

The Winnipeg Strike Trials

Les procès de la grève de Winnipeg

E. W. Greening

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Article abstract

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The Winnipeg Strike Trials *

E.W. Greening

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In the Spring of 1919 there took place in the city of Winnipeg the only general strike which has ever occurred in Canada and one of the few to take place in any modern industrial country. The events which precipitated the Strike, in the middle of May, arose out of a dispute between the metal trades and construction unions in the city and local employers over collective bargaining rights and higher wages. In this era, when Canadian unions lacked the legal protection which they enjoy to-day, the employers put up a very stubborn stand in opposition to the Union demands and finally these classes of workers began a "walk-out" on May 16th. They were soon joined by the great majority of the Union members in the city, including such classes as Post Office employees, telephone operators, express, freight and baggage employees of the railway companies, printers and typographers, and many other groups. Many phases of life in the city threatened to come to a complete standstill during the next few days. There was no fire protection, or postal delivery, or delivery of

GREENING, W.E., M.A., Toronto. Author of several books including « History of the Brotherhood of Transport Workers », « History of the Brotherhood of Papers Makers in Canada ».

* This forms part of a forthcoming book on famous trials in Canada.

bread and milk. Newspapers, ceased to appear, with the exception of the « Western Labor News », which was the organ of the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Congress. A strike committee consisting of well-known radical figures and Union officials in the city was set up to direct the strike. On the other side, the employers' groups in the city almost immediately formed a so-called « Citizen's Committee », with the aim of getting the Municipal services functioning again as soon as possible and of breaking the strike.

During the next few days, the crisis in the city deepened in gravity. The efforts of Mayor Grey and other groups in Winnipeg to settle the dispute proved to be unavailing. The Manitoba Government refused to intervene in the conflict.

In the Spring of 1919, there was widespread social unrest all over Canada, partly because of the high cost of living which had been created by the war and the influence of the left wing and radical movements which were sweeping many European countries at this period as an aftermath of the war. Sympathetic walk-outs by Union groups began in other Western Canadian cities including Calgary and Vancouver and this movement spread as far eastwards as Toronto.

Although the Strike Committee during the first two weeks of the walk-out succeeded in preventing any acts of open violence on the part of the Union members, yet the atmosphere of the city became steadily more heated. At this period Winnipeg, like most Canadian cities, was full of men who had just returned from service on the battlefront of Europe and who formed restless and dissatisfied elements. Both the Citizen's Committee and the Strike Committee tried to win these veterans to their side with varying success. But it was clashes between veterans who had taken the employers' side, and strikers, that resulted in the first open disorder and disturbance early in June.

In the meantime, the Borden Government in Ottawa was watching these events in Western Canada with anxious eyes since, by the beginning of June, it looked as though this strike wave might engulf the whole country. Finally, the Federal Government decided to intervene actively in the dispute. An Order-in-Council was rushed through Parliament which gave the Federal Government the power of deporting natives of the United Kingdom who were guilty of subversive activities. During this period the anti-sedition clauses of the Criminal Code had also been strengthened by the Borden Government.

In the night of June 16/17th, 1919, after the walk-out had been in progress for over a month, a squad of R.C.M.P. descended on the homes of several members of the Strike Committee, several of whom were also prominent local labor leaders, arrested these men on charges of criminal conspiracy and took them out to the grim Stony Mountain Penitentiary which was located a short distance outside of the city. Among the members of this group were John Queen and A. A. Heaps, both of whom represented the local unions in the Winnipeg City Council; Ivens, the editor of the "Western Labor News" and a former Protestant clergyman, and two other labor officials Russell and Armstrong; also Bray, an ex-Private in the Canadian Army who had tried to organize the veterans in support of the Strike. At the same time, the R.C.M.P. arrested Pritchard, a prominent Vancouver labor leader who had only come to Winnipeg a short time before, and Johns, another Winnipeg labor official who had been absent in Montreal during the Strike and since the beginning of the walk-out. They also rounded up and placed in the Federal Penitentiary some natives of Central and Eastern European countries who had taken part in radical political activities in the city.

At first it was the intention of the Borden Government under the power of the recently passed Federal legislation, to deport all of these men to Great Britain without trial since, with the exception of Armstrong, they all had been born in the United Kingdom. But this action seemed so arbitrary and high-handed that it aroused immediate and strong protest among labor and progressive groups all over Canada, and finally the Federal Department of Justice, under Arthur Meighen, changed its mind and decided to give them a civil trial in Winnipeg.

