

Greg Kealey

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Interviewer Alvin Finkel, Camera Don Bouzek

Q: What was going on in 1919?

GK: I think people were happy that the war was over, but there were a lot of other things in their lives that didn't make them so happy – much of what predated the war but a lot of it exacerbated by the war. If we think globally about 1919, which is I think how we should think about it --we Canadians tend to think about it as a, we used to think about it only as a city event; then we thought about it as a bit of a regional event, because that was one of the explanations.

Increasingly, historiography has come around to thinking about it as a national event, but indeed it's a national event that was taking place in a context of similar events around the world. The most famous American example would be the Seattle General Strike that was around almost the same time. There was a Boston Police Strike and police strikes in many cities, events in South America. European events of course, the failed German Revolution led by the Spartacus, which led to the unfortunate deaths of Leibknecht and Luxemburg and the Hungarian soviet of Bela Kun, unfortunately not very long lived. I'm not sure I've even covered all of the international events.

Q: What was the cause of this?

GK: The causes in different parts of the world would be different. In the North American context, which is the one that I know best, I think it had a lot to do with the ever-increasing perception of inequality that was based on the rampant war profiteering that was evident to everybody. It was also based, I think, on concerns that the propaganda efforts of the west in the war against Germany and its allies was very much couched in terms of a war for democracy. There were raised expectations of what democracy should mean, both in a political and an

economic sense. I think a combination of the material conditions, returning soldiers, met a situation where employment was already high as the economy demobilized and war industries had to convert, etc. So I think those ideas were strong, and of course those ideas about democracy and equality were also then leavened with socialist ideas that had been developing throughout the second half of the 19th Century and strengthening in the early 20th Century and finding expression everywhere, more strongly in Europe but quite strongly in the United States and Canada as well in Socialist parties of various stripes that were popularizing notions such as production for use, not production for profit. Those ideas were powerful. Then, of course, the events that took place in 1917 in Russia, transforming it into the Soviet Union, had a kind of inspirational effect as well that made all things seem possible. Some of the things that happened later in the Soviet Union, of course, were on nobody's lines. Indeed, people didn't know a lot about what was actually happening in the Soviet Union, because the world press did not have the kind of coverage that it has now or the immediacy that it has now, and equally of course was almost always disapproving and therefore not always believed by people who thought it was an inspiring event.

Q: By 1919, Canada is fighting against the new Russian government.

GK: Yes, the Borden government sent military support to the allied intervention in Siberia and there's some interesting events connected to that because the Canadian troops, some of whom were conscripts, were not real anxious to go fight against the Soviets. There was a bit of the military refusing orders in Victoria when they were about to embark to go to Siberia. A number of the cavalry element of that which did not rebel were former North West Mounted Police officers. So yes, the Canadian government and governments around the world were openly in opposition to the Soviets. The Civil War in the Soviet Union, which lasted for quite a while, certainly played a debilitating role on the early years of the Bolshevik rule.

Q: This is at a time when workers are pretty class conscious, right?

GK: Absolutely. One of the ironic things about the General Strike was in many ways we can talk about the levels of class consciousness of the workers, which we have been doing. But the Canadian bourgeoisie, if anything, proved more class conscious. They exaggerated the threat in many ways, but they did perceive it as a real threat. The threat was not of a Bolshevik revolution, although that's what they said, and it wasn't about the alien enemy, although that's what they said. What it really was was about a potential challenge to the capitalist system and to their way of life and profits.

Q: They tried to make it look like workers who are rising up are playing the alien card, that they're German agents.

GK: Absolutely, and they're unpatriotic. Among the returning soldiers there was a similar class split. The officer core tended to side with the citizens' committee and the bourgeoisie, and the returning soldiers, the grunts, tended to support the strikers. But there was always an attempt by the officer class to try and mobilize former soldiers against that perceived or reputed ethnic threat. In a city like Winnipeg and in almost all North American cities, the very large percentage of the working class, and especially of the lower wage parts of the working class and primarily unorganized working class, was made up of a variety of primarily European-origin workers. That also was where there were, especially among the Finns and the Jews and the Ukrainians, significant populations of socialists, some of whom had brought their politics from the old world but many of whom had become socialists in the Canadian context.

Q: In 1918 when they banned a variety of socialist organizations, there seemed to be a focus on the non-English-speaking groups.

