railways workers voted unanimously at a mass meeting to remain on strike until the Winnipeg workers' demands were settled. Most strikers whose employer was neither the city nor the federal government also stayed out until June 25 when the strike was declared over because Winnipeg's strike leaders were ending their strike. But the city utilities workers' defection meant that the general strike, while creating inconvenience for Edmontonians, had limited impact on the city's economy.

As hostile as it was to the OBU, the ETLC leadership worried that defeat of the Winnipeg strikers would embolden local employers against negotiations with cross-craft groupings. But they denounced any notion of achieving root-and-branch social change through labour action in the streets. The *Edmonton Free Press* as the voice of ETLC leadership supported a proposal for joint boards of management chosen by workers and owners in all industries, national, district, and shop put forward by British Liberal MP J.H. Whitley. This system promised workers input into management but not workers' control, which revolutionaries supported. F.R. Coutant, an advertising manager for a wholesale firm and vice-president of the Dominion Labour Party, Edmonton branch, wrote in the *Edmonton Free Press* in April, "Bolshevics (sic) are recognized by labour forces to be an enemy, and as surely as the bodies of business men have failed to admit the need for wider vision, only the influence of conservative workers is protecting the commercial and industrial structure of Western Canada."

# Edmonton Strike Bulletin

EDITED BY STRIKE PRESS COMMITTEE

Edmonton, June 4, 1919

## NOTICE

STATIONARY ENGINEERS AND FIREMEN  
ORGANIZATION MEETING  
LABOR HALL, PURVIS BLOCK.  
FRIDAY, 8 P.M.

All Stationary Engineers and Firemen are Asked  
to be present

## NOTICE

PUBLIC MEETINGS  
will be held  
EACH EVENING  
in the  
MARKET SQUARE,  
8 p.m.

## A PUBLIC MEETING

will be held  
THIS (WEDNESDAY) EVENING  
on the  
SOUTH SIDE, at 8 p.m.  
Gather at Corner of Whyte and Main.

## STRIKE SPARKLETS.

Business houses are crippled, honest advertising is robbed and even beggary is taxed to defray the expense of publishing the "Dull".

Defiance is liberty; obedience all the time is slavery. With the growth of the necessity for mutual service among Labor's band, their association becomes more extensive and intensive.

It is quite evident that unionists in all branches of labor are remembering the inter-relationship. Watch Vancouver-to-day. And other valuable co-operators to follow suit. Seattle is not so distant. She also sends Canadian Trades and Labor Councils good cheer and support. No nation ever advanced that held its Labor in contempt.

We learned that coal was the foundation of the nation's war work, and that every pound wasted was a weakening of that foundation. Without coal the wheels of industry cannot be turned. Coal is power. It is heat and light.

"Going to Edmonton?" asked a travelling man of a negro porter on the C. N. R. the other day.  
"No, sah! I've gone right through to Ponoka to see how many of the Citizens' Committee have arrived there."

There is alleged to be complaint from the farmers that they cannot ship products into the cities on account of the strike. It is not made by the farmers, but by the profiteers, who cannot get in to exploit the people.

Please would the ladies of Calder tell Teddy a little more gently what they think of him.

The Editor of our Bovine contemporary seems to have expired after his "Blasphemite" effusion.

Edmonton Bulletin, June 4.—Calgary situation grows more serious.

The Journal quotes our squibs and calls them scoops. We wish they would quote our solid matter.

Journal, June 3, 1919.—Slowly, but surely, the strike of the shoppens and maintenance of way men on the G. T. P. and C. N. railways is making itself felt.

The weird ramifications of the collective bargaining issue which has been up before the House at Ottawa seems to have stupefied our untutored representatives. Who chloroformed them?

Was there a human heart so base as not to know the difference between justice and injustice, between playing fairly and unfairly?

## LABOR'S DEFINITION OF COLLECTIVE BARGAINING.

"The right of any individual to belong to a labor union if he so desire, and the right of all such unions in a given industry to form themselves into a council to conduct negotiations through their council.

"When negotiations have succeeded and schedules are agreed to they shall be signed to cover all trades negotiating within the industry mentioned."