By the end of June, deprived of its leadership the Strike movement in Winnipeg soon completely collapsed and the strikers went back to work without obtaining the objectives for which they had originally walked out over a month before. At the same time, the similar movements in other cities of Western Canada also petered out.

During the next few months, the fate of the accused and arrested men aroused wide interest not only in Canada but in European countries and in the United States. And as the summer of 1919 went on, the tactics of Meighen and the Federal Government became very clear. They were setting out to prove that the arrested men had been closely connected with a far-flung conspiracy which aimed to overthrow the exist-

ing governments in Western Canada and to set up a revolutionary dictatorship there along the lines of the one that had been established in Russia by Lenine and Trotsky only a year and a half before.

In this connection a labor federation called the One Big Union came into great prominence. This had been set up in Western Canada in 1918 by a group of socialist union officials who had become very dissatisfied with the cautious and conservative leadership of the Trades and Labor Congress in Ottawa. They had broken away from the T.L.C. and had formed a new labor Federation in Western Canada called the One Big Union. Several members of the arrested group of men, including Russell and Armstrong, had been prominent in the organization of this federation in Winnipeg. The programme of this Federation resembled to some degree that of the Syndicalist movements in such European countries as Italy and Spain at this period. It shunned political and legislative action along the lines of the British Labour Party and placed a strong emphasis on strikes and on purely industrial action as a means of obtaining labor's ends. As a matter of fact, this movement was still in the organizational stage when the Strike began in Winnipeg in May, 1919.

The Federal Department of Justice tried to link all of the arrested men with this movement and to claim that the walk-out in Winnipeg represented part of its attempt to gain control of political and economic power in Western Canada. This was in spite of the fact that several members of the Strike Committee and, notably, Heaps and Queen, were not supporters of the One Big Union and strongly believed in the labor party idea.

From the very start it was apparent that the accused men would not receive a fair trial. For one thing, after the collapse of the Strike, the whole atmosphere in Winnipeg remained very tense and most members of the property-owning class there regarded the strike leaders with bitter antagonism and hatred. Furthermore, the Federal Government chose as its legal representatives in the prosecution of the accused men a group of local lawyers who had been intimately connected with the activities of the Citizens' Committee during the Strike and whose attitude towards the affair certainly lacked judicial objectivity.

For some unknown reason, the Federal Government decided to try one of the accused men — Russell — first, in November 1919, and the

others in January 1920, but the course of the two trials and their outcomes was much the same. Andrews, the Winnipeg attorney who was the chief prosecutor for the Federal Government in both trials, had accumulated a vast quantity of evidence in the form of socialist and left wing literature of many different types, which had been seized by the R.C.M.P. in several western cities, including Winnipeg and Vancouver. The Communist manifestos of Marx and Engels was even brought forward as evidence. When the trial of Russell began in November, a great number of witnesses were produced by the Crown from every walk of life in the city, who gave evidence unfavourable to the accused man concerning every aspect of the Strike. The most important member of this group was Mayor Grey who harbored a deep antagonism towards Heaps and Queen because he felt that as members of the City Council during the Strike, that they had tried to usurp his authority as Chief Magistrate of the city. The proceedings of the two trials threw a graphic light on the methods which the Federal Government was using at that time to get information about the activities of socialist and left wing organizations in Western Canada. An R.C.M.P. inspector Zaneth testified that masquerading as a coal miner, he had managed to worm his way into the inner councils of a socialist group in Calgary which had ties with the One Big Union.

The indictment which was prepared by the Federal Government against the accused men was a lengthy affair which covered several pages and which included a long list of counts. The basic charge was one of seditious conspiracy under the Criminal Code, but it also included the usurpation by the Strike Committee of the powers of the Federal, the Manitoba and the city governments by taking over the administration of certain public services, including the delivery of bread and milk, and the control of the operation of public utilities such as waterworks, during the Strike. And it was claimed in this document by the Federal Government that some of the unions which had walked out on May 17, 1919, had done so illegally in violation of certain clauses contained in the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act.