GK: Right, all the language federations are indeed banned. The censorship was very extensive and shut down the left-wing press for a few years. Fortunately, the papers of the censor survived, so we have extensive files on all of the newspapers that they shut down. There's very interesting correspondence with translators coming up with the evidence to allow the secretary of state to

shut down the papers for being allegedly seditious. One paper that didn't shut down, however, they made the mistake of recruiting a translator who actually was a socialist, and he managed to disguise the content of the paper.

Q: What about the radicals during the war?

GK: There is a strong anti-war sentiment, for one thing, and elements of the international socialist movement had before the war said that they would never fight an imperialist war and fight workers against workers. That was not a predominant view among Canadian labour but it certainly was a significant view in the left-wing pockets where it was very strong. Among Québécois it also was very strong, so that when the Borden government moved to conscription it led to very significant riots in Quebec, a lot of people refusing to engage in the process that could lead to conscription. In a famous incident in British Columbia, a smelter workers' leader, Ginger Goodwin, was actually killed by a police officer who was trying to enforce the legislation. That led to a one-day general strike around his funeral and was just one precursor to what happened in Winnipeg.

Q: So Ginger Goodwin was basically saying, this is an imperialist war and workers have no business fighting it.

GK: That's right.

Q: That was clearly a worrying viewpoint to the Canadian state.

GK: Yes, it worried them so much that in 1917 the Borden government hired a Montreal lawyer named C. H. Cahan to do a study of what they described as Bolshevism in Canada. Cahan surveyed the left-wing press and used the apparatus of the Royal North West Mounted Police in western Canada, which is where it had authority, and of the Dominion Police in eastern Canada, to provide him with information. He recommended at the end of that the creation of what

would've been an agency much like the FBI, which was also being given birth to in the United States at exactly the same time, initially called the Bureau of Investigation. But the Borden government, for a range of reasons, decided not to go that route, and just left those surveillance functions with city police forces, provincial police forces, and Dominion Police and Royal North West until in 1920, upon reflection when they were thinking of ending the Royal North West Mounted Police altogether, they came up with the idea that they needed a full federal police force, and that was when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police came into existence. From the start, one of its major functions was domestic surveillance and a national security role. It absorbed all the information that the Royal North West Mounted Police had already compiled, and then started keeping files that eventually led to--by the time of the Royal Commission in the 1970s-- investigating RCMP wrongdoing. They have files on some 800,000 Canadians, which was a pretty significant chunk of the population, including such well-known threats as Tommy Douglas, among others. For those viewers in Ukrainian or Finnish or Jewish communities, the surveillance that went to those ethnic groups' language federations and labour temples, etc., was extraordinary. They really kept tabs on every play that was produced in every Ukrainian or Jewish organization in the country. They even surveilled children's mandolin orchestras. The files are absolutely mindboggling. Even old Ukrainian Communists that I've spoken to, they knew they were being surveilled but they had no idea the extent of it. They were truly amazed when they saw the file lists when they became available archivally.

Q: Most of the activities of these groups were completely legal.

GK: Absolutely. They were community groups – dance troupes, plays, music – and often within the context of the Communist Party as it emerged. These groups were not exactly the furthest left of the party, if you define left by being the closest to Stalin's line.

Q: As the war goes on, the reformists seem to move left and become the One Big Union idea. Why is there this shift?

GK: I think it's a growing frustration with the political parties and political ideologies of the mainstream parties. Probably the strongest labour element was what was often described as LibLab, a kind of Liberal-Labour coalition. It enjoyed a bit of electoral success; not a great deal, but there was a bit. I think that even the politicians who came out of the labour movement and got elected in LibLab formulations were frustrated by their inability to actually make significant change. That ideological frustration plus the other elements of the war mentality I think drove most progressives further left. Then the opportunities or the excitement of the workers taking power in a very large state further excited optimism and hope.

Q: During the war, with high employment, workers were less fearful of joining unions. But high inflation detracted from the benefits of employment.

GK: The wartime inflation was such that even wage increases, which there were, were not keeping up with the cost of living. The other thing we haven't talked about, which is an important element in all of this, is that the union – we've mentioned the OBU and the IWW but we probably should emphasize that one of the things that's happening is that the old craft forms of organization – carpenters, railway engineers, plumbers, etc., -- is giving way to new notions of industrial unionism that are embodied both in the IWW and in the OBU. That new thrust of industrial unionism is bringing factory workers who are largely unskilled into activity, sometimes organized and sometimes not. One of the amazing things about all these general strikes everywhere is that it's not simply the unionized workers that are on strike, it's virtually the entire workforce bringing the city to a halt, which means that all kinds of unorganized workers, as in Winnipeg, have joined these strike efforts. Ideologically, they're part of that same notion that there's possibilities of a different future, a way forward to a better life – more equal, more democratic, etc.

