

# CALGARY 1919

*In 1919, workers across Canada revolted.*

Strikes protested issues such as low wages, long hours, and a lack of collective bargaining rights. In some cities, like Winnipeg, general strikes were called in solidarity with local strikers. In other cities, like Calgary (Treaty 7 territory), a general sympathy strike was organized to support the Winnipeg General Strike. All told, workers in Canada spent 3.4 million days on strike in 1919.

## CALGARY STRIKE BULLETIN

PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY OF CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE

No. 3



JUNE 2, 1919

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### WORKERS, AWAKE!

**Public Utilities Refused the Right to Strike—  
Postal Workers Lose Their Jobs Forever**

Fellow workers! Do you realize by the Government's action in dismissing the Postal Workers from the service, that what it has taken Trades Unions years to obtain suddenly, without warning, has been taken from them and lost for years to come. The Amalgamated Postal Workers, with branches in every city in the West, are affiliated with the Trade Councils in their respective cities. This organization is one that is recognized by the Post Office Department and by the Government itself.

Now then, Trades Unionists, are you prepared to see the strike weapon taken from you forever, or are you prepared to take immediate steps to see that the Postal Workers are reinstated?

There is no middle course, boys—there is no sitting on the fence. This is a clear-cut issue that you must face and face at once.

How was it that the Medicine Hat Railway men got their demands in full? They were obtained by the fact that it was known both by the men's representatives and the C.P., G.T.P., C.N., E.D. & B.C. Federated Railways that the general public of this city has not and can not, have any influence on the situation in Winnipeg, yet is called upon to suffer all the inconveniences of a strike.

William Irvine, Calgary's Unitarian minister and editor of the *Alberta Non-Partisan*, wrote at the time:

***"We are witnessing today perhaps the greatest uprising of the common people in Canadian history."***

The strike was opposed by a "Citizens' Committee" of Calgary elites and by different branches of the state. As Prime Minister Robert Borden wrote later, "it became necessary in some communities to repress revolutionary methods with a stern hand and from this ***I did not shrink.***"

### RAILROADMEN SOLID

Winnipeg, May 30—All points standing firm and ignoring ultimatum. Whole Canadian Brotherhood is behind us.—Canadian National Railway Employees.

Edmonton, June 1.—At a mass meeting of the C.P., G.T.P., C.N., E.D. & B.C. Federated Railways voted unanimously to stay out until Winnipeg's demands are settled. Have advised all points. Position firm here. Will advise later.

(Special to the Calgary Herald)

Thief River Falls, May 30.—One thousand returned veterans called at the Parliament buildings at noon and pressed their views on Premier Norris and his cabinet. They claimed that the Provincial Government should not ignore this right of labor unions to administer their own affairs. The move made to secure legislation to make collective bargaining between employer and employee compulsory is what the Unions protest against.

The Calgary strike, between 26 May and 25 June, was part of this strike wave and involved 1,500 workers. The die has been cast in Medicine Hat; a majority of Unions affiliated with the Trades and Labor Council have expressed their determination to go on strike next Monday if the Winnipeg strike is not settled.

The general public of this city has not and can not, have any influence on the situation in Winnipeg, yet is called upon to suffer all the inconveniences of a strike.

The 1919 strikes were a sign that working people in Canada, including Alberta, were not afraid to organize and strike in solidarity to build a better world. The workers' revolt of 1919 holds many lessons for those carrying on this fight today.

Above: Calgary Strike Bulletin, no. 3 (2 June 1919): 1.



***The workers' revolt needs to be understood in the context of settler colonialism and capitalist development.***

*"Workers on Kananaskis falls development project, Kananaskis, Alberta," circa 1910s. NA-3802-39. Glenbow Museum.*



In the late 1800s, the Canadian government continued its nation-building project of dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their lands and encouraging settlers, especially immigrants from Europe, to travel west. Calgary's industrial development was made possible through this process. The arrival of the North-West Mounted Police and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) made Calgary a hub in the new economy of the west.

Fortunes were made in new industries connected to the railroad and the construction boom that coincided with the city's growing population. In the early 1900s, Calgary's population increased by 900% and reached 44,000 by 1911.



*"Construction workers, Calgary, Alberta," circa 1910s. PA-3709-37. Glenbow Museum.*



*"Welcome home parade for 50th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, Calgary, Alberta," 1919. NA-3965-8. Glenbow Museum.*

*Private George Palmer addressed a mass meeting of the Calgary Great War Veterans' Association on 2 November 1918:*

