Chaos in Canada: The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919

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Part One

Tensions rose with the temperature on June 21, 1919 as the Winnipeg General Strike moved into its sixth week. The strike was focussed upon the building and contract shop workers, and the plight of these workers cannot be undermined. They were rising up against their factory owners who subjected them to unhealthy working conditions with little compensation. These men worked long hours for little pay in unsafe environments and it was not even considered manly. They felt belittled by the big machines who did all the hard work and were watching their jobs get taken by children and women. And this was just those working in factories - the strike saw public servants, bakers, streetcar workers, policemen, all unite against a capitalist system where employers had total control over the treatment of the employee. The strike was the culmination of utter unrest with this system.

The official demands of the Strike Committee was collective bargaining, they wanted bigger, more inclusive unions so that workers would have more power, but the mass participation of the sympathy strike emphasizes the widespread grievances that were apparent all over the world. As the Industrial Revolution brought in more factories, it also brought great wealth to the owners, who felt little need to share it with the producers. These workers were not narrowed to a particular job, but the sympathy strike was held up by men and women, rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, organized and unorganized, Canadians and 'aliens'. Their diversity in appearance was also reflected in their diversity of grievances and perceived solutions, but exasperation with the long strike was widespread and growing.

Officially, the Strike Committee claimed no political activity, they wanted only the right to collectively bargain. They held public meetings in outside locations, but wanted no riots,
they were striking only against their stubborn employers. However, no movement is completely united. Some did refer to themselves as “Reds” and some were sympathetic of the events in Russia, arguing the allied forces were there to maintain capitalism (Bercuson, 1990). Even afterwards, there were accounts given to the ‘Royal Commission on Industrial Relations’ that emphasized a resentment towards the current capitalist system and the rhetoric of production for use, not production for profit, was repeated across the country (Kealey, 1984). There was cause to believe the accusations of the Citizen’s Committee that there were communists in the movement, but it was not limited to them.

The grieved workers were dealing with high inflation, growing inequality, and still being rejected recognition of unions from their stubborn employers, who, armed with great benefactors, felt they had little to lose. Their employers were reinforced by the richest men in Winnipeg and the government, who was also one of the worst offenders being struck against. This tremendous support made them feel it was fairly unnecessary to back down to the demands of a mere 30,000 workers, so they held up their fight (Bercuson, 1990).

The riot was in part caused growing distress that the strike was proving fruitless, but was set off by two important events. Before dawn on June 17, after enacting legislation which broadened the government’s deportation laws, the strike’s most radical leaders were arrested on charges of seditious conspiracy with intent of sending them out of the country (Francis, 1984). Then only days later came the decision on June 20 for workers to begin operating street cars again. This was all too much for the desperate strikers. They were watching their serious plight be undermined without winning any concessions. They were afraid of the strike losing its power and for the employers to win. So that Saturday, June 21,
the pro-strike veterans called a parade which was to turn into their first, and last, show of violent revolt (Bercuson, 1990).

Besides the emergency services regarded as necessary, Winnipeg was quiet on that morning, a mere corpse of the previously lively city. Bustling factory yards had been reduced to dark fields of useless machinery; construction projects were growing dusty with disuse; and most notably, the street cars were asleep in the garage.

The crowds began to gather in the early afternoon around City Hall along Main Street for the parade to mark their extreme discontent with the streetcar workers' betrayal. When they saw an approaching streetcar, a looming symbol of their strike's demise, hundreds gathered round to take matters into their own hands. Failing at arresting the vehicle, they turned their attention to a second streetcar driving in the opposite direction that they were able to halt (Bercuson, 1990).

The crowd's frustrations broke out with the windows as they collectively directed their efforts to destroying the car. After ripping apart the inside, but unsuccessfully toppling it over, the crowd contented themselves with lighting it on fire. Their grievances of the long and unsatisfactory strike had climaxed and they would no longer sit idly by while their efforts were being undermined (Bercuson, 1990).

The government's reaction was immediate. In fact, they had been planning for this day months in advance, training volunteers and gathering arms. They patrolled into the downtown – the NWRMP, the 'special forces', the militia – equipped with batons, guns and armoured vehicles with machine guns menacingly perched on top. They were well prepared for the chaos, but this crowd was not going down without a fight. Armed with whatever was
on hand - sticks, bricks, stones, and bottles - they fought valiantly for their strike. There are tales that suggest otherwise, like that of the policemen caught in his stirrup, hanging from his horse and defencelessly beaten by his assailants. But the reaction of the police to the attack, “with revolvers cocked in hand”, suggests the brutality was not limited to any one side (Bercuson, 1990:168).