The Edmonton *Strike Bulletin* provided this definition of collective bargaining on June 4: “The right of any individual to belong to a labor union if he so desires, and the right of all such unions in a given industry to form themselves into a council to conduct negotiations through their council. When negotiations have succeeded and schedules are agreed to they shall be signed to cover all trades negotiating within the industry mentioned.” The *Strike Bulletin*, since it spoke for both OBU-supporting unions and striking unions that remained in the ETLC struck a more radical tone than the *Edmonton Free Press*. The front page of each issue noted that “the *Edmonton Free Press* is Not the Official Paper of the Edmonton Labour Unions Out on Strike.” While the *Strike Bulletin* emphasized the non-revolutionary aims of the Winnipeg Strike and the sympathy strikes, it also reported objectively on OBU activities and commented sympathetically regarding the progress of the Bolshevik government in Russia.

The *Strike Bulletin* recognized that the Edmonton strike had less resonance with that city’s non-unionists than its Winnipeg counterpart. On June 20, it carried a candid article entitled “Why Does Not the Public of Edmonton Support the Strikers?” It observed that Winnipeg strikers had focused their campaign on three notorious employers to galvanize support across the city’s working class. Edmonton’s strike, focused on support for the Winnipeg cause, mobilized only unionists. Meanwhile, while few Winnipeg strikers had returned to work, many in Edmonton had returned, reducing incentives for non-unionized workers to join the strike. Differences between the two cities were also noted:

*...Winnipeg is a much larger and better organized industrial centre. The large part of the inhabitants of Edmonton are of the white collar, Government clerk variety, and they spread an atmosphere of frigid respectability. Having obtained their jobs by private favoritism, they are not prepared to believe that governments can be made to act by outward and visible protests.*

To a degree, the almost exclusively male Edmonton union leadership supported greater gender equality within the labour force. The *Edmonton Free Press*, while naively denouncing women who accepted low wages as if they had much choice in the matter, commented: “To the argument that an unskilled girl just entering a trade or business is not worth a living wage, the only reply is that any human being of normal mind and body must be worth enough to give her sufficient food, proper shelter, the comforts and a few of the little luxuries of life.”

## PRECARIOUS WOMEN'S LABOUR IN CALGARY

*Mrs. George Corse, speaking to the Mathers Commission for the CTLC, May 3, 1919*

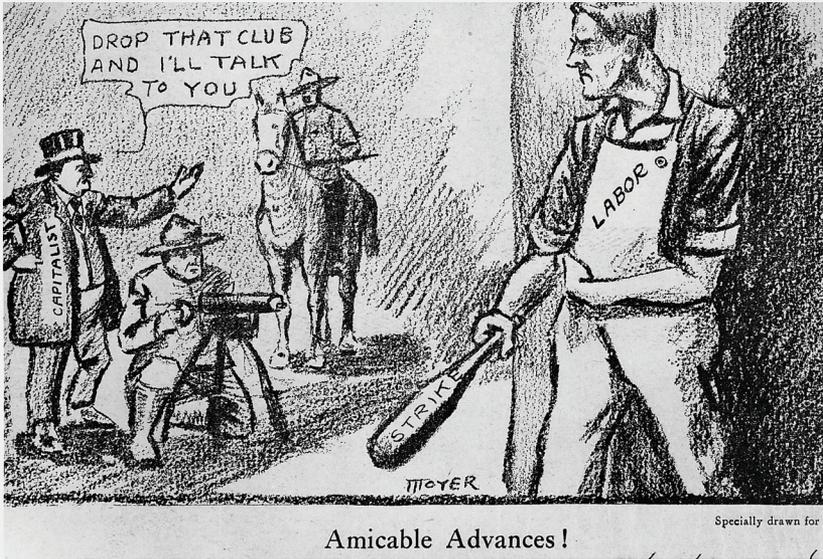
Mrs. Corse was a Labour member of the Calgary School Board. A mother of six children, her family lived poorly. Unlike Jean MacWilliams, who told the Commission that she supported revolution, Mrs. Corse viewed herself as a reformer. But her observations about the precarious position of women workers and working-class families were nonetheless stark.