Andrews, during the course of both trials, used cheap and bullying tactics. He tried to arouse every type of class and patriotic prejudice in the minds of the members of the jury and of the public by claiming that the accused men were bomb-throwing anarchists — evil and sinister men who were trying to use the strike weapon in an effort to destroy and wreck the whole fabric of society in Western

Canada. He claimed that the leaders of the One Big Union at this time were preparing similar plans for a series of general strikes in every city of Canada from coast to coast which would paralyse the whole Canadian national economy.

The conduct of the defense in the second trial was particularly interesting and unusual because several of the accused men, including Heaps, Pritchard, Ivens and Queen, decided not to avail themselves of the services of counsel but to conduct their own defense. Anyone who has gone through the record of the trial in detail will agree that their performance in this regard was quite remarkable, considering their lack of legal training and experience. They regarded themselves as the martyrs of class and social prejudice on the part of the property-owning class in Winnipeg and Manitoba and they claimed with considerable correctness that it was not only themselves but the whole radical movement in Western Canada which was on trial here.

Queen and Pritchard in their speeches were especially scathing in their denunciation of the method which the R.C.M.P. and the Federal Department of Justice had used to collect evidence against them and the other strike leaders. They ridiculed the claims of conspiracy made by Andrews, and asserted that the whole dispute had been basically over the question of collective bargaining and Union recognition. They charged that they were being persecuted by the property-owning classes in Canada and by the Federal Government, because they championed the claims of the workers in demanding the creation of a more just social order. They also claimed that they represented a movement which extended far beyond the boundaries of Canada and which represented the aspirations of the wage earners in every modern industrial country, and their eloquence was often deep and moving.

The result of the two trials was almost foregone, taking into account the circumstances and the general atmosphere of Winnipeg at that time. Russell, Queen, Pritchard, Bray and Ivens, and Armstrong were all sentenced to a year in the Federal Penitentiary. For some unknown reason, the jury in the second trial found Heaps innocent of the charge laid against him, in spite of the fact that he had been just as active in the direction of the Strike Committee as Queen or Russell.

The trials, which came to an end in March 1920, aroused much interest, like the Strike, among labor groups both in Canada and abroad.

There was an almost unanimous opinion in these circles that the accused men had not received a fair trial, and they were the victims of the MacCarthyite anti-radical hysteria which swept Winnipeg and other Canadian cities during 1919; it was one more proof that the whole administration of justice in Canada was heavily biased in favour of the possessing classes.

The Strike and the ensuing trials had important and far-reaching consequences in the labour and political history of Canada. From the short-range standpoint, the arrest and the trial of the strike leaders put an end to the progress of the One Big Union movement, which soon afterwards faded into insignificance. And indeed, this marked the end of the whole wave of radicalism which had swept Western Canada during the latter part of the war and of which the events in Winnipeg in May and June 1919 had formed the culmination. Indeed, as in the United States during the nineteen twenties, the labour movement in Canada was to enter a period of stagnation which was only to come to an end in the succeeding decade with the advent of the C.I.O. and the Canadian Congress of Labor.

It is interesting to note that the jailing of the accused men did not affect their subsequent careers in an unfavourable manner. Russell and Queen and Ivens continued for many years to be prominent in labour and Left Wing political activities in Manitoba. Both Queen and Ivens were subsequently members of the Manitoba legislature and the former was for a time Mayor of Winnipeg. Heaps was elected to Parliament as an Independent Socialist in 1926 and for almost a decade he and J. S. Woodsworth (who also had a minor connection with the Strike) were the sole representatives of the Socialist movement in the House of Commons.

The Strike and the trials involved issues which are still as controversial and important to-day as they were almost half a century ago. There is no doubt that the men did not get a fair trial and, as we have said, this would have been impossible in the emotion-laden atmosphere of Winnipeg of that period. Andrews and the Federal Government, in spite of their mountains of evidence, were not able to substantiate their charges of criminal conspiracy against the strike leaders, or to show that there was a close connection between them and the One Big Union movement. And, as we have already pointed out, Pritchard (one of the accused) was hundreds of miles from Winnipeg, in Vancouver, when the

Strike began and was never a member of the Strike Committee. Another member of the arrested group — Johns — was equally far away from Winnipeg in Montreal during almost the whole course of the Strike. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the Federal Department of Justice was correct in claiming that certain classes of workers in the city, and notably the civic and Federal Government employees, had acted illegally in walking out in sympathy with the construction and metals trades workers. But this, in turn, raises the question which has been by no means solved to-day, over four decades later, of the right of these classes of wage earners to embark on sympathy strikes or, indeed, to form unions at all.