Finally, at 2:35 Mayor Gray read the Riot Act, giving the crowd thirty minutes to dispel or be liable for arrest. Only moments afterwards, the police, feeling overcome by the huge crowd, issued the order to start shooting. Guns were fired randomly into the legions of strikers, and panic took over as men watched their friends fall where they stood. They fled to the back alleys, trying to remove themselves from the now bloody downtown. The police tried to round them up, to arrest them for disturbing the public with their riot. They caught over eighty, they killed four, and they succeeded in ending the strike that had put Winnipeg on standby (Bercuson, 1990).

Once the shots rang out, the crowd quickly dispersed. The police still blockaded the main downtown area, and stayed on guard until midnight, but the rest of the day was quiet – labor had been broken into submission. Their hopes were dashed as their government sided against them, and the chaos of the riot made them doubt their ambitions. They did not want chaos, they were not fighting the government, and the propaganda that the strike was revolutionary seemed to come true. The surrender of the workers ultimately caused the strike to fail, as most were unable to get any of the concessions they had demanded. However, they would not admit defeat, and they called on strikers to join them for the next battle, at the municipal elections. In the words of the Enlightener, published just days after, “Labor
must fight on until she wins the long war for freedom. Never quit. Never say die. Carry on” (Enlightener, 1919).

**Part Two**

The Winnipeg General Strike is generally considered an aberration from Canada's fine capitalist history, as it radically diverged from the status quo, but afterwards reverted back to moderate change. Still, the effect of the strike reverberates to the present day, where workers are finally seeing their rights upheld by the courts as protected under the Charter of Freedoms and Rights (Bernard, 2007). No change could happen without public support, but the progress of the workers' demands in Canada has been fairly slow. The strike is an important example of extreme public support for reform that was blocked by government to protect the elites. It is significant in explaining the slow change from free-market capitalism that has taken place in Canada since confederation, despite demands for a more socialist society.

In 1919 the economy was run *laissez-faire*, ruling that labour was a commodity and enforcing that the more people were looking for work, the lower wages would be (Bercuson, 1990). The workers wanted more control and the syndicalist movement had huge support across the country, as workers were transitioning from full control over their jobs to none, slaving away in polluted factories for long hours (Korneski, 2000). These workers wanted more power over the production process, and Winnipeg is an important example of the mass public support for this movement, as an estimated 30,000 people went on strike (Bercuson, 1990).

The long six weeks of the strike also emphasized the resilience of the elite to change
and their support by the government to keep them in power. This was apparent before the strike, as strikers were successfully sued by firms for lost profit and the Winnipeg parliament building scandal of 1915 revealed how the government had withheld wages and cheated workers. After the strike, the Citizens's Committee presented the federal government with a bill for $1,000, which was paid in full, signifying the close relationship between the two parties to limit the worker's power (Bercuson, 1990).

By mid-June, the strikers were getting poor and disenchanted with the cause and the riot was the last straw. The people had been pacified by a long war, and were not interested in waging another one on their own government, they just wanted an increase in power over their jobs through unions and collective bargaining. The violent riot and the attack by the police took the legitimacy out of the strike, and the people gave up, the majority going back to work the very next day. However, the movement did not end with the strike, but transformed it. The clear government intervention showed labour that it needed different tactics, which meant a more active role in the state. Labour groups politicized, which made their goals happen more slowly, as they became divided into different parties, and a national labour group able to gain the support of all the diverse cultures has been slow to develop in Canada (Bercuson, 1990).