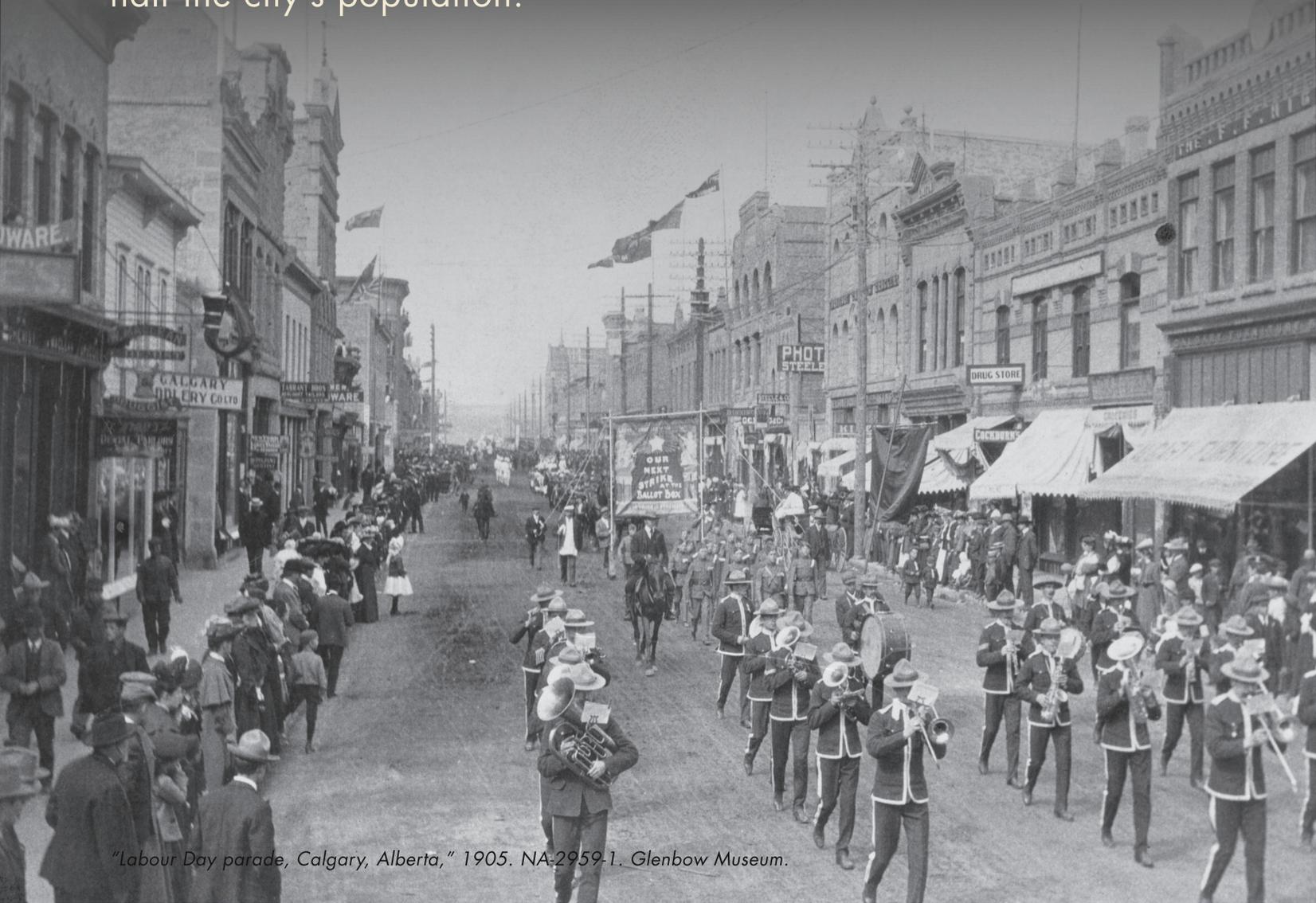
*"Are we going to permit a few greed-sodden drones, men who know not nor ever did know the meaning of the words patriotism and sacrifice to have the ruling of our lives? No! A thousand times no! It's **the rotten corrupt system** that allows men to accumulate millions while others starve."*

***Not everyone benefited equally from this industrial growth.***

With the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877, the federal government restricted members of the Blackfoot Confederacy and the Stoney Nakoda and Tsuut'ina Nations to small reserves of land.

Working people struggled to make ends meet. Inequality increased during World War I (1914–1918). The sons of farming and working-class families fought in the fields of Europe for "freedom" and "democracy" while capitalists made record profits from the production of war-related materials.

***In the early 1900s, Calgary workers had considerable success in workplace and political campaigns.*** The first representative of labour was elected to city council in 1902, and by 1914 Calgary was the eighth most unionized city in Canada with 44 union locals. In some years, Labour Day parades involved more than half the city's population.



*"Labour Day parade, Calgary, Alberta," 1905. NA-2959-1. Glenbow Museum.*

World War I put new pressures on Calgary workers. Businesses merged and bosses formed associations to control wages. Employers hired the unskilled and unorganized at the expense of craft unionists. Wages fell relative to inflation. In response, workers embraced new strategies at the ballot box and at the workplace.

***The Labour Representation League was established in 1917.***

Candidates Andrew Broatch and Alex Ross won city council and MLA seats, respectively, that year. Federally, the Dominion Labour Party was formed in Calgary in April 1919.