It is, indeed, very difficult to tell exactly what the ultimate aims of the strike leaders were in May and June 1919. As we have said, the members of this group were markedly different in their personalities and in their political and social views and they were certainly not agreed in their ideas about the new social and political order which they thought should be established in Canada. Historians will probably dispute about these points for many years to come. Nevertheless, the whole incident remains a fascinating and unique one in the history of Canada.

LES PROCÈS DE LA GRÈVE DE WINNIPEG

Au printemps de 1919 eut lieu à Winnipeg la seule grève générale qui se soit jamais produite au Canada et l'une des rares à survenir dans un pays industriel moderne. Deux premiers groupes de travailleurs déclenchèrent un « walk-out » le 16 mai, et la grande majorité des membres de l'Union (One Big Union) en firent bientôt autant. Au cours des quelques jours suivants, la vie de la ville était menacée d'une paralysie complète. En même temps, la crise s'aggravait et l'atmosphère se réchauffait progressivement. Le premier trouble éclata au début de juin.

Après avoir suivi les événements de très près, le Gouvernement Borden intervint. Dans la nuit du 16 au 17 juin, 1919, plusieurs arrestations furent effectuées par la Gendarmerie Royale. Privé de ses chefs, le mouvement de la grève s'effrita vers la fin de juin, et les grévistes retournèrent au travail sans avoir atteint leurs objectifs.

Mais le sort des accusés souleva un vif intérêt, non seulement au Canada, mais aussi dans les pays européens et aux Etats-Unis. Au cours de l'été 1919, il apparut évident que Meighen et le Gouvernement fédéral allaient s'efforcer de prouver que les personnes arrêtées avaient été étroitement reliées à une conspiration révolutionnaire dans la ligne de Lénine et Trotsky. Depuis le début, il apparaissait que les accusés ne subiraient pas un juste procès.

Pour quelque raison inconnue, le premier à subir son procès fut Russell, en novembre 1919 : celui des autres eut lieu en janvier 1920. Mais le déroulement des deux procès et leur résultat se ressemblèrent beaucoup. L'acte d'accusation préparé par Ottawa contre les accusés était long et comprenait une longue liste de chefs d'accusation. La conspiration séditeuse fut le chef principal ; l'usurpation de pouvoir en fut un autre et on prétendit également que le « walk-out » avait été illégal selon certaines clauses de la Loi des enquêtes en matière de différends industriels.

Andrews, qui était le principal procureur du Gouvernement fédéral, utilisa des tactiques chiches et brutales dans les deux procès. Il essaya d'éveiller, dans l'esprit des membres du jury et du public en général, toutes sortes de préjugés de classes et patriotiques, en traitant les accusés d'anarchistes dangereux, d'hommes diaboliques et sinistres qui essayaient d'utiliser la grève pour en arriver à détruire toute la structure de la société dans l'Ouest canadien.

De leur côté, les accusés se dirent les martyrs des mêmes préjugés de la part des groupes de propriétaires de Winnipeg et du Manitoba, et ils prétendirent qu'il ne s'agissait pas uniquement de leur procès, mais de celui de tout le mouvement radical de l'Ouest du Canada.

De plus, on ridiculisa les prétentions de conspiration avancées par Andrews et on affirma que tout le conflit avait fondamentalement porté sur la question de la négociation collective et de la reconnaissance syndicale de l'Union.

Les procès, qui se terminèrent en mars 1920, suscitèrent beaucoup d'intérêt, comme la grève, parmi les groupements syndicaux, à la fois au Canada et à l'étranger. Dans ces milieux, on était d'opinion que les accusés n'avaient pas subi un juste procès et qu'ils avaient été victimes d'hystérie anti-radical à la MacCarthy. On avait une preuve de plus que l'administration de la justice au Canada favorisait les classes de propriétaires.

La grève et les procès qui suivirent eurent d'importantes et de profondes conséquences dans l'histoire politique et syndicale au Canada.

Le « One Big Union » tomba vite dans l'oubli. Et ce fut la fin de toute la vague de radicalisme qui avait déferlé dans l'Ouest canadien, pendant la dernière partie de la guerre et dont le point culminant avait été les événements de Winnipeg, en mai et juin 1919.