

Sharon & Nolan Reilly

Interviewer: Alvin Finkel; Camera: Don Bouzek

SR: Hello, my name is Sharon Reilly. I'm a member of the conference organizing committee and I'm a member of the MFL committee that's been planning the centenary of the Winnipeg General Strike commemorations.

NR: Nolan Reilly. I'm also involved in the conference and all the many events associated with the commemoration of the 1919 General Strike.

Q: What was going on in Winnipeg at the time?

NR: The general context is one that all Canadian workers were facing and, in fact, many industrial workers around the world were facing at the end of the First World War. The frustration with the war itself, the slaughter of their loved ones and friends in Europe angered a lot of people. There was the issue of inflation during the war, the living conditions at home. The soldiers were getting reports from home about how difficult things were back in Canada, back in Winnipeg. So there were all these growing discontents, and this struggle to basically survive is occurring at the same time that those who have wealth are getting wealthier. The profiteering during the war is well documented. Those were contextual kinds of things that were bothering people. Then, within the workplaces themselves, there were many issues around working conditions and the question of wages. These were important concerns for workers during this time. Many of them had come to the conclusion that the way you begin to resolve that is to unionize. There were many workers who wanted to unionize but they had been blocked from doing so in the years before the First World War by business and the state through the use of the courts and police. These frustrations were building. Then we had in Winnipeg this whole agitation going on around this idea of a One Big Union or any kind of industrial union. When you look at what the workers are writing during that time, you get this sense where in the western railway shops where people like R. B. Russell and Dick Johns are working, they're

talking about the need to do away with this proliferation of all these different craft unions and to build a One Big Union. By One Big Union, they mean one that brings all the workers in the plant together, then the idea of extending that across the community. So this idea of One Big Union is both a practical concern, because in the workplace they're looking for new ways to organize more effectively, but then in a broader way and generally circulating throughout the country was this idea that things needed to change, that they couldn't go on the way that they had, especially what had happened during the war. That begins to get caught up in the language of the One Big Union. You also see some response to the revolution in the Soviet Union. What we have to remember is it's very different; the understanding of what's going on in Russia is very different from what it is today. If you step out of today's history and go back to 1919, the Russian Revolution had only occurred two years before. What workers were inspired by was this apparent large, major country in the world having become some kind of a worker state. In Winnipeg, when you look at it, it remains as kind of aspirational – this is something that we should struggle for. They didn't know exactly how they wanted to do that. Most of them probably believed that it would come somehow through the union. So there are many different events. Then for families and especially for women, young women who were taking up jobs during the war, also women working in the retail trades and the telephone system, they're looking for some kind of organization. In Winnipeg you have a group of very prominent women who set out to get them organized. You have the Helen Armstrongs and the Catherine Queens and the Judith Hiscocks and others who are going out from shop to shop organizing. They're also campaigning for mothers' allowance and for other kinds of assistance for women. So, there's all this kind of general agitation going on and then on the other side, on the side of business, this idea that they're going to resist. There had been a general strike in 1918 among government workers, especially civic workers, and the unions actually won that struggle.

Q: Which inspired a lot of workers.

NR: Which inspired a lot of workers. We're not far away from 1918 to what's going to be happening in 1919. I think 1918 is important because, on the one hand, it inspired the workers.

But it also inspired the Committee of 1,000, so-called Committee of 1000, but the business class. I think the business class is determined in 1918 and 1919 that they're never going to get cut out like that again. I'm sure there were discussions going on over that year about what had happened and how it might be done differently. The consequence of that is from the beginning of the strike there's no doubt that the Citizens' Committee's goal is to smash the strike. They're not interested in negotiating. We see at no point does the Citizens' Committee ever really come forward with any kind of meaningful offer of negotiation. There are many levels and layers of what's occurring in Winnipeg in the winter and spring of 1919.