*A year ago in Calgary we had a strike of the cooks and waitresses here and conditions then were unsatisfactory...A few of us women investigated and we found conditions almost unbelievable among the girls in the stores, restaurants and hotels in the city. We did everything we could but we could move no one...*

*Girls in Calgary are working in places which has not sanitary accommodation all day long and there is absolutely nothing being done about it and I want to say that that is one of the reasons why there is so much unrest among the women. Almost every day, women are being added to the ranks of, shall I say the socialist party or those with socialistic inclinations. We mothers find it is practically impossible to dress our children and to give them the education we feel they should have, on the money which our husbands can earn. I, myself...have taken my two eldest boys from school and put them to work, simply because I could not keep them at school out of my husband's earnings...[She noted that only six percent of children in Calgary reached high school with some parents]*

*If my children are starving and I go on the street with a tin cup and beg for a little to buy them bread, I am arrested as a vagrant. Another woman can stand on that corner, wearing hundreds of dollars worth of furs, boots costing \$20.00 and a corsage bouquet and they can collect nickels from the Veteran and war widow and she is commended for her services for some petty little scheme...*

*...soldiers' wives and widows of men lying in France...have not the wherewithal to live.*



## Alberta Strikes: The Calgary General Strike

The Calgary General Strike had a similar genesis to the Edmonton General Strike. Both cities were divided on the issue of creation of the OBU. Thirteen Calgary locals of 24 that held votes elected to join the OBU. But 839 individual voters said no against 724 who said yes. One conservative union in Calgary was IBEW Local 348 with a membership of about 200. Its *Information Bulletin* in March, 1919, declared that the Bolsheviks were “German offspring fed by German capital.” Rather than viewing the new Russian government in class terms, it dismissed them from the government’s xenophobic perspective. By contrast, R. H. Parkyn, appearing for Calgary carpenters before the Mathers Commission, said: “I will tell you straight what my remedy is and I believe it is the remedy of most all thoughtful Trade Unionists that have studied the thing from an economic point of view that public ownership and control of all means of production and distribution of wealth; all people to serve the state according to his or her ability and the state to serve according to each and every person’s need, the surplus to be used in the interest of the common good. In a word, to cease producing for profit and to immediately produce for use.”

“DROP THAT CLUB AND I’LL TALK TO YOU.” GLENBOW ARCHIVES, GL-NA-2790-2.

Still, even relatively conservative craft unions recognized the challenge Winnipeg employers were posing to unions' abilities to cooperate to negotiate better contracts. The success of the 1918 freight handlers' support strike emboldened city unionists to warn Calgary employers to avoid the behaviour of their Winnipeg counterparts.

About 1500 unionists in a city of 75,000 went on strike. As in Edmonton the participation of utility workers helped create the sense of a city under worker control. But threats of job loss caused utility workers to return to work on June 2. Meanwhile striking postal workers were fired by the federal government. The post office had been staffed the previous week by volunteers provided by the inevitable Citizens' Committee established to intimidate strikers and prevent their winning concessions from employers. Railway "maintenance of way" workers were ordered back to work by their unions which claimed the strike violated their agreements with the CPR and the CNR.

Violently anti-strike rhetoric in the Calgary newspapers enraged strikers and on May 28, the Strike Committee announced that they would no longer speak to *Herald* reporters. Instead they would produce their own *Strike Bulletin* to explain why the strike was necessary and how they were keeping it orderly. The *Calgary Strike Bulletin* walked a fine line between support for the OBU and for more traditional trade union demands. Overall it called for far-reaching social change and an end to unilateral employer control over the operation of enterprises. Nonetheless, it tried to reassure Calgarians that its aim was not proletarian revolution though it viewed sympathetic strikes as a legitimate workers' weapon within a capitalist system. The *Bulletin* commented on June 2: "The system for which we stand... seeks no unjust advantage over the employer...Whenever an employer gets an opportunity to shelve the principle of collective bargaining he does his best. Not because it is against him, but because it robs him of an instrument from which he can use against fair play. The workers recognize that it is within their power to wrench this weapon from him by means of a sympathetic strike. They recognize that a sympathetic strike does call for inconvenience to innocent persons, and we can assure the Citizens' Committee that we are prepared to do our utmost to remedy any inconvenience or suffering that is necessary."