Q: When the war is over in 1919, inflation is still there and unemployment has risen. The state isn't doing anything to ensure that workers have jobs.

GK: No, it's very much a laissez-faire state, compared to what would come later.

Q: Or even compared to what happened during the war.

GK: Indeed. Of course war always imbues the state with powers that it claims it doesn't have the rest of the time. They did play with some controls around prices, but they were taken at best. They also, in the wake of the industrial strife--1917, 1918 had very large amounts of workers on strike, the largest until 1919 in Canadian history--there were notions of some kinds of reforms of industrial relations systems, Whitley councils, and Britain was an example that came out of a royal commission. In the Canadian context there was the Mathers Commission, which investigated for the first time since the mid-1880s the state of capital-labour relations in the country. The testimony to that commission, which went pretty much coast to coast, is really one of the best articulations of the kinds of things we've been talking about in terms of the sentiments the workers held. Time and time again they do talk about production for use, not for profit. Not always full-blown socialist ideas, but quasi-socialist ideas.

Q: Certainly ideas of workers having more control.

GK: Precisely. It's a remarkable moment. The other element: we spoke earlier about the different nature of the labour movement, and craft unions especially. One of the things that is striking about the debates that take place in the Trades and Labour Council of Canada in those years is that the old construction of a conservative east versus a radical west just doesn't stand up when you actually dissect the debates. There were strong anti-war sentiments expressed by eastern and central Canadian workers, not only western workers, which is the way that some of the old historiography had discussed it. There of course was western frustration which led to the Western Labour Conference in Calgary that led to the OBU.

Q: After their guy from the west, James Waters, is voted out as the president and Tom Moore, a Conservative, is voted in.

GK: Again, there's all the state repression stuff that we've talked about, but there also is some element of the federal state that is also trying to entice a certain kind of labour leader into their midst. The senator, Gideon Robertson, who plays a role in the Winnipeg General Strike, as a Borden cabinet minister, is a prime example. He comes out of the railway telegraphers, I think. James Murdock, whose trade I forget, is one of the people on the board for price control. So there's some conciliatory efforts, although that tends to not last very long and doesn't take real root. In the aftermath, the repressive route is seen to have worked more successfully.

Q: Why was the One Big Union idea so attractive?

GK: I think it's that notion of solidarity across all divisions, regardless of craft, regardless to a large degree of gender, regardless to some degree of even race. It's that notion of a working class in its entirety as a force of resistance to capital.

Q: And it had some successes already during the war.

GK: I think the earlier general strike formations did have a modicum of success, which I think fed into 1919, which also of course played a role in the bourgeoisie's fear, because they saw it as a kind of sequential building. So yes, I think that was a powerful notion and of course it survived, although the OBU never took over the entire labour movement by any stretch of the imagination. But it did survive, and then was reborn with industrial unionism during the Depression with the rise of the CIO unions.

Q: The OBU at the Western Labour Conference in March of 1919 was strongly supported. But there were some who felt threatened by that.

GK: Absolutely. The craft unions saw it as a direct attack. The TLC, with Tom Moore, worked as hard as they could to undermine the OBU. The Canadian state certainly targeted the OBU as

well as the political parties that were on the left in terms of who they surveilled and took most interest in. We have the list of the files and the order that they were opened for the first few thousand, and very prominently among them are the Winnipeg strike leaders, people from the Calgary Labour Conference, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the One Big Union.

Q: And surveillance continues, even after the strike.

GK: It continues from its origins of in the First World War period until the kind of surveillance that we are experiencing today. It's continuous. The only thing that changes is it becomes more and more technologically sophisticated, and we're subjected to indeed vastly more surveillance than was possible even at the heights of the RCMP craziness.

Q: What was the purpose of the anti-immigrant hysteria? These people had been brought in to do the cheap labour that was necessary to build a country, and then they're vilified and seen as a threat to the country's existence.