SR: Maybe it's got something to do too with Winnipeg being relatively isolated. Even to this day, if we want something in Winnipeg, we have to make it for ourselves. We have exceptional everything – music, theatre, museums, ballet, schools – because it's a long way to get anywhere else. So we do things ourselves here, and I think that tradition goes way back. The other thing is that the disparity was so stark, and perhaps there was a greater contrast here than in some other places in Canada at the time.

Q: It had grown very quickly.

SR: It had grown unbelievably quickly and there was no way the infrastructure--the effort hadn't even been made to keep up with the expansion in the population. The millionaires in Winnipeg: there were more millionaires in Winnipeg in 1911 than anywhere else in Canada. We had this incredibly wealthy population and we had this huge population of very poorly paid people from many backgrounds. Winnipeg also had more people from different nationalities than any other place in Canada during this time period. Many of them had a strong union tradition and a strong tradition of resistance in many different ways, whether it was from union organizations or from fraternal and sick benefit societies. I think all of that came into play. Then, as Nolan was saying, in the war, the hardships of the war, people were recognizing these difficulties and resisting on different levels. With the flu epidemic in 1918 we see somebody like Ethel Johns, who's the director of nursing at the Children's Hospital, and she's greatly concerned about the condition of

children being brought to the hospital, because they're impoverished, they're skeletal. She's one of the people that speaks to the Mathers Commission and talks about the poverty and the need to find a way to provide basic needs to families in the city. She's seen as a hero by her bosses because of the great work she's doing, but during the strike when a storm takes out the boiler system and they can't clean instruments and bedding and so on, the strike committee sends workers over to repair the system. She says, please come in. To other workers from the strike committee who bring bread and milk, she welcomes them. She gets fired over all this and she's kicked out of the city. All she cares about is taking care of people. Somebody during this conference talked about an interview they did. No, it was one of the media people we talked with recently, who said they spoke with a descendant of the Committee of 1,000 who was critical of the strike leaders who were banned in Winnipeg in the aftermath of the strike and said, no we're the ones that stayed and built this city. Well somebody like Ethel Johns had no work; she was blacklisted. And somebody like Helen Armstrong.

Q: Some of these people could never work again.

SR: They had no choice but to go off, and they did wonderful work in other cities. But Winnipeg lost that leadership to a certain extent, not all of course. But that was one of the aftermaths of the strike.

Q: How was the city run by the strike committee?

SR: I think you should tell the story of the placards.

NR: Yes, I could do that. But first I think the work that's been done in a book just published, called *When the State Trembled*, by Tom Mitchell and Reinhold Kramer, I think they give us reason to temper how much we assume the workers were running the city. In some aspects of the city, the workers were in control in terms of the people they had out on strike, and they had been able to close the city down. But the workers never – and I think this is a bit of a

misunderstanding of what's going on – the workers are never politically or effectively in control of the city. That really is the Citizens' Committee. The Citizens' Committee is telling the mayor and the council, except for the labour council, basically saying to them, this is the way we need to run this strike. I don't think that there's any point--I wish there was--, but I don't think there was any point at which Labour really had the degree of control that some of us might've thought it did a few years ago and that the Citizens' Committee claimed that they believed the workers to have. I would see control of the city, the best way to think about it now is it was contested in a really important political way. It was a significant contest. Where that contest does play out, quite interestingly, is in the centre of the city. You look at where the conflicts occur, where these classes are really banging up against one another. It's in the central part of the city. This is where the strike committee has its headquarters, it's where the Citizens' Committee has its headquarters, this is where the police are, this is Victoria Park where the workers gather in their large meetings. There's this contest over: are the workers going to be allowed to march, or are the police going to dampen that? You see that conflict in a very pointed way on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June when the special police who have been hired to replace the police--they're hired essentially by the Citizens Committee; they're hired through the Citizens' Committee headquarters. They hire these specials and on June 10<sup>th</sup> they send these specials out on horseback to patrol the streets. When they get to the corner of Portage and Main, the workers and their supporters see them, and they're angry and they all gather around. You see the photographs from Portage and Main and you see them all struggling all together. It's quite a tense moment. The workers actually rough up these specials, and the specials leave. They're sent back to their barracks, and the specials on horseback will never come back onto the streets of Winnipeg during the strike. During the discussions of what went on, one of the Conservative city councillors just literally said it was about who controlled the streets; that's what the 10<sup>th</sup> was all about. I see it more as a kind of contested struggle. Then the whole question of the posters that were put up, permitted by the authority of the strike committee, which the city asked for. It was all done very hastily. Bob Russell and I forget who else, it might've been the president of the Trades and Labour Council, they went off to a print shop to put together some kind of poster.