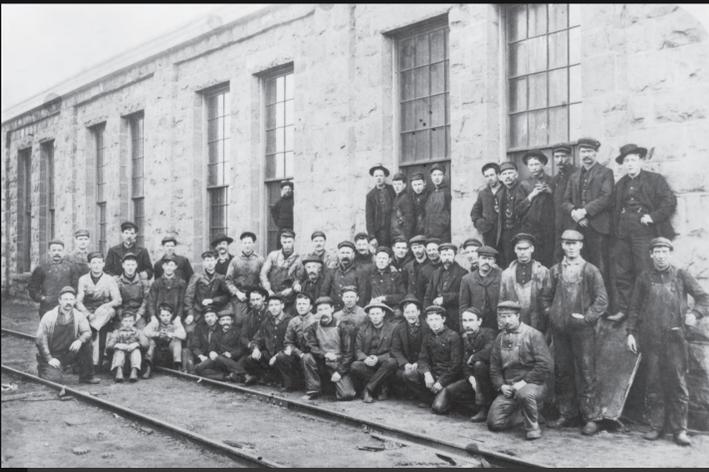
*"Painters' union celebrating Labour Day, Calgary, Alberta," 1912. NA-1383-1. Glenbow Museum.*

Between 1916 and 1918, labour witnessed a wave of organizing that saw union membership increase by 35%. Public sector workers and provincial employees organized for the first time. Existing craft unions began to cooperate in industry-wide organizations, such as the Building Trades Council, the Carpenters District Council, and the CPR Federated Trades Council. By the end of the war, Calgary workers were prepared to demand what the Calgary Strike Bulletin would later call "fair play": a living wage after years of wartime sacrifice.

***Prelude to Revolt and the Lessons of Solidarity***

In 1918, Calgary workers proved willing to strike for collective bargaining rights and improved wages and conditions. Over the course of the spring and summer, hotel and restaurant employees, painters, carpenters, teamsters, letter carriers, postal clerks, retail clerks, telephone linemen, laundry workers, and civic employees all struck for higher wages.

The largest strike of the year was mounted by railway freight handlers in the fall after a union organizer was fired. When the company rebuffed a delegation of freight handlers protesting the decision, workers struck. Talk of a general sympathy strike soon started in the city.



"Canadian Pacific Railway employees leaving work at car shops, Calgary, Alberta," 1912. NA-644-18. Glenbow Museum.

On 5 October, Calgary machinists, pipefitters, blacksmiths, boilermakers, carmen, and electricians downed tools in solidarity with striking freight handlers. Other unions awaited the call to join them, and labour councils in other cities promised support.

The federal government responded to worker solidarity with threats and repression. On 16 October, five strike leaders were arrested.

**The strike committee then escalated the strike by calling out the city employees and street railwaymen.** On 19 October, streetcars were returned to the depot, shutting down a vital part of public transportation. The *Calgary Herald* denounced labour's "Kaiser-like tactics." Foreshadowing the events of 1919, the *Herald* called for the formation of a "citizens' committee" to break the strike and obstruct the "volcano of class reign."

To prevent the strike from spreading further, the arrested strikers were released and the Railway Board granted wage increases.

**By 23 October, the strike was over.** It was a victory for the freight handlers, and worker solidarity was a key contributing factor.



"Workers at Canadian Pacific Railway west end shops, Calgary, Alberta," circa 1910s. NA-4976-1. Glenbow Museum.



"Mrs. Jean McWilliam, and her first boarders, Calgary, Alberta,"  
1907. NA-2173-2. Glenbow Museum.

***"The conditions here are a disgrace!"***

The war's end depressed the Calgary economy. In January 1919, the unemployment rate was already 7%. The number of unemployed steadily increased as more soldiers returned and employers cut back production.

By the spring of 1919, when the Commission on Industrial Relations (the Mathers Commission) heard testimony in Calgary, there was clear evidence of deprivation and rising working-class anger in the city.

***"There is so much unrest among the women,"*** Mary Corse, Labour member of the Calgary School Board reported. "A year ago in Calgary we had a strike of the cooks and waitresses here and ***we found conditions almost unbelievable.***"

Corse continued, "Girls in Calgary are working in places without sanitary accommodation all day long. 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. Soldiers' wives and widows of men lying in France have not the wherewithal to live."

Corse said that only six percent of children from Calgary's working-class families could afford a high school education.

***"The working man is beginning to think for himself that something is wrong,"*** postal worker Clifford Nichols told the commissioners.

Jean McWilliam was more pointed in her testimony:

***"If they ask us 'are you in favour of a bloody revolution,' we will answer 'why any kind of revolution would be better than conditions as they are now!'"***

In the aftermath of war, and drawing inspiration from events such as the Russian Revolution (1917) and the Seattle General Strike (February 1919), workers throughout Canada sought new methods to improve social conditions.

On 13 March 1919, union delegates from across Western Canada met in Calgary at the Labor Temple to devise strategies for increasing worker power.

The idea to establish the **One Big Union, "irrespective of nationality, sex or craft"** was proposed. The One Big Union (OBU) came into being at a founding convention in Calgary on 4 June 1919.

