

Remembering the Winnipeg General Strike

Source: http://rc-archives.cbc.ca/on_this_day/05/15/

The Story – On May 15, 1919, 24,000 organized and unorganized workers in Winnipeg walked off the job. Another 6,000 would soon join them. It was the start of the largest strike in Canadian history, and political leaders at all levels were quick to act. Parliament amended the Immigration Act so British-born immigrants could be deported, and expanded the definition of sedition, which is conduct or speech that aims to encourage the people to rebel against the authority of the state.

The strike demands were the right to collective bargaining, a living wage, and an eight-hour day. Banks, streetcars, mail, telegrams, telephones, food delivery, water and power supply and police and fire services were all cut off. Some services resumed only by authority of the strike committee. Civic leaders and employers feared a Soviet style revolution was brewing and that the workers would seize control and topple the government. Fearful of a “Red Scare” they scrambled to break the strike. They formed the Citizens' Committee of 1,000 and hired 2,000 “specials” — a militia to replace striking police.

The federal ministers of labour and justice travelled to Winnipeg to meet with the Citizens' Committee but refused to meet with strikers. On June 17, ten strike leaders were arrested under the legislation that had been quickly passed in Parliament for that purpose. Without their leadership, and with the violent intervention of the “specials” and the North-West Mounted Police, the Winnipeg General Strike came to a chaotic end after six weeks.

Did you know?

- Conflict between workers and employers had been growing in Winnipeg and across Canada for about two years before the general strike. Labour disruptions and demonstrations took place across the country in 1918 and 1919, and the uprising in Russia in 1917 had inspired trade unionists in Winnipeg and elsewhere.
- Most returning veterans of the First World War supported the strike. Unemployment was growing and inflation had increased the cost of raising a family.
- Among the workers permitted by the strike committee to remain on duty were police, firefighters, utilities employees, bakers and milk truck drivers.
- On June 21, “Bloody Saturday,” chaos broke out after the city's mayor literally read the Riot Act to a crowd that had assembled to protest the arrest of the strike leaders. Police on horseback — both militia and Mounties — charged the protesters, swinging bats as they passed through the crowd. On a second charge they began firing their revolvers. Two strikers were killed and about 30

were wounded.

- The strike committee agreed to end the general strike on June 26. Though their demands for fairer wages and hours hadn't been met, workers did accomplish some of their goals. Legislation was enacted to allow collective bargaining, strikers were guaranteed their jobs back, and employers agreed to recognize unions.

READING GUIDE AND QUESTIONS

1. How many workers walked off the job in May 1919? _____

2. What were the strike demands?

3. List the workers who went on strike?

4. What did parliament do in response to the strikers' actions?

5. What did civic leaders fear? _____

6. What is a "special?" _____

7. When the federal government got involved, which side did they support?

8. What was the consequence of the strike leaders being arrested?

9. What was the view point of many of the veterans on the strike?

10. What happened to the crowd of workers that gathered on June 21st?

11. What did the workers gain after the strike?

12. In which goals were the workers not successful?

In a 1969 CBC Radio documentary commemorating the Winnipeg General Strike strike, lawyer Jim Walker talks about the federal government’s response. He explains the new laws and the amendments to the Immigration act and how they were aimed at undermining the strike leadership and strike activities. Furthermore, he explains how these laws represent an attack on the freedom of Canadians. Source:

<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/economy-business/labour-unions/labour-unions-general/remembering-the-winnipeg-general-strike.html>

FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you think the government was justified in passing emergency legislation that targeted the strikers or did the government overstep its democratic boundaries? Explain your reasons.

2. In the English legal tradition a person was considered innocent until proven guilty. Is it appropriate for someone to be considered guilty until proven innocent? Justify your response.

3. Provide two current examples were the fundamental rights of Canadians have been suddenly terminated by the government.

4. Do you think that the government is really interested in upholding the rights of Canadians? Explain your answer.

For Homework:

Omar Khadr returns to Canada

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/09/29/omar-khadr-repatriation.html>

Bill 115

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/teachers-challenge-ontario-bill/article4607725/>

Occupy Toronto

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/11/15/occupy-national-roundup-toronto-calgary.html>