SR: Having come to the agreement with the city that this is what would be done.

NR: So they get to the print shop where they're going to do this, and the printers are out on strike. They said, well we're on strike; we're not even going to print this for you. So they refused to print it. So Bob Russell and this other fellow are busy. They frame this thing, draw it up, get it made up, and they send it out just as a way of ensuring that people knew that these wagons or theatres or whatever were not being run by scab labour. It just meant that these were pro-strike businesses; so let them be. This was to ensure the delivery of food and milk into the working-class neighbourhoods.

Q: But the Citizens' Committee does turn that into a control issue, because they said that means that the strike committee is running the city.

SR: Which is what happens with the police. The police want to support the strike. They're willing to stay on the job at the request of the strike committee, and they're fired because the Citizens' Committee doesn't want union people in any position of anything.

NR: Which to me raises another interesting dimension of the strike. The first one is who actually controlled the city; we talked about that. The other one for me is this question of--what was I talking about? I lost my train of thought. There's another issue that will come back to me. Yes, the police and the use of. . . The Citizens' Committee, what they do very effectively is to use that poster and, as you were saying, Alvin, to kind of turn it against the workers. It's interesting even historically when we look at it, because many of us who are labour historians have kind of interpreted it that way too. It's only as we begin to get other evidence and explore other ways of thinking about it that we see that it wasn't so much this idea of controlling the city. That actually takes me back to the point I wanted to raise. That is. . . I'm struggling here, it's late in the day. . . What I was thinking about is the way the workers conduct the strike. It's a remarkably peaceful strike. The only violence during the strike, the only significant violence. . . There's going to be jostling. The workers are going out on strike. They're going around on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May from shop

to shop pulling other people out. A lot of people are coming out because they want to. There are going to be some who resist, but they're going to come out because they think they'd better. But in terms of real violence, there's very little. That's why when we think of the strike we use the streetcar and we talk about Bloody Saturday as a riot. I think that is a very serious misinterpretation of what's going on there. The workers did not riot; they were attacked. Even the streetcar, the guys shake until they pull it off the rails; they don't even get it tipped over. They start it on fire; the fire is put out in less than 15 minutes. Then if you look at the photographs, the ones that are supposed to be of Bloody Saturday and the streetcar, everyone's standing around, men and women, and they're kind of looking at this. Sharon and I were looking at these photos over the last couple of months again, and it's quite remarkable. They're all standing around like, geez what's going on here? They're not rioting. Nowhere in the life of the strike do you see any kind of looting. There's no breaking into buildings, smashing of windows. We know people are angry, we know they're upset, but it's remarkable that it never at any point translates into that kind of action.

SR: The workers are encouraged by the strike leaders to go to the parks. The strike leaders don't want them on the streets; they don't want problems to develop. The message is, do nothing and then do some more of doing nothing. They have bicycle riding lessons at Victoria Park and there's a list of all the parks where the meetings take place. They're all over the city – they're in St. James and St. Vital and out toward West Kildonan. People don't have newspapers; they don't have radios. So it's one way the strike leaders can get word out to them about what's going on. That's where the strikers go. The people who are parading on the streets are the returned soldiers. That's what soldiers do – they're used to marching in formation. That was their way of showing their solidarity with the strike. That's what happens on Bloody Saturday as well. They refuse to obey an order from the mayor to stay off the streets. They're saying, we fought for democracy; we have a right to stand up for what we believe in. We can have a silent parade through the streets of our city.