The Women's Labour Council with Mrs. George Corse as president and Mrs. Jean MacWilliams as vice-president proved crucial in raising money for relief of strikers and their families. The *Calgary Strike Bulletin* noted on June 16: "The members are solid behind the men in their determination to win the present strike." Eligible for membership in the Council were "the wives and daughters of trades unionists, trades union women, and unorganized workers."

Though the strikers' numbers were depleted by defections from their ranks, the strike continued, like the Edmonton strike, until the Winnipeg strike was declared over. Ironically, on June 30, five days after the Calgary strike ended, the Royal North-West Mounted Police (RNWMP) carried out a warrant issued eight days earlier to raid the Calgary Labour Temple, which housed the CTLC, and the homes of strike leaders to search for evidence of a revolutionary conspiracy. They seized left-wing literature but found no evidence of plans to overthrow Canadian governments.

CALGARY LABOUR TEMPLE. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, GL-LABOUR\_TEMPLE 0002



## RACIALIZED WORKERS

*The Alberta strikes of 1919 were largely male white Christian affairs. Work was racialized, with non-whites largely excluded from most occupations and forced to find particular niches. Indigenous people continued to live off the land in areas, especially in northern Alberta, where they had not been dispossessed and their lands stripped of wild animals. To supplement subsistence economies, some worked as labourers in the European fur trade. Further south, in areas where they had been confined to small reserves, Indigenous people farmed, though “treaty Indian” families were generally given ten acres compared to the 160 acres that white settlers acquired, allowing them to only practice subsistence agriculture. Successful Indigenous ranchers in southern Alberta watched helplessly as the Department of Indian Affairs illegally seized large sections of their reserves to grant lands to aspiring white farmers. Apart from dispossession of their land, and violation of treaties, Indigenous people suffered the seizure of their children who were forced to attend “residential schools” where their language and culture were forbidden, physical and sexual assault were common, and malnutrition contributed to high death rates.*



*Life for the Metis and non-status Indigenous people was even more precarious than for “status Indians” whose treaties, while frequently violated, provided them with a place to live. The Metis became “road allowance” people, forced to live on lands set aside for highways and train routes and then move on as those transportation routes were developed. An Alberta commission established in 1934 revealed that about 90 percent of Alberta Metis suffered from tuberculosis, while paralysis, blindness, and syphilis were also rampant. In cities Indigenous people faced discrimination in housing and employment.*

*Few white people made common cause with them, including white workers who ignored working and living conditions for colonized peoples whose ancestors had been in Canada millennia before Europeans arrived. So, while complaints about capitalist exploitation drew many European-origin workers into the streets demanding revolution or at least major reforms, few considered the original victims of colonialism and capitalism. Solidarity with Indigenous peoples was a missed opportunity.*



*African-Canadian female workers were accepted in few jobs outside domestic servitude while male African-Canadian workers were mostly relegated to jobs as railway sleeping car porters. Railway worker unions had membership clauses that excluded non-white workers. So the porters formed the Order of Sleeping Car Porters in 1917, the first black railway union in North America. They applied for membership in the TLC but were denied entry, and told they could only become members as an auxiliary of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees, a union which the TLC was fully aware restricted membership to whites. African-Canadian workers, as badly treated by white unions as by white employers, joined Indigenous workers in simply ignoring the 1919 strikes. Chinese-Canadian workers faced similar discrimination. Indeed unions often claimed they were the cause, rather than the victims, of capitalist efforts to lower wages to miserable subsistence levels. The willingness of Edmonton Chinese-Canadian laundrymen to support the general strike reflected their desire to protest their appalling working conditions despite the hostility they had experienced from white workers in the past. Similarly, in Calgary, the Strike Bulletin pointed proudly to Japanese wipers in the Calgary round house joining fellow workers to join the general strike on May 30. However temporarily, the solidarity engendered by a general strike brought white and non-white workers to bury past hostilities in hopes of uniting to force bosses to elevate the status of workers.*



