

A Cautionary Tale:
The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919

Spencer Bubis

ELA: Literary Focus 30S

Mrs. Heather Ragot

April 26, 2019

For most Winnipeggers, life had hit rock-bottom by 1919. Four years of a brutal, agonizing and, as many would argue, pointless world war had come to an end. The deaths and lifelong injuries of tens of thousands of young men touched practically everyone. To top those losses off, the Spanish influenza further devastated the nation by ending countless more lives.¹ The economic situation was not much better: inflation skyrocketed while reasonable wages, decent working conditions and any sense of job security were nonexistent. Immigration continued to boom and employment was increasingly scarce.² However, not everyone in Winnipeg, Manitoba suffered these adverse circumstances. In fact, residing a short distance south of the Canadian Pacific rail yards, the city's ruling class were flourishing, a situation largely attributable to the economic boom provided by the war. Economic disparity between the elite and the poor were reaching new heights, leading to a divisive democracy and a strained society. As more wealth concentrates into an ever smaller percentage of the population and income worsens for a growing middle class, the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 provides us, as members of a democracy, valuable insight into the risky path that rising economic inequality takes and how we can safeguard our society from falling victim.

Returning from years of sacrifice for their flag and country, the Winnipeg men who survived World War I were met by living conditions not far off from the war-torn lands they had just left behind. Meanwhile, their prospering employers were not prepared to sacrifice any opportunity for profit to make their workers' lives better. As in the conclusive words of labour

¹ Government of Canada, "The Spanish Flu in Canada (1918-1920)," Parks Canada, last modified September 28, 2018, <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/culture/clmhc-hsmbc/res/doc/information-backgrounder/espagnole-spanish>.

² Reilly, J. Nolan, "Winnipeg General Strike". In The Canadian Encyclopedia. Historica Canada. Article published February 07, 2006; last modified July 31, 2015. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/winnipeg-general-strike>.

leader Fred Tipping, the returning soldiers “thought that when they came back the time for sacrifice had past.”³ But to much displeasure, they had persevered for a society that, to say the least, had not yet returned the favour as basic economic rights were denied for the working class. In a widespread response fueled by the embittered veterans and workers whose demands for change were dismissed by Winnipeg’s business leaders, unionism arose as a means to have their voices heard.

The movement for the idealized “One Big Union” quickly gained traction as 1700 workers convened at the Walker Theatre in December 1918 to garner support for the repeal of federal wartime legislation that curtailed labour rights.⁴ Hundreds of delegates made way to a Calgary unionist convention in March 1919 which played a major role in effectively spreading awareness to both union and non-union workers about labour’s need for improved union organization.⁵ In addition to the unions’ assertive agenda for labour at these meetings, socialist undertones were strongly felt with the Winnipeg gathering concluding with “three cheers for the Russian Revolution”⁶ and the Calgary convention unanimously calling for the “abolition of the present system of production for profit.”⁷ Expressing the labourers’ shared weariness

³ Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike, directed by Andrew Blicq, narrated by Tom Anniko, CBC/Radio-Canada, 2007.

⁴ Paul Moist, "Walker Theatre Meeting Helped Set Up Winnipeg General Strike," Winnipeg Free Press, last modified December 21, 2018, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/walker-theatre-meeting-helped-set-up-winnipeg-general-strike-503300181.html>.

⁵ Paul Moist, "Calgary Convention Set the Stage for 1919 Strike," Winnipeg Free Press, last modified March 13, 2019, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/calgary-convention-set-the-stage-for-1919-strike-507076602.html>.

⁶ Moist, "Walker Theatre," Winnipeg Free Press.

⁷ Moist, "Calgary Convention," Winnipeg Free Press.

surrounding the evils of capitalism, plainly stated on the membership card for the One Big Union was “‘Money is the Root of All Evil’ saith the Lord.”⁸

Likewise, many parallels between the fervor of discontented Winnipeggers can be drawn to the Russian Revolution of 1905. Much like the general strike’s “Bloody Saturday” signified by the violent clash of strikers and the Royal North-West Mounted Police on June 21, 1919, there was Russia’s “Bloody Sunday” massacre of frustrated workers.⁹ Worker strikes became a commonplace at that time in Russia, setting the stage for the triumph of Bolshevism a dozen years later and bringing the Marxist ideologies of Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin to the forefront of the new ‘Soviet’ state. On May 15, 1919, inciting fear not within the Tsarist autocracy, but the federal government and wealthy ruling class, Winnipeg strikers of all crafts and trades risked ever finding employment again by collectively walking off the job for six tense weeks.