GK: It is an extraordinary contradiction. As business people in all parts of the country will explain, they really need these people because they need workers and they can't, for whatever reason (usually terrible wages and working conditions), get Canadians, who are usually first-generation immigrants themselves, to do that work. Yet there's this countervailing notion that somehow these people who don't look like us and maybe don't have the same coloured skin, maybe don't speak English so well, that these people are somehow a threat to something they define as Canadianism or the good old days or some mythical thing. It never fails to amaze me that a society that's so totally built on immigration can still have people thinking and saying the things that get said. Recently Linda and I [found that]one of our contractors, who's very proud of his parents who fled the Hungarian Revolution – he was actually born in Canada but his parents were Hungarian – was falling into this trap. I said, 'but George, that's your parents.' It was kind of a wakeup moment.

Q: For the state, it's useful to create this notion of a national group of Anglos.

GK: Yes if there's aspirations on the part of the working class to have this One Big Union, it's equally aspirational on the part of the bourgeoisie to make sure that that doesn't happen, and racism and ethnic chauvinism is part and parcel to trying to make sure that doesn't happen.

Q: What was the legacy of Canada's 1919 labour revolts?

GK: I think it's important that we take a long view. Rather than thinking about 1919 as a specific event, rather to think of these as moments in the history of capitalist development, moments of crisis, sometimes crises that have to do with the cycle of capitalist development itself, sometimes that have to do with external events like wars. Nevertheless, there is a kind of series of moments of crises in which workers, and even the working masses before the industrial working class, that these groups managed to find ways of uniting to resist the depredations of the ruling class of the day. We need to, even in these days of seemingly less good moments for the left and for workers, we need to remember that these moments come and there's no reason to ever think that they won't come again. The lesson is we need to be working to be ready for those moments and to be ready to take crises and turn them in favourable directions toward more equal society and to a future that builds on the kind of images and hopes and aspirations that these previous generations have had in the social movements of their day.

Q: Are there some moments of the general strikes of 1919 that stand out for you?

GK: The overt repression of the horrible events and the pictures of the Mounted Police and troops attacking the crowds is certainly a moment. We don't know as much as we'd like to, but I think the presence of women in the strike and the leadership of some of the women that we do know about is an important aspect of 1919. The spread of the sympathy strikes is also a demonstration of solidarity that I think is probably there for the first time on a national scale. The role of those often unorganized in a labour union sense but often organized in their own

communities of the immigrant population in Winnipeg in making the strike total is another important moment of that strike. You'll appreciate this, because you had the opportunity to study with him as well. Kenneth McNaught, the University of Toronto historian and long-time CCF and then NDP supporter and hater of the New Left was one of my examiners on my PhD. He had just supervised Bercuson's PhD thesis on the General Strike and they were probably in the process of writing the small book that they wrote together. He asked me in the oral about the role of immigrant workers in Winnipeg, and I gave an answer that was probably less developed than what I just said, but something along those lines. He basically went, 'no no no, wrong; it was British workers that led the strike.' Of course he was thinking of the titular leadership of the strike, but was not willing to grant a role to any of the others.

Q: It's almost a notion that if others were involved, it wasn't a proper patriotic strike. Some people have pointed out that Indigenous people were excluded, and to some extent women.

GK: That's part of the difficulty. We're finding them in the history, but the archival records don't actually show that. In terms of the Indigenous, there must have been Indigenous workers in that labour force. I suspect the census would show us that; I haven't looked. But I suspect that they were there, although the critiques of what was happening to First Nations in the general Winnipeg area are certainly valid in terms of labour not playing any particular role in the day.

Q: Labour didn't recognize the colonialism that Indigenous people experienced. But a lot of Indigenous people were in that labour force, although not necessarily recognized as Indigenous as such.

GK: More of the ironies of trying to think of things in racial constructs.

Q: Do you know anything about the Amherst, Nova Scotia strike?

GK: Well you're going to be interviewing the world's leading expert on the Amherst General Strike tomorrow. None of us knew about the Amherst General Strike until Nolan found it.

Q: Anything about the Calgary Ogden CPR shop strike?

GK: There's probably something in my article on the labour revolt, but I don't remember. Sorry about that. I was saying to Alvin that if I'd known that I was doing this I would've reread that article.

Q: In 1919 the Privy Council was banning strikes. So it was illegal then. Can you talk about that kind of risk-taking among the unions?