### *The World's Greatest Problem!*



*The Alberta Non-Partisan 3, no. 11 (22 May 1919): 9.*

Coal miners were enthusiastic about the OBU, but Alberta's city-based unions were largely opposed. Only 34 of Calgary's 58 unions voted on the OBU question and 14 reported unanimous opposition.

Calgary delegates to the Western Labor Conference believed it was important to win power through electoral politics. As machinist-delegate and city councillor Andrew Broatch put it, "Bringing all workers within the fold of [the OBU] will not eliminate the fact that laws will still exist, and the chambers where the law is made will still be a part of our social life. When we call a general strike under this form of organization we leave the other man holding the strings of the bag."

**The Western Labor Conference was an important convergence of unionists.** Attending the conference that year were a number of delegates from Winnipeg who went on to play central roles in the Winnipeg General Strike.



*"Group at Labour Temple, Calgary, Alberta," n.d. NC-60-64. Glenbow Museum.*



"Mounted special police controlling crowds on street during riots, Winnipeg, Manitoba," 10 June 1919. NA-1775-3. Glenbow Museum. Courtesy of Sharon Reilly.

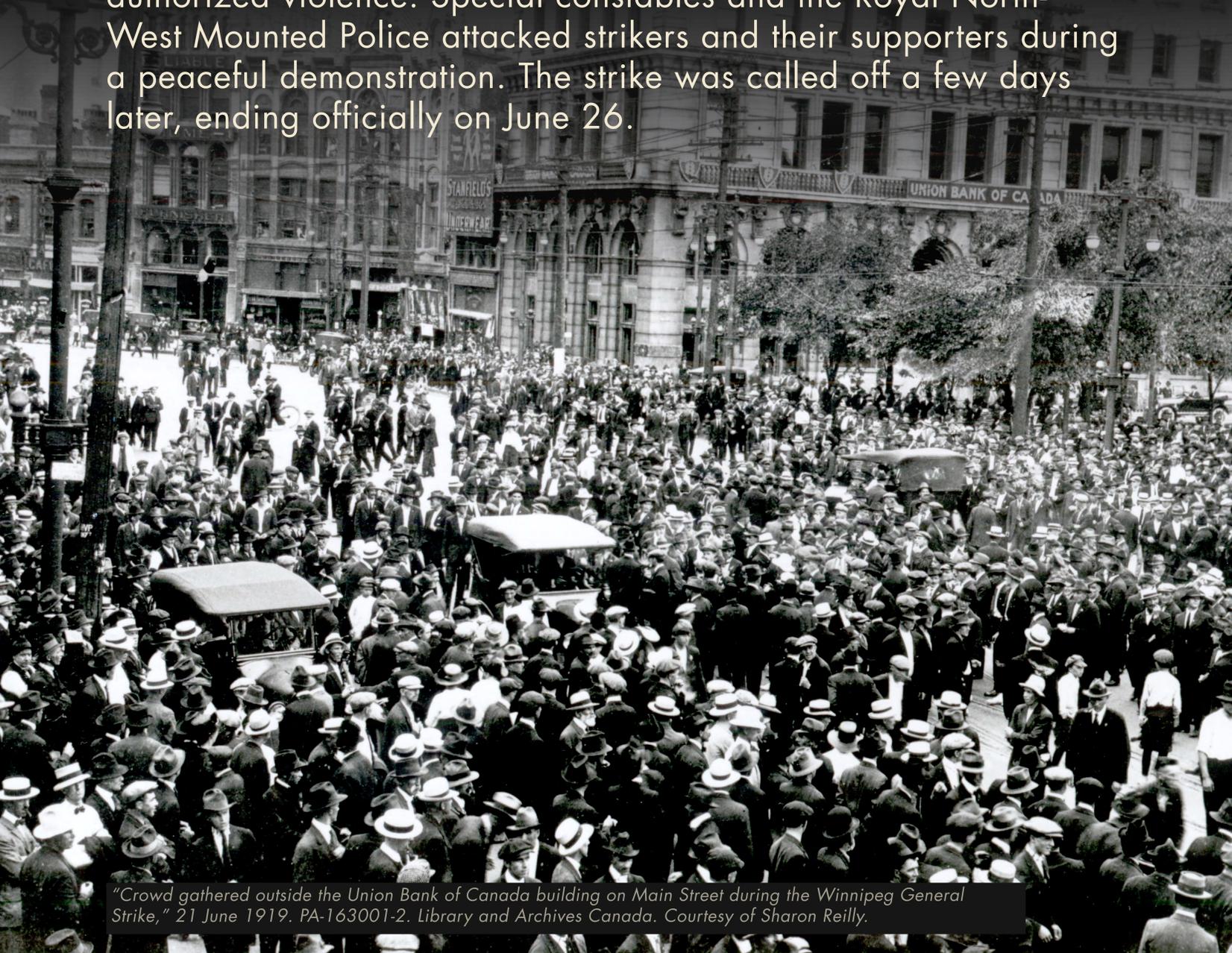
In 1919, 35,000 workers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Treaty 1 territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation, staged a six-week general strike between 15 May and 26 June.