Q: The Citizens' Committee seem determined to make the strike appear to be a kind of alien invasion. How well does that work in terms of dividing the workers?

SR: We can see in the parades of the minority of returned soldiers that they're carrying banners that say, down with the enemy alien and down with Bolshevism and all this kind of thing. The parades of the pro-strike return soldiers talk about solidarity and unity. Their banners say, we stand for 35,000 against 1,000. So I think there was remarkable solidarity across the lines of different ethnocultural groups in Winnipeg at that time. We wouldn't have had 35,000 workers out on strike without that kind of solidarity. When you think there's 35,000 people out on strike and everybody's got two or three people at home, that's a huge number of people in a city of maybe 180,000.

Q: Why did the Citizens' Committee and various governments decide to come down with such severe force on Bloody Saturday?

SR: I think they decided that was the only way they could end the strike. It didn't just happen either; it didn't just happen on Bloody Saturday. The plans were in the works a long time ahead of June 21<sup>st</sup>. Those armoured vehicles and equipment were being shipped in by train. Gen. Ketchen was telling men that should have been released from their obligations to the armed forces that they couldn't be released. They weren't demobilized; they were made to continue to be under obligation to obey the orders of the government. Fort Osborne Barracks was actually in the process of being relocated from near the grounds of the legislative building to the outskirts of the city. There'd been a fire; they'd lost some of their buildings. Yet some of those people were made to stay in tents and be close at hand. The Minto Armoury on Minto Street, again the soldiers there were kept on call. Troops from both areas were sent to mobilize on Main Street and made their way to the intersection of Portage and Main, because the pro-strike returned soldiers were refusing to keep off the streets. They were there well before the streetcar incident. The workers weren't attacked because of the streetcar incident. It was just a little spark that was used as a reason to attack unarmed women and men and children.



Q: The anti-strike forces didn't care that the strike was peaceful. They were determined to crush it.

SR: They were. I think some of the strikers wanted to carry on even after the events of Bloody Saturday. The strike leaders met and they said we don't want any more violence, and they called it off. There was opposition to that decision.

Q: They then move toward a political front as a way to try and change things. With what success?

NR: Actually, there's a couple of things I'd like to talk about before that. When Sharon talked about the meetings that were held in the different parts of the city, I think is important for us in terms of understanding what was going on in Winnipeg in 1919. Because of the geography of the city today and over the last 50 years, there has become this sense that working-class Winnipeg is the North End. In 1919 it was an important working-class district, and it had predominantly but not exclusively Central and East European workers. But there were other equally significant working-class neighbourhoods. I think in some ways in terms of the strike and the leadership of the strike, both in terms of the unions and of the women's involvement in the Women's Labour League, it's the neighbourhoods that are south of the tracks that are of crucial importance. Those are the neighbourhoods of Weston and Brooklands. They are primarily English and Scottish with some Irish of course mixed in, and then others as well. The difference is, in the South End is predominantly those English-speaking workers and some Central and Eastern Europeans. In those neighbourhoods, that's where the heart of the leadership comes for the strike. It is primarily the organized workers, the skilled trades, that provide the initial impetus for the strike. It's a variety of the metalworkers and the skilled building trades workers, and a lot of them live in those neighbourhoods. Some of the descriptions of those neighbourhoods, I've been thinking it would be interesting to go back and do more research on this. Just as the North End has its special characteristics of being the centre of this European life in Winnipeg, those areas south of

