

WHAT LESSONS CAN CANADIANS TAKE FROM THE WINNIPEG GENERAL STRIKE  
OF 1919?

The Forgotten Women of the Strike

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On Thursday, May 15, 1919 at 7:00 a.m., 500 telephone operators ended their shifts, leaving the lines unattended, as no one came in to replace the workers. Of those operators, approximately 90% of them were women, causing them to be the major group to start the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.<sup>1</sup> Women were a key factor in the Winnipeg General Strike, often playing essential roles that have been undocumented, and, until recently, ignored. I will be addressing this issue by recognizing the historical significance of women, such as Helen Armstrong, Gertrude Puttee, and Katherine Queen, and the cause and consequence of their actions.

For many years the Winnipeg General Strike has been celebrated in old textbooks, documentaries, and books, but the efforts of women are non-existent. But women were there, and they did participate in changing the future of Winnipeg. Only a few were mentioned, namely in the newspapers of the time. One woman in particular, Helen Armstrong, took charge of the Women's Labour League, creating a food kitchen for dominantly female strikers, or anyone in need of a meal. The soup kitchen gave out 1 200 to 1500 meals a day.<sup>2</sup> She became the leading lady for women's rights during the strike, causing herself to be arrested three times in connection to her work.<sup>3</sup> Another significant women is unknown, although her actions are one of the most prominent incidents of the strike, setting the tipped over rail car ablaze.<sup>4</sup> Everyone must be

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<sup>1</sup> Goldsborough, Gordon. "Manitoba Historical Society - Keeping History Alive for over 140 Years." Manitoba History: Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. Accessed April 20, 2019. [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb\\_history/11/women1919strike.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/11/women1919strike.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> Gordon.

<sup>3</sup> CBC. "Helen Jury Armstrong: The Canadian Activist Who Fought for Equal Wages for Women. In 1919. | CBC Canada 2017." CBC News. May 01, 2017. Accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/2017/canadathestoryofus/helen-jury-armstrong-the-canadian-activist-who-fought-for-equal-wages-for-women-in-1919-1.4093263>.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon.

considered equal. The first step to doing so is to include the actions of all, and identify them as being equally significant to history.

On September 7, 1919, J.S. Woodsworth, one of the Strike leaders spoke at a protest meeting, saying that the cause of the Strike was not just the ability to collectively bargain, but that they felt dissatisfied with the payment they are receiving in exchange for their work. This dissatisfaction is “the things behind the strike,” he states.<sup>5</sup> This dissatisfaction covers not only the men, but the women as well. The most common belief of the government was that women were to depend upon men for their income, whether that be their father or husband.

Because of this, women’s wages were often much less than the living wage, barely enough to cover expenses.<sup>6</sup> It is important to keep in mind that workers did not have a minimum wage, union rights, financial support, or a 40 hour work week. It was because of these unjust conditions that many women decided to take action and support a cause they believed in. One woman, Ms. Gertrude Puttee, wife to the editor of the Voice, a Labour newspaper, went undercover as a factory worker to learn about the working conditions and wages of the job.<sup>7</sup> This would have come at an extreme risk, and her experience allowed for others to know the full extent of the hazardous working conditions.

Another woman, Katherine Queen, supported a minimum wage for women, was against conscription, and was involved in the Mother’s Allowance Act, which gave mothers enough

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<sup>5</sup> "Will Ask Prince to Use His Influence." The Winnipeg Free Press (Winnipeg), September 8, 1919. Accessed April 20, 2019. Newspaper Archive. Keyword: Helen Armstrong.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon.

<sup>7</sup> Christie, Nancy, and Michael Gauvreau. "Full-Orbed Christianity." Google Books. Accessed April 20, 2019.

[https://books.google.ca/books?id=zcfujZowlDwC&lpg=PA120&ots=AwRbRJmgzu&dq=gertrude puttee&pg=PA120#v=onepage&q=gertrude puttee&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=zcfujZowlDwC&lpg=PA120&ots=AwRbRJmgzu&dq=gertrude%20puttee&pg=PA120#v=onepage&q=gertrude%20puttee&f=false).

money to care for their children.<sup>8</sup> It was women like these who stood up for what they believed in, supporting this Strike that would create a long term change for future of Winnipeg.

The cause of these actions were simple. There were unequal and unfair wages, for both male and female, and the consequences of their actions were less than expected. Although the Strike itself was long, being roughly six weeks, the outcome was not what many expected, after putting so much at risk. For many it was seen as a failure, when none of the conditions the Strike Committee were met. However, the influence it had on the city over time was much larger. A century later we have achieved many of the goals the strikers set out to reach, such as minimum wages, paid sick days, union rights and financial support, although collective bargaining is still not available for many unions. The General Strike could not have occurred in the relatively peaceful fashion that it did without the women who carried the load of ensuring a smooth operation. Women were the support behind the strike. Without them, it may not have happened.

Women can create change. It may be covered up by male historians, who instead favour their white, male counterparts. However, that does not mean that these events did not occur, it simply shows that women and other minorities who face the same discrimination must have resilience. That is one thing that has not changed, and continues to happen each day through movements such as Idle No More, MeToo and events like the Women's Day March. If there is one thing that we can take away from the Winnipeg General Strike, it's that women played a role, and these roles have influenced and changed our city.

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<sup>8</sup> "City and District - Mother's Allowance Act." *The Winnipeg Free Press*(Winnipeg), February 26, 1919. Accessed April 20, 2019.  
<https://access-newspaperarchive-com.wpl-dbs.winnipeg.ca/ca/manitoba/winnipeg/winnipeg-free-press/1919/02-26/page-31/?pep=helen-armstrong&pr=30&pc=33301&psi=47&pci=2&ndt=by&py=1918&pey=1919>.

To answer the question “What lessons can Canadians take from the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919?” this essay has explored the role of women during that time, focusing greatly on the importance of the action they took to insure the occurrence of the Winnipeg General Strike. Their heroic deeds may have been smoothed over by the decisions of white men, however, that does not mean they did not occur, or carry significance. If Canadians take one lesson out of the Winnipeg General Strike, it should be this; everything that you do becomes history at some point in time. It is up to you to decide how your actions influence others, as one day someone will look at your life and decide whether or not you made a difference. Everyone can make a difference, because together, we are the majority.

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