## In Other Alberta Cities

Calgary and Edmonton unionists were not alone in voting to participate in sympathy strikes with Winnipeg workers. In both Medicine Hat and Lethbridge, the Trades Councils held referenda on whether workers favoured a general strike. In both cases overwhelming majorities voted affirmatively. In Medicine Hat, eight locals voted to strike with three opposed. Municipal workers' negative vote followed a prior employer announcement that city workers who joined a general strike would be automatically dismissed. In Lethbridge, though only eight of the 11 unions in the Trades Council agreed to hold a vote and their vote split 4-4, there was "a large majority in favour of a strike," the *Lethbridge Herald* reported. The coal miners, already out on a sympathy strike, voted "strongly for" a strike while the Civic Employees Federation, which had been struggling to get a new contract from the city, also provided an impressive strike mandate. But the postal clerks, CPR machinists, freight handlers and clerks, and barbers voted to keep working.

The Lethbridge TLC leaders never called a strike, claiming falsely that the Winnipeg General Strike would soon be settled. Their Medicine Hat counterpart suggested that mediation efforts to settle the Winnipeg Strike were supposedly in the works. In both cases, a conservative leadership simply ignored the results of a plebiscite.

## End of the Strikes and Aftermath

It became an article of faith for the ruling class that the Winnipeg General Strike must be quashed without strikers' demands being met. Although the Strike Committee maintained order, street demonstrations and mass meetings meant to solidify striker solidarity scared the corporate elite. The city fired the entire police force because its members voted overwhelmingly to join the strikers even though, at the Strike Committee's request, they stayed on the job. The new anti-strike police could do only so much to repress the strikers' constant marches and meetings to popularize their demands. Prodded by the Citizens' Committee that insisted that Winnipeg was in the midst of a Bolshevik Revolution led by aliens, the federal government sent the RNWMP to Winnipeg to aid the city council's efforts to ban outdoor pro-strike gatherings. The Mounties arrested 10 strike leaders and two OBU organizers on June 17 in an effort to deprive the movement of leadership.

Four days later, in a challenge to government efforts to forbid mass gatherings, there was a massive protest against the arrests in the city's Market Square. The protesters attempted to stop street railway trains, driven by scabs, from operating, in one case partially or completely tipping over a street car. The mayor read the Riot Act and the RNWMP attempted to disperse the 5000 to 6000 protesters with a volley of shots fired into the crowd. The strikers would label that day, June 21, 1919, Bloody Saturday. The police riot caused the deaths of two men: Mike Sokolowski, apparently a Winnipeg tinsmith, and Steve Schezerbanowes, a worker from near-by East Selkirk. Twenty-seven other strikers were injured, and 90 men and four women were arrested.

CROWD GATHERED ON STREET TO HEAR SPEAKERS, LETHBRIDGE, NC2-1780S.





The remaining Strike leadership voted on June 25 to end the strike the next day rather than risk more state violence against workers, and called upon sympathy strikers across Canada to end their strikes but to campaign for release of jailed strike leaders and the dropping of charges against them.

Both the Mathers Commission, reporting in June, 1919, and a Manitoba royal commission on the causes of the Winnipeg General Strike which reported in November, 1919 (though only made public in March 1920) dismissed notions of a revolutionary conspiracy and confirmed that workers had ample reasons for demanding structural changes. The federal commission emphasized unemployment, unstable employment, the high cost of living, government and employers' failure to allow collective bargaining, a lack of decent housing, the government's clampdown on free speech and a free press, and lack of educational opportunities for working people. But the trials in Winnipeg proceeded nonetheless, with seven men eventually imprisoned for "sedition." Those who had precipitated the strike through their oppression of workers faced no charges.