the tracks are very British and very Scottish. I was reading some descriptions of it and people were saying, if you walk through these streets it was like kind of walking through an English town or a Scottish town, because it's the way that the people had concentrated. So they're working class, but they have different ethnic emphasis. I think what's happened in our understanding of the strike is that because of the CPR and it creates this geographical separation in the city, that we've come to see the North End as being sort of the centre of this struggle. Having said that, I would also emphasize that there were other significant working-class neighbourhoods in the city. Down near Fort and Garry downtown where the Canadian Northern Railway and the Grand Trunk Pacific had their railyards, you had exactly the same kind of neighbourhoods. They tended to be quite mixed. If you drive up Osborne Street in Winnipeg, on the one side you have this kind of middle-class neighbourhood, but on the west side it's called Railway Town because on the east it butts up against this main line of the other transcontinental railway. Then if you go across the tracks to the west side, you have these other large working-class neighbourhoods. Then finally you have Transcona, there's parts of St. Boniface, Elmwood; so there are many working-class neighbourhoods and, remarkably, they are all participating in the strike in 1919. There are divisions, and there are really significant divisions in the labour movement before the strike is called. But you can really look at those six weeks as a remarkable solidarity, remarkable social cohesion. But it's important to not limit our understanding of Winnipeg in 1919 as simply the North End as we define it, and then the South End; there were many other significant working-class areas. Immigration is very important. The number of Manitoba-born people living in Winnipeg in 1921 (we have statistics for it) is around three percent. That's remarkable. It's a city of 171,000 or 180,000, very small; 85 percent of them are under the age of 45. It's a young population and everyone's come from away, as they say in the Maritimes. Maybe they've come from southern Ontario, but they're still new to the city. And they've come from Europe, a significant number have come from the United States, and of course massive numbers are coming from the British Isles.

Q: Winnipeg at that point was still coming together.

SR: Yes, it's still a very young city.

NR: The other thing about this experience is that many of them are coming with previous experience of alternative socialist, anarchist politics. The North End is really remarkable that way, especially among the Jewish population; there's a spectrum that you have there. They're all coming from Europe or the British Isles because they basically have been alienated from their own land and they're being forced out. A lot of them come with some of these political ideas. Bob Russell and Dick Johns and others come with some political ideas. Having said that, what further radicalizes them is the situation in Winnipeg itself. If conditions in Winnipeg had been different at the time, we may not have had a general strike. But they came over and they've made the sacrifice to get over here, and then they find out, oh what the hell, this is as bad as where we left, and we're not going to put up with this anymore. But again, I go back to the youth. Bob Russell was 30 years old and Dick Johns was 29, and here they are leading this massive general strike. Most of the leadership was in their late 20s through to their 30s; a few Armstrongs and a few others might've been in their 40s, but most of them are very young. One final thing I'll say, and then I'll be quiet. I just want to finish up on immigration, because I've been thinking about it a lot. The other thing is in those immigrant communities, non-English-speaking communities in the North End, when you look at, for example, the Ukrainian Labour Temple, the records of the Ukrainian Labour Temple from that period, they're very well aware of what's going on in Winnipeg but they're still equally concerned about what's taking place in Europe. That's understandable, because they haven't even been here a generation. I also think that that helps us explain that kind of connection, helps us explain what happens after the war, which is a very contorted way of getting back to your political question. You see a lot of the Europeans, when the Communist Party forms in 1921, that's a political tradition coming out of what's been going on in the Soviet Union, with which they're much more comfortable than the British workers, who come out of a different political situation, a Labour Party that emphasizes constitutionalism and parliamentarianism. Both of them are revolutionary in the sense that they fundamentally want to make changes, but how they go about that is quite different. During the strike, they kind of put those differences aside. But by 1920, 1921, that's when you see them begin to divide politically.

They're quite successful, even though the city is gerrymandering the political system. But in terms of those neighbourhoods being very political, they were, and the contest was what degree of left are you. It wasn't are you centre; it was what degree of left are you, and do we agree with that or do we agree with this other one? That's true of all the working-class neighbourhoods in the city.

Q: People living in the North End at that time did feel a degree of discrimination. That must have affected their ability to become involved in politics, as opposed to the British.