The transformation of the labour movement to seek political power happened almost immediately, with the municipal elections in the fall of 1919. Before the strike, the ballot had been advocated as the “most powerful and effective workers in labour’s arsenal” (Bercuson, 1990:102). However, it was not until the government involved themselves in destroying the strike that it was fully supported as the best tactic. In previous election, candidates typically
ran as independents, but the desire for the opposing camps - Independent Labour Party (now NDP) and Citizens's League (now the Greater Winnipeg Election Committee) – to unify the vote, has since seen candidates divide into these two groups (Rea, 1971). The League won the majority of the Wards, but Rea (1976) points out how the election system benefitted the elites, who have won the majority in every election to 1975, as the class divisions in the geography of the city were manipulated to create a rich, a mixed, and a poor ward (Bercuson, 1990). Furthermore, one still had to hold property to vote, eliminating many working men and immigrants, and one could vote in every district where they had property for aldermanic positions (Rea, 1976). There was also no residency requirement, so men who could afford to travel were brought in from all over North America to vote, while the poor have generally low voter turnout ratings (Rea, 1971; 1976). This gerrymandering and questionable election rules explains the League's hold over the council until 1975. Class polarization was prominent in the council chambers as Labour sought a more active state with an increase in social services, while the League blocked anything that might raise taxes. This could be seen right up to the 1970s, as, despite the League’s insistence that “they are tied to no political party” (Rea, 1976:23), there was almost total party discipline on issues such as public services, welfare costs, and the rate of taxation that completely divided the two parties. Labour was able to elect several strike leaders, including Queen, Ivens, and Armstrong, who were all elected to the legislature, with S.J. Farmer elected mayor in 1919 (Naylor et al, 1994). Despite their minority position in the legislature, Labour was able to put pressure on government policy just by being elected. Their steady role as opposition allowed them to highlight problems in policy for the public to see, and helped legitimate the
workers movement, as it was now working inside the confines of government, instead of against it.

The immediate effect could also be seen in the provincial election as well, as Labour jumped from only one seat in 1915 to eleven in 1920 (Elections Manitoba, 2003). The movement to the left could be clearly seen earlier in the 1915 election, when the Liberals won their biggest victory ever, after the Conservatives called the country into war. In 1921 J.S. Woodsworth, a prominent figure during the strike, was elected to the federal government, proving he had maintained the support of the locals, despite several years passing since the strike (Francis, 1984). However, in the ensuing provincial elections, the Liberal, Labour, and Socialist Party divided the left vote, and the subsequent movement of outraged farmers further decreased their political power until the atrocities of the Great Depression brought capitalism under scrutiny again.

The strike did not just affect the subsequent elections but also produced a re-evaluation in the approaches of political parties. Politics rarely experiences an immediate change and the strike's significance cannot be narrowed to its immediate consequences. Before the labour movement began breaking ground with demands for worker's rights, the socialist parties did not recognize their shared goals of regulating free-market capitalism (Peterson, 1984). The Socialist Party of Canada had focussed its efforts on educating the public and saw the decline of capitalism as gradually occurring in the distant future (Angus, 2009). Their main focus was creating socialists and did not realize the harsh conditions imposed by employers was doing the work for them. The strength of civil outrage and the defiance of employers across the country led to the creation of communist groups in most
major Canadian cities, as the rhetoric of Marxists proved true. The struggle between employers and workers created by free-market capitalism was proving to be worldwide and Canadians saw they were not immune to the conflict. The global events fuelled their outrage, as they realized that they were not alone in their struggle (Bercuson, 1990). In May, 1921, the separate communist groups merged into the Communist Party of Canada, marking the decline of the Socialist Party as many members were won over (Angus, 2009). Their success was limited, as the propaganda against Soviet takeover emerging before a communist party had even come to effect. Still, they had support across the country, and the demise of the Socialist Party prompted the formation of the Co-operate Commonwealth Federation, whose party president was strike leader J.S. Woodsworth. The global outrage of industrial workers had sparked a refocus in the Marxist movement to take up their cause, and the demise of the strike prompted its leaders to fight for changes in other ways. The CCF has since developed into the New Democratic Party, and in 2011 won official opposition for the first time, emphasizing the struggle for socialism lives on into the present day.

The move towards socialism has been fairly slow in Canada. Compared to its southern neighbour, it seems quite advanced with “public health insurance for virtually the whole population, a universal child care allowance, and an equalization to assist less-well off provinces, [while] the United States has none of these social policies” (Prince, 2008). However, this information is misleading, as when compared to the Netherlands, Canada’s social programs seem like the bare minimum (Brooks and Hwong, 2006). Canada’s slow progression towards socialism can be explained, not by a lack of support, but by the work of those in power in the current system to thwart efforts at reform. By shooting down the strike,
the government forced the movement to change its tactics and work in the confines of a system that was set against them. This has resulted in slow but persistent reform, as politics has divided the movement and taken the pressure off of the employers to change.
References

Enlightener, June 26, 1919, p.2