Several convicted men were vindicated by working-class voters who elected them to the legislature in the Manitoba election of 1920. Four leftist MLAs were elected in the 10-member Winnipeg seat (MLAs were chosen by preferential balloting), three of whom were serving prison terms for “seditious conspiracy” at the time, the fourth having been charged but exonerated. Seven other leftist MLAs, supporters of the Winnipeg strike, were elected in seats outside Winnipeg. J.S. Woodsworth, who became editor of the *Western Labour News* after its editor was arrested on June 17 and then was himself arrested, was found not guilty of seditious conspiracy when it



turned out that his allegedly incendiary words came from the Bible. Elected in 1921 to Parliament for Winnipeg Centre, the cradle of the Strike, he attributed his election to those who had jailed him and made him a martyr. He would later become the founding leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1932, the forerunner of today’s New Democratic Party, which was founded in 1961.

Strikes in other cities, including Edmonton and Calgary, ended after the Winnipeg Strike Committee announced the end of their strike. As in Winnipeg, the focus turned to a defence of the arrested Winnipeg strike leaders and to politics. In December, 1919, seven of ten elected members on Edmonton city council were men endorsed by the ETLC along with three of the four men elected to the school board. Only three of ten elected council members in Calgary that month were candidates endorsed by Labour. But in 1921, when four Labour members were elected to the legislature, two were from Calgary, one from Medicine Hat, and one from Rocky Mountain. The only Labour MP elected in the province in 1921 was William Irvine from Calgary. Irvine, a Unitarian minister who also worked as a railway labourer, had told the Mathers Commission that “what the working men want today is truly democratic control of industry,” noting that that meant “production for use and not for profit, but it is perhaps more than that. It means at least the worker will find expression. At the present time, he is a cog in the machine, he has nothing to say as to what is to be done or how it is to be done.”

The Alberta Labour MLAs reflected opposing views within the labour movement. The MLA for Rocky Mountain was P.M. Christophers, the former OBU mine leader, and an advocate of workers' Soviets to replace capitalism. By contrast, Alex Ross, who was first elected to the legislature in 1917, remained a voice for working within the system. He was invited by the United Farmers of Alberta, who formed the provincial government in 1921, to be Minister of Public Works. A more radical Labour member was elected from Calgary in 1926, when Alex Ross was defeated. Carpenter Robert Parkyn had advocated "public ownership and control of all means of production and distribution of wealth" before the Mathers Commission.

## Long-term Impact of the "Great Labour Revolt"

On October 11, 1919, the *Edmonton Free Press* reported that a local Sheet Metal Workers' Union member had died "when a scaffold on which he was working collapsed." The paper noted that:

*The enactment known as the Building Trades Protection Act, a provincial legislative measure, provides for the inspection of scaffolding. But it absolves the government from responsibility by a provision that city authorities should enforce the Act. With the result that what is nobody's business is nobody's business and we have Monday's fatal accident as the consequence of the improper enforcement of a measure calculated to insure safety for the worker.*

Corporate murder of workers, with state complicity, was commonplace and clearly not confined to coal mines. Before and after the Great Labour Revolt of 1919 lack of workers' control over their workplaces meant precarity of employment, dangerous working conditions, low pay, and little or no ability to guarantee even minimum subsistence for their dependents. The strikes, protest marches, and worker gatherings of 1919 demonstrated that significant numbers of workers were willing to risk everything to seek improvements. Some viewed their actions as revolutionary and meant to replace capitalism with a workers' economic democracy while others simply demanded the right of all workers to be represented by trade unions and/or to have state programs of social insurance for health, unemployment, and old age remove some of the insecurities that marked workers' households.

But employers, backed by the repressive powers of the state, carried the day. Employers viewed sympathetic strikes much as the OBU did: as preludes to revolution. If all workers united whenever an employer rejected a particular union's demands, the capitalist system, which depended on employers' ability to subordinate workers to the making of profits, would collapse. The OBU, though it remained popular in workers' thinking, became a minor working-class organization in the face of employer and state violence. Solidarity strikes, which had increased workers' sense of their potential power as a class during World War I and its immediate aftermath, became uncommon. Workers' struggles continued throughout the inter-war period though employers and the state, aided by high unemployment in the first half of the 1920s and throughout the Great Depression of the 1930s, successfully reduced the proportion of workers with union representation to figures well below levels at the end of World War I.