***The Winnipeg General Strike remains one of the most important strikes in Canadian history.***

Strikes had been a common occurrence in Winnipeg since the 1890s as working people pushed back against poor working conditions and growing inequality in the city. When building and metal trades workers went on strike on 1 May 1919, other unions in the city decided to join them in a general sympathetic strike.

The strike began with 11,000 unionized workers, but the number of strikers soon swelled to 35,000 as thousands of non-unionized workers also walked off the job. Many of them were women and recent immigrants living in the city's North End.

The Winnipeg General Strike lasted for six weeks. On 21 June — "Bloody Saturday" — state officials, working with employers and elites organized into the Citizens' Committee of One Thousand, authorized violence. Special constables and the Royal North-West Mounted Police attacked strikers and their supporters during a peaceful demonstration. The strike was called off a few days later, ending officially on June 26.



"Crowd gathered outside the Union Bank of Canada building on Main Street during the Winnipeg General Strike," 21 June 1919. PA-163001-2. Library and Archives Canada. Courtesy of Sharon Reilly.

**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 miner in full gear, Crowsnest Pass, Alberta," circa 1920s. NC-54-2864. Glenbow Museum.



"Miners, Galt Coal mine, Lethbridge, Alberta," circa 1910s. NC-2-132. Glenbow Museum.

**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.

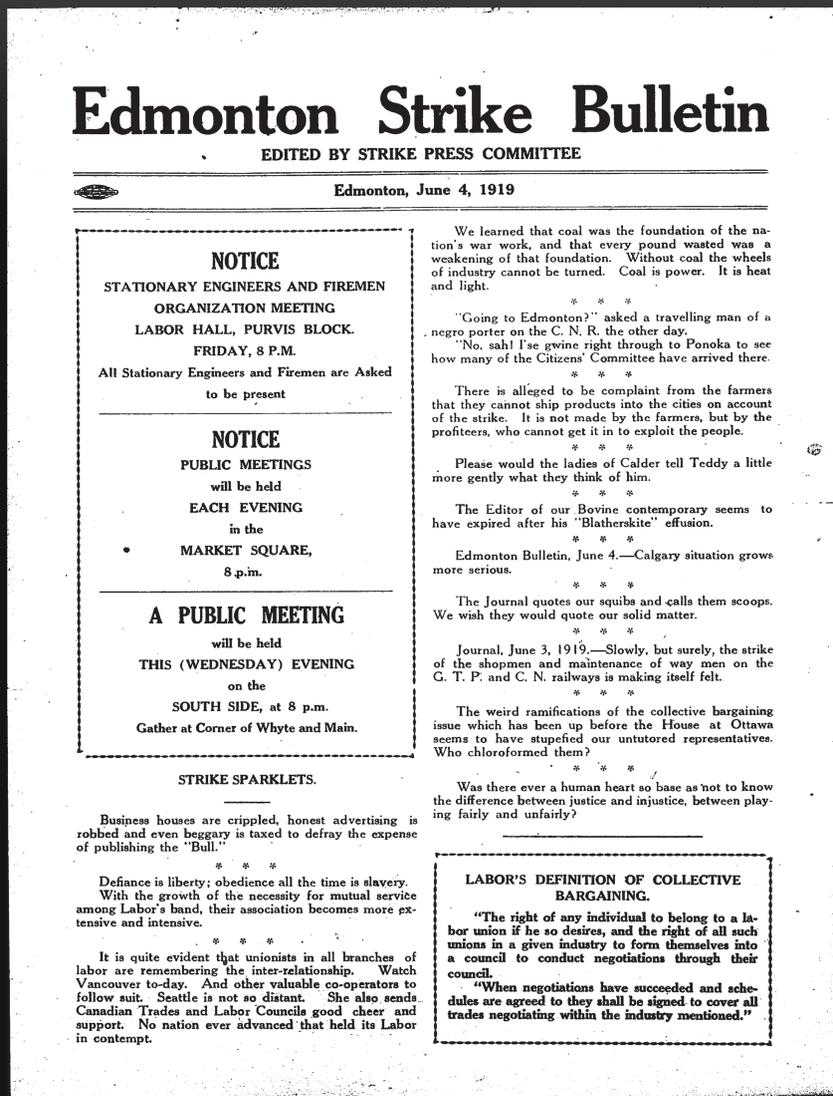


"Miners at Hillcrest, Alberta," circa 1924. A-2414. Provincial Archives of Alberta.

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.

Winnipeg's request to labour councils across Canada to stage sympathy strikes struck a chord with unionized workers in Alberta.

34 of the 38 locals in the Edmonton Trades and Labour Council (ETLC) agreed to call a strike. The city's mine locals, railway locals, and most trades voted overwhelmingly to strike. Though the ETLC had done little to endear itself to non-white workers, the city's Chinese laundry workers decided to join the strike.



