

THE WINNIPEG

GENERAL STRIKE



In May and June 1919, 35,000 workers in Winnipeg, Manitoba staged a six-week general strike. Workers from various backgrounds struck for higher wages and collective bargaining rights and to demand more power for working people. Ultimately, the strike was violently crushed by police acting on the orders of politicians and the city's capitalists. Although the strike ended in defeat, it was not a failure. It demonstrated the power of working people and inspired new generations of workers to carry on the struggle to build a better world.





Revisiting the Workers' Revolt in Winnipeg

Poster by David Lester

Essay by the Graphic History Collective

In 1919, 35,000 workers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Treaty 1 territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation, staged a six-week general strike between 15 May and 26 June. Workers from various backgrounds withdrew their labour power—they went on strike—to demand higher wages, collective bargaining rights, and more power for working people. One hundred years later, the Winnipeg General Strike remains one of the largest and most important strikes in Canadian history.

The Winnipeg General Strike is part of the longer history of colonial conflict, capitalist development, and class polarization in Western Canada. By the early 1900s, a number of aggressive businessmen—including some who participated in the Government of Canada's violent efforts to dispossess Indigenous communities of their land in 1869–1870 and 1885—had come west to pursue industrialization. Over time, they shaped the development of Winnipeg for their benefit. The city became increasingly divided along class lines, with capitalists pitted against workers.

The situation worsened during and after World War I. Many working-class men went off to fight in the fields of Europe while capitalists stayed home and profited from wartime production. Soldiers hoped to enjoy a more equal and democratic society when they returned home. Instead, they faced high rates of unemployment and inflation. Employer indifference to these issues and refusal to recognize unions and bargain with workers further fanned the flames of discontent. When Winnipeg's building and metal trades workers went on strike on 1 May, other unions in the city decided to join them in a general sympathetic strike.

The Winnipeg General Strike began with 11,000 unionized workers, but the number of strikers soon swelled to 35,000 as thousands of non-unionized workers also walked off the job. Many of them were women and recent immigrants living in the city's North End. As the city ground to a halt, as the phones went silent, the streetcars stopped, and the lights turned off, workers demonstrated the power and potential of labour solidarity.

But divisions still existed. Some strikers reinforced notions of white supremacy by advancing their demands as the rights of white, Anglo-Saxon, and loyal British subjects. Strikers also failed to make connections with the struggles of other dispossessed and exploited groups, such as the Anishinaabe community of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, who were experiencing a major land loss due to the construction of the Winnipeg Aqueduct at the same time. This was a missed opportunity to build strong relations of solidarity amongst different groups to fight, win, and leave no one behind.

The Winnipeg General Strike lasted for six weeks but ultimately ended in defeat. Employers and state officials worked to contain the strike, undercut the strike leaders, and pit working people against each other. They labeled the strikers "enemy aliens" and "foreign radicals" and even arrested many of them on dubious charges and tried to have them deported. Finally, on June 21—a day that has come to be known as "Bloody Saturday"—state officials authorized violence. Special constables and the Royal North-West Mounted Police attacked strikers and their supporters during a peaceful demonstration. The strike was called off a few days later, ending officially on June 26. The events of Bloody Saturday are a stark reminder that to crush resistance to capitalist development and colonial expansion, the state is not afraid to bloody its hands. Indeed, less than 35 years separated the state's attack on strikers in Winnipeg and its violent suppression of Métis, Cree, Assiniboine, and Saulteaux communities in the North-West in 1885.

On the 100th anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike, it is useful to revisit the workers' revolt to introduce new generations to the many lessons it holds for today. Although the Winnipeg General Strike ended in defeat, it was not a failure. In the years afterwards, new leaders and political groups tried to build on the strike's momentum and carry on the struggle for a better world for workers in Winnipeg and elsewhere. Understanding the power of working people and the strike and building new relationships of solidarity can help reenergize our efforts to build a better world.



Biographies

David Lester is the guitarist in the underground rock duo Mecca Normal. He is author/illustrator of *The Gruesome Acts of Capitalism* and the graphic novel *The Listener*. He has contributed to several GHC projects, including *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working-Class Struggle*, *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A Graphic History of the Strike in Canada*, and *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike*. He is currently working on a graphic biography of Emma Goldman. davidlester-artmusicdesign.wordpress.com.

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Further Reading

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