All was not lost. The Communist Party, organized in the 1920s, led efforts to organize militancy within unions and later within separate Communist-led unions. Governments, despite using deportations and troops to suppress radicalism, increasingly worried whether they could maintain order through repression alone. During and after World War II, a return to near-full employment led to a successful industrial union organizing movement and political demands from both the CCF and the Communists for socialization of industry. The capitalist class feared the ramifications if it simply scaled back military industries, as it did after World War I, leaving the responsibility for creating peacetime jobs and social benefits for workers to the private sector. Both a desire to resist post-war worker militancy and a need for peacetime capital accumulation argued for a “postwar compromise” with industrial workers. That meant the right to trade unions and collective bargaining, on the one hand, and social insurance programs, on the other. But unions were to be hemmed in by regulations limiting the scope of collective bargaining and making strikes during the term of a collective contract illegal. Though the trade union leadership mostly welcomed this government package, it meant a workplace world very different from what the strikers of 1919 envisioned. Workers and unions were expected to agree to owners' and managers' full control over the workplace environment in return for pay and benefit increases.

The postwar compromise that mainly applied to industrial jobs was eventually extended to workers at all levels of government as their militancy began to match that of the industrial workers in the 1940s. But the highest level of unionization ever achieved by Canadian workers was about 39 percent in the early 1980s. So, at all times, the majority of workers in Canada were unrepresented by anyone other than themselves in dealings with employers. Service industries outside government were mostly ignored by the labour movement, which, until the 1970s, rarely criticized the gendered and raced division of labour in Canada. While the labour movement and other civil society movements won some social insurance programs that reduced the precarity of working class lives, sought-after “cradle to grave protection” for workers never arrived.



NOT UNTIL 1975, WHEN KATHLEEN ANDREWS WAS HIRED, HAD ANY WOMAN BEEN ALLOWED TO DRIVE A BUS FOR EDMONTON TRANSIT. PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, J-1835-1.

As long as memories of 1919 and struggles afterwards gave hope to workers and instilled fear in capitalists, the postwar compromise seemed impregnable. A variety of factors caused it to crumble after the mid-1970s. Capitalists concerned to maintain high profit ratios increasingly invested in the former colonies of Africa, Asia, and South America in search of cheaper labour for industrial production and later services as well. The labour movement, often itself imbued with colonial thinking, was slow to develop solidarity across international boundaries or to revive 1919 notions of workers’ control and workers’ internationalism. Indeed trade union complacency during the era of the postwar compromise made it difficult for both unions and social democratic parties to respond to the “neo-liberalism” increasingly advocated by capitalists and their political parties. Neo-liberalism called for a partial return of powers and funds that governments had been assuming since 1945 to private sector actors. Privatization of government infrastructure, lower taxes on corporations and the wealthy, less regulation of industry, and reduced social programs were tied into one bundle. The recreating of relatively high unemployment was seen as an important element of neo-liberalism. Only higher unemployment would scare workers into not striking for better wages and benefits as the workers’ share of production fell relative to capital’s share. Shrinking state guarantees for citizens, regardless of their work status, played a big role as well in neo-liberal ideology. If unemployment did not carry serious penalties, workers’ fear of unemployment would not be maximized.

But the message of 1919 still rings true today. When workers unite across occupations, industries, genders, and ethnic/racial origins, they are a formidable force. When they see the profit-seeking capitalist and state employers as “the alien” rather than people of specific genders, skin colours, religious beliefs, or place of origin, they can strike at the heart of the real workings of the capitalist economic system. Whether their goals are reformist or revolutionary, they gain more from class solidarity than from mythical cross-class alliances with bosses favouring a particular region or industry. Employers tend to view unorganized workers as dispensable and organized workers as a problem requiring a show of force from owners or management. In 1919, workers, seeing how well class organization worked for owners of capital, decided that similar organization on their own part and a show of strength were necessary to win social justice and ultimately an economy and society controlled by workers and communities with production for use and not for profit as its central objective.

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