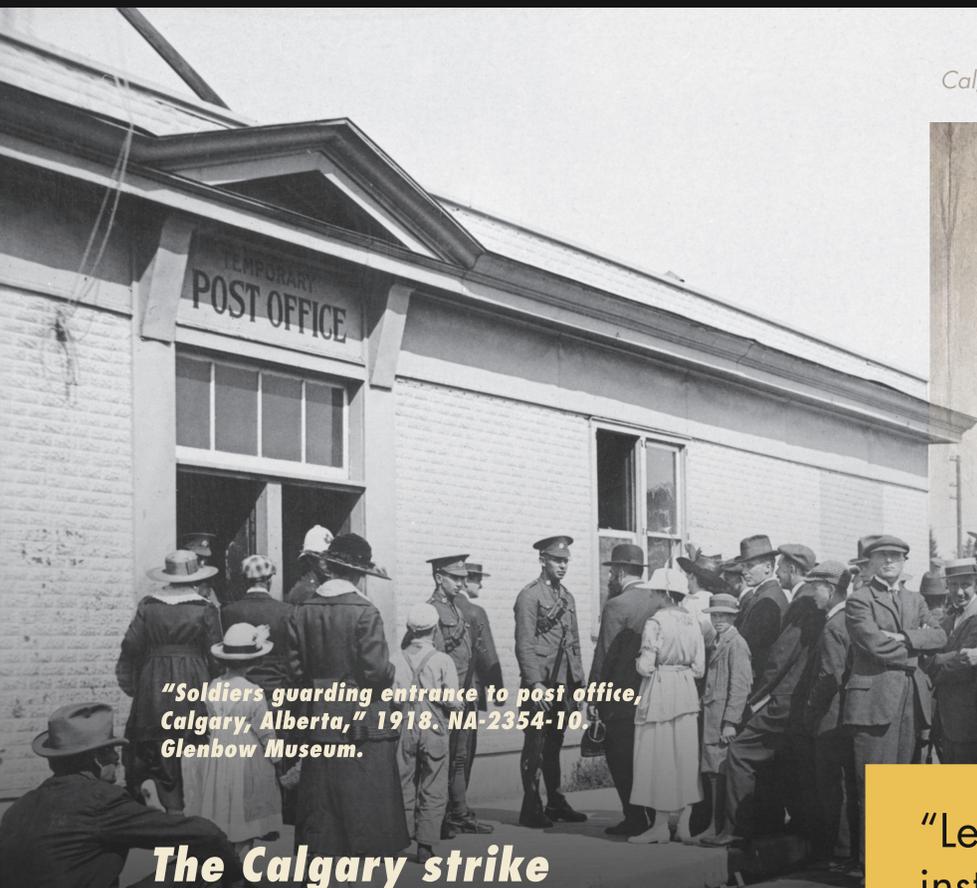
Edmonton Strike Bulletin (4 June 1919): 1.

2,000 workers walked off the job on 26 May. During the first week, strikers gave temporary power over city services to the Strike Committee. They agreed to permit full water services only to hospitals and to people on the first floor of buildings.

Articles in the *Edmonton Strike Bulletin* emphasized the non-revolutionary aims of the sympathy strikes but reported on the progress of the OBU and expressed sympathy for the Bolshevik government in Russia.

**As in Winnipeg, a Citizens' Committee formed to oppose what they regarded as workers' seizure of power.** Mayor Joe Clarke, who had earlier expressed support for the workers' cause, declared that civic workers who did not immediately return to work would lose their jobs. On 31 May, utility workers and other city employees, except street railway workers, abandoned the strike.

On 1 June, railway workers voted unanimously at a mass meeting to remain off the job until the Winnipeg strikers' demands were met. Most strikers in Edmonton stayed out until 25 June, the day the Winnipeg strike was called off.



"Soldiers guarding entrance to post office, Calgary, Alberta," 1918. NA-2354-10. Glenbow Museum.

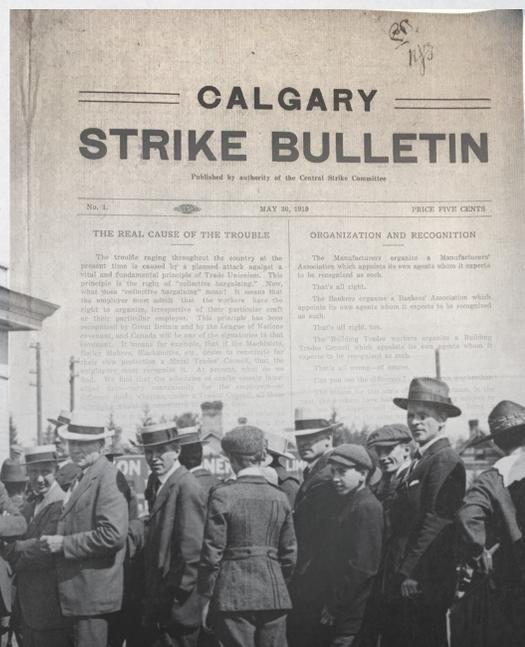
**The Calgary strike began on Monday, 26 May and lasted just over four weeks.** In terms of the total number of work days lost due to the strike, it was the third largest work stoppage in Western Canada (after Winnipeg and Vancouver) and the largest strike in the city's history.