Fearful of the changes the union movement would bring and aiming to maintain the economic status quo, a group of Winnipeg’s wealthiest formed the Citizens' Committee of 1000 to serve as their own united front to oppose the strike.¹⁰ Unlike the strike leaders, these men enjoyed a realm of influence encompassing the media and federal government, aiding in their ability to accelerate the dismantlement of the strike while paying no attention to the workers’ demands.¹¹ Discrediting headlines were made that labelled the strike as a Bolshevik, revolutionist

⁸ Bloody Saturday.

⁹ Russian Revolution of 1905," in Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019), [Page #], last modified January 15, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Revolution-of-1905>.

¹⁰ Canadian Museum of History, "Winnipeg General Strike," Canadian Museum of History, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/labour/lab22e.html>.

¹¹ Bloody Saturday.

movement led by “alien scum,” despite possessing no evidence for such hostile claims.¹² In reality, the strike was largely spearheaded by British-born men, not the scapegoated Eastern European and Jewish immigrants. Furthermore, government officials who disproportionately represented an upper class viewpoint such as Gideon Roberston, the labour minister, remained utterly disaffected by the interests of the working class which played a key role in putting down the strike.¹³

While different solutions are taken today than in 1919 to address issues of economic inequality, it is nonetheless on the rise yet again with jobs becoming increasingly disposable as factors like globalization and automation advance. As American author Mark Twain is commonly credited with saying, "History doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes."¹⁴ Canada's political and economic climate has never rhymed more with that of early 20th century Winnipeg's and it is not too late to alter our course. The strike teaches our democracy the importance of electing representatives to Parliament who can sympathize far beyond the levers of political power to those of the veterans and working class. While opportunity for economic growth is vital, unfettered capitalism will inevitably cause a widening economic gap between the rich and poor. Governments cannot be allowed through voter apathy to retreat to the interests of the upper class and away from areas where a social safety net is lacking and social redistribution is needed. Otherwise, the dynamic will worsen as it is today, enticing parties to lurch further to the left or right of the broadening political spectrum. Additionally, decades before the words

¹² Canadian Museum of History, "Winnipeg General," Canadian Museum of History.

¹³ Bloody Saturday.

¹⁴ Garson O'Toole, "History Does Not Repeat Itself, But It Rhymes," Quote Investigator, last modified January 12, 2014, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/01/12/history-rhymes/>.

“fake news” were ever uttered, the strike taught us the danger of disenfranchising, ridiculing and, ultimately, dehumanizing vulnerable groups of people. When people seek a scapegoat, these divisions edge closest to crisis. To avoid tensions boiling over, strong political leadership must be taken that deals with all dissenting views fairly. In a robust democracy, the strike reminds us that all constituents, be it the worker or the owner, have a voice that must be heard.

Bibliography

- Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike*. Directed by Andrew Blicq. Narrated by Tom Anniko. CBC/Radio-Canada, 2007.
- Canadian Museum of History. "Winnipeg General Strike." Canadian Museum of History. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/labour/labh22e.html>.
- Government of Canada. "The Spanish Flu in Canada (1918-1920)." Parks Canada. Last modified September 28, 2018. <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/culture/clmhc-hsmbc/res/doc/information-backgrounder/espagnol-le-spanish>.
- Henderson, Matt. "Power to the People." Winnipeg Free Press. Last modified April 20, 2019. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/books/power-to-the-people-508807182.html>.
- Moist, Paul. "Calgary Convention Set the Stage for 1919 Strike." Winnipeg Free Press. Last modified March 13, 2019. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/calgary-convention-set-the-stage-for-1919-strike-507076602.html>.
- . "Walker Theatre Meeting Helped Set Up Winnipeg General Strike." Winnipeg Free Press. Last modified December 21, 2018. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/walker-theatre-meeting-helped-set-up-winnipeg-general-strike-503300181.html>.
- Monroe, Susan. "Winnipeg General Strike of 1919." ThoughtCo. Last modified July 21, 2018. <https://www.thoughtco.com/winnipeg-general-strike-1919-510002>.
- O'Toole, Garson. "History Does Not Repeat Itself, But It Rhymes." Quote Investigator. Last modified January 12, 2014. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/01/12/history-rhymes/>.
- Reilly, J. Nolan, "Winnipeg General Strike". In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published February 07, 2006; last modified July 31, 2015. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/winnipeg-general-strike>.
- Reynolds, Lindor, and Mary Agnes Welch. "Divided We Stand: As Middle Class Shrinks, Gap between Winnipeg's Rich and Poor Widens." Winnipeg Free Press. Last modified June 16, 2012. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/interactive-the-income-gap-157595775.html>.

"Russian Revolution of 1905." In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019.
Last modified January 15, 2019.
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Revolution-of-1905>.