GK: That's an interesting question. Certainly part of it is that the post-Second World War... The post-Second World War Labour Accord that came after the Ford strike put in place and then developed across the country, not just federally but provincially in every jurisdiction, a set of labour laws that created a framework of industrial legality that had simply not previously existed. Part of the devil's bargain was that in return for legal recognition of unions and lots of positive things that allowed workers to organize they gave up the right to strike during a collective agreement. They allowed the right to strike to be shrouded by a whole series of legal steps before workers could strike even after the expiration of a collective agreement, and a set of extensive grievance procedures that are also legally quite restrictive in terms of work now, grieve later. That's the industrial relations regime that we know and that [we]by and large accept at moments of serious crises, which we have had a number of when provincial government tried to put in place austerity programs that flew in the face of public sector collective bargaining and created real crises, like Operation Solidarity in British Columbia in 1983 and later manifestations in other provinces. Unions by and large abide by this. Pre- PC 1003 and the post-war accord, there was very limited framework. Some provinces had little bits but there were very limited legal frameworks. There was the PCO [editor: Privy Council Order] order but by and large that PCO order just was ignored.

Q: Since any strike was illegal, a general strike wasn't anywhere legal.

GK: Right. It had not been enforced. But equally, it tells you something about that moment of crisis, that no legal stricture would've stopped it from happening. They would've had to arrest 100,000 people or whatever the appropriate number is, which of course is not beyond their means at some other point. But it is a whole other different construct of capital labour relations. I think we need to know more about some of those constructs. Tom Mitchell gave a very interesting paper this morning about royal commissions and the relationship of 1919 to Gouzenko and the role that E. W. Williams, who was one of the legal brainiacs of the Winnipeg General Strike situation, along with Andrews, who was president of the Canadian Bar Association in 1946 and apparently was a primary source of advice to Louis St. Laurent, who was the minister of justice, around the Gouzenko affair and then the Kellock-Taschereau Royal Commission. So the law is a very interesting place to go in these discussions.

Q: The workers were incredibly well read. It's worth talking about the self-education that was going on at that time.

GK: In the Mathers Commission testimony of course, it's mainly Anglo-Celtic workers. But we know, partly from the RCMP and now increasingly from oral histories, just how extensive the cultural work in the language federation context was, often specific to the particular ethnic cultures, be they Finnish or Jewish or Ukrainian. But those were real conveyors of important cultural figures in those national traditions, as was evident with the British workers. William Prichard and that address to the jury is just a magnificent piece of prose. The understandings of economics and of capitalism and of capitalist development and of the labour process are mind-blowing. So I think you're quite right that many of these people were polymaths and they learned through their political parties and they learned through the ethnic organizations. Some of them would've learned in religious contexts as well where there's strong traditions that they can also draw on to justify rebellion and revolt. So it is very worthy of comment about these cultures and

how vibrant they were, which of course just contrasts so totally with how especially the ethnic workers would've been viewed by the Canadian elite.

Q: The Socialist Party was often criticized because it focused so much on education and not enough on action, but certainly its members were extremely well read.

GK: And they continued, especially in British Columbia, the members of the CCF out of that tradition continued to run circles around the other CCFers.

Q: Despite the appalling working conditions, there was an incredible sense of hope.

GK: I think that may be one of the hardest things for us to get inside of and to understand as historians. So much has changed, and for many of us we're in a downward slope where it's difficult to feel optimism. The way that I try to recapture it and the way that Bryan Palmer and I talked about the 1880s and that moment of the Knights of Labor. . . The 1960s were the most recent moment of that kind. We were all young in that period, and I remember that the world seemed just filled with possibility. Despite the immense horribleness of the Depression and the rise of fascism in the 1930s [they]were another moment of that kind, and 1919 was another. The 1880s and into the 1890s were another. These moments are moments often of crisis but also of possibility. That is really important to realize for historians, that the present which seems so horrible in many ways is not the future. We don't know what the future is, but it's not this, and therein lies opportunity.

Q: The One Big Union in some ways helped to create this sense of hope.

GK: Yes, and I think analogously in today's world where union density has fallen dramatically (not as badly in Canada as in many other places), we probably need to think about unions not just in terms of workplace struggle but of reaching out and involving themselves with various communities of progressive folks of different identity politics and geographically as well, a kind

of solidarity of people against the various ways that austerity practices come down on us from the provincial governments and indeed the federal government, of the kind that you were describing earlier. Solidarity unionism, social unionism – these are manifestations of that. But I think that that organizational mode probably is perhaps the One Big Union for our time.

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