Soon after the strike began, workers organized a Strike Committee to coordinate events and relay information. The committee produced a strike bulletin to provide updates and to counter the unsympathetic coverage the strike received in the *Calgary Herald* and other efforts to break the strike.

Throughout the strike, workers and their supporters organized events to bring people together and draw attention to labour issues. On several occasions, workers marched through the city accompanied by a band. They also held mass meetings at Mewata Park and St. George's Island, where they listened to speeches by labour supporters, including socialist Bill Pritchard and Unitarian minister William Irvine.

The Calgary strike continued into late June. On 17 June, as news spread about the arrest of the Winnipeg strike leaders, the Calgary Strike Committee called for a nation-wide strike in solidarity. Following the violent suppression of the Winnipeg strike on Bloody Saturday, however, strike action in other cities dwindled. The Calgary strike ended on June 25.

Calgary Strike Bulletin, no. 1 (30 May 1919): 1.



"Let your slogan be: Re-instatement of the postal workers now on strike without discrimination against any one man. The organized labor movement of Western Canada either goes down as a whole on this question or it stands together for victory. **If the Government breaks the 'posties' now, it will turn around and break you later. Think it over and don't be too long about it.**"

*Calgary Strike Bulletin (7 June 1919). Postal workers were the first to walk off the job. In response, the postal service fired the strikers and barred them from being rehired.*

**Women played an active role in the Calgary strike, primarily through the Women's Labor Council.**

Activists Jean McWilliam and Mary Corse established the council in spring 1919. Membership was open to union and non-union women workers as well as the wives and daughters of trade unionists.

The council provided crucial support during the strike. Soon after the strike began, members formed the Calgary Defence Committee to raise money and organize events. They collected hundreds of dollars in donations, at times enduring abuse and threats of violence while doing so. They also organized social events, such as dances and lunches, to bring people together and boost the strikers' morale.



"Mrs. Jean McWilliam, voluntary worker, Calgary, Alberta," 1907. NA-2173-1. Glenbow Museum.

Council members pressured politicians and employers. Early in the strike, the council put together a petition calling for the fired postal workers to be reinstated. They also passed and submitted to the post-master general a resolution demanding that the postal service stop hiring young workers as scabs.

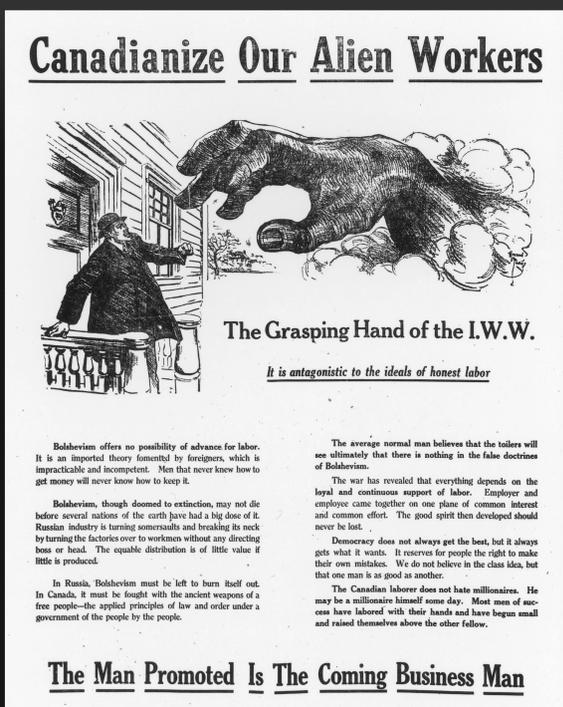
**MASS MEETING  
OF  
W O M E N**  
WILL BE HELD IN  
**The Labor Hall**  
**Friday Afternoon at 3**  
**BE THERE!**