NR: And the British know the politics; it's their political process. They're comfortable with it and they're not going to be deported. If you're living in the North End, one of the great fears is if you become either indigent, dependent on the state in any way for support, or you're caught up in political action, there's a very real risk of being deported. You have to be very careful about what you do. That's one of the interesting things, because they're trying to democratize the process. Those non-English-speaking communities are very much beginning to talk that way too. Winnipeg is a city of immigrants – everybody's from somewhere else. The way that works itself out in 1919 and then through the 1920s, I would argue the general strike period is really from 1917 to 1921 when you have the formation of the Communist Party, and that really begins to change the political framework.

Q: The One Big Union idea plays a big role in Winnipeg. Why was it so popular?

SR: It's clear that the old craft unions weren't really able to succeed anymore. There had to be a new approach. People had to come together. It really was the beginning of becoming a more inclusive labour movement. We've had at this conference some discussion, for example, about the role of Black workers, which has never really been part of the historiography before. But when we look at Penner's book at the list of who voted to go out on strike May 13<sup>th</sup> as reported in the *Western Labour News*, the sleeping car porters vote 67 to 9 to go out on strike. This is a fledgling union of black sleeping car porters that had really just been formed, and they're

throwing in their lot and they're saying, yes, we want to be part of this general strike. Somebody like R. B. Russell is fighting against his union which does observe a colour ban, and saying, no, we have to have everybody; we have to have persons of colour; we need to have women. So with those kinds of voices and the huge need if we're going to make this strike work it's got to be everybody; there is an inclusivity. I learned today through a presentation that the railway porters actually took up a collection and donated what would've been a huge sum of about \$54 to the strike fund. That's quite remarkable.

NR: On the One Big Union, I think what's happening is that it's like it's in the air. When we talk about what makes Winnipeg different, it's that all these unorganized workers go out. Well that's what they've been talking about in Winnipeg. There's a lot of emphasis by Russell and Johns and particularly by the Women's Labour League on organizing the unorganized. So there is this great emphasis that we all want to get organized. There isn't a One Big Union yet, but the idea is there and people are beginning to take up this idea and be kind of inspired by it. I have this reminiscence of this fellow from the Ukrainian Labour Temple in 1969 at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike. He's writing his reminiscences and he said, you know, I worked in the packing plant in St. Boniface. He said, we liked the idea of the One Big Union and we'd join the One Big Union because we thought it would protect us from losing our jobs when the soldiers came back. That's really important. Here are these non-English-speaking immigrants who are seeing the union as being an organization for them and that it will protect them. That was a remarkable story to come across.

SR: The other thing that we haven't really talked about is the amazing role of women in the strike. I don't think that the strike could've gone on for six weeks without the Women's Labour League taking up collections, running the soup kitchens, making it possible for young women who had joined the strike without any union support, because they weren't organized, to survive – to have a meal, to pay their rent. They were helping people who would've been evicted otherwise. And the women who were in their homes supporting their families – their husbands, their daughters, their sons who were on strike – were finding ways to get through those weeks

and make it possible to continue the protest. After the strike even, the Women's Labour League is still organizing to help workers in Nova Scotia in the coalmines who were on strike. We have archival photos of those women putting together relief bundles to send out east. In Alberta, the Women's Labour League under Catherine Queen turns to political action and is organizing to get people elected to government. It's a huge part of the story that has been little told until the last few years.

NR: And they scared the shit out of people, these women. In the Weston area the women try and bring the strike breaker, the express wagons, they try to bring them into Weston. It's Eaton's delivery wagons; they try to bring them into the Weston Brooklands area. They're met by a group of women led by the Women's Labour League. They just say, there's absolutely no way you're going into our neighbourhood. The drivers go home, and they report in the news the next day and the drivers say, I've never met women like this before; I've heard language from these women that I've never heard in my life; once this strike is over, I'm still not going to go back into those neighbourhoods. So, as Sharon was saying, they were doing all this and they had this kind of militant presence.

[ END ]