*Calgary Strike Bulletin, no. 5 (5 June 1919): 3.*

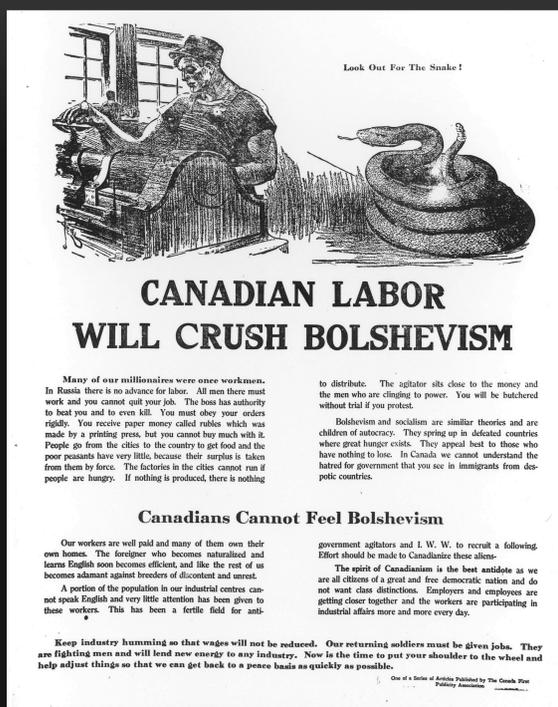
When police arrested the strike leaders in Winnipeg, Calgary women sent a telegram of support to the Women's Labor League in that city and called for a national general strike. Though the Calgary strike ended on 25 June, the Women's Labor Council continued to be a strong voice for working women in the years that followed.

## Wealthy elites in Calgary formed their own "Citizens' Committee" to defeat the strike.

Strikers argued that the wealthy businessmen of the Committee were disconnected from the realities of working-class life in Calgary. They pointed out that members of the Committee could afford to pay \$600 memberships at local golf clubs yet had the "gall to call a man a Bolshevik for asking for anything more than \$56 a month in order to keep a wife and family in the bare necessities of life."



"Canadianize our Alien Workers," Calgary Daily Herald, 17 June 1919. NA-3442-2. Glenbow Museum.



"Canadian Labour will Crush Bolshevism," Calgary Daily Herald, 20 June 1919. NA-3442-3. Glenbow Museum.

The *Calgary Herald* sided with the Citizens' Committee, writing that the strikers aimed to "substitute for democratically elected government the rule or dictation to the government of an industrial class. In brief, the issue is democracy versus Soviet rule, better known as Bolshevism."

Unlike in Winnipeg, the Citizens' Committee in Calgary did not resort to physical violence to break the strike. Nevertheless, the Committee worked closely with the RNWMP, which carried out a series of raids on labour offices and the homes of strike leaders as an intimidation tactic after the strike had ended.



"Justice in Winnipeg!"

The Alberta Non-Partisan 3, no. 13 (19 June 1919): 6.

THE HERALD The Calgary Herald INVITES is a Plutocratic journal which claims to stand for law and order. Whenever there is an opportunity offered, and often without justification it cries Bolsheviki at all who disagree with it. Bolshevism to the Herald means bloodshed, lawlessness, crime, etc., etc. We are not now concerned with what Bolshevism really means, but rather with what the Herald takes it to mean. Educated people know of course, that the Herald is wrong. But we will measure the Herald by its own yard stick. We are opposed to bloodshed, disorder and crime, therefore we are opposed to the Calgary Herald. "Nothing will satiate the better element of the people of Winnipeg but bloodshed." is the statement appearing in the Calgary Herald. Such a statement is not only barbaric and nauseating to a civilized person but it is encouraging those better people to take their drink of human blood. Had such a remark passed the lips of a labor man the Herald would have clamored for his arrest. If such statements are unlawful why is it that the editor of the Herald is not arrested? Of course it is the champion of these "better" people who will not be satisfied without blood. These "better" people never hesitate to shed blood whenever they can get some one else to do the shedding in their interests. We are astonished that any daily paper dares to publish such damnable suggestions. We think it is time the typographical unions refused to set some of the Herald's bloodshed stuff.

The Alberta Non-Partisan 3, no. 14 (7 July 1919): 1.



"Cartoon depicting pressure on labour from capitalist," 1919. NA-2790-2. Glenbow Museum.

***The Canadian labour revolt was repressed with considerable – even deadly – violence, but this did not mean that it was entirely defeated.***

Major figures in the Calgary sympathy strike went on to win elected office. William Irvine was elected MP in 1921; Robert Parkyn, elected Alderman in 1922, won a seat in the provincial election of 1926. Labour candidates were regularly elected to city council and the Board of Education for the next three decades.

In the years after World War II, the influence of Calgary's labour movement declined. Nevertheless, some struggles provoked broad-based public sympathy and union solidarity. In 1995, hospital laundry workers – many of them women – launched a wildcat strike to save their low-paying jobs. Unions across the province were prepared to mount sympathy strikes to support them.



"Striking laundry workers, Alberta," 2012. Alberta Labour History Institute.

100 years later, the lessons and legacy of the 1919 strike wave are mixed. There were missed opportunities to widen the circle of solidarity to include Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups.

Still, the 1919 workers' revolt serves as a reminder that through organization and political activity working people can change society for the better.

***"Don't get discouraged. Don't be misled.*** Look beyond Calgary. Look beyond Winnipeg. Look beyond Canada. Read the signs of the times. From every corner of the globe are wafted to us the winds, the voice of myriads of our fellow workers, joyously singing that great refrain, 'Justice for the working class!' We will admit that sometimes the outlook must seem dark, but it is only the darkness before the dawn. United we stand, divided we fall!" – *Calgary Strike Bulletin*, 14 June 1919