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Introduction to Papers from the Winnipeg General Strike Symposium, March 1983

Nolan Reilly

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NO OTHER SINGLE EVENT in Canadian labour history has received the attention historians have showered upon the Winnipeg General Strike. This episode in Canadian working-class life boasts an historiography consisting of several monographs, a reprint of the strikers' own interpretation of their struggle, and numerous articles, dissertations, memoirs, and recollections. The events in Winnipeg in May 1919 deserve all of this attention and more for, as Greg Kealey has argued, the General Strike was "an epic struggle" in the history of the Canadian labour movement. During the strike, unprecedented numbers of men and women — some unionized, many more not — of all grades of skill and from diverse ethnic experiences shared a class solidarity unparalleled in Canada in the twentieth century.

A remarkable feature of the literature on the General Strike and the emergence of the labour movement in western Canada is the almost unanimous agreement among its authors that at its root the protest was regional in character. This argument is most aggressively pursued by David Bercuson, the author of several important studies on radicalism in the west and a participant at the symposium. The western exceptionalist interpretation argues that radical and militant unionism was an essentially western phenomenon in early twentieth-century Canada, a fact attributed to the rapid development of a resource-based industrial economy that fostered intense class conflict. By contrast, the thesis proceeds, the more mature industrial economies of central Canada and the Maritimes cultivated a conservative craft union movement. Recent studies on the emergence of the labour and socialist movements, however, have demonstrated that militant trade union practices and anti-capitalist ideas enjoyed considerable support among central Canadian and Maritime working people. The western exceptionalist characterization of the Canadian labour movement as one of eastern conservatism and western militancy is overdrawn. Regional economic and social differences did help shape the workers' revolt of 1919. But equally important in explaining that protest was the commonality of the late and post-World War I working-class experience. This commonality of experience was shaped in a structural sense by the ascendancy of monopoly capitalism, with its attendant national labour market and concentration of corporate power and wealth, and in the realm of consciousness by wartime events

and socialist ideas. An exploration of the national dimensions of this movement, of which the Winnipeg General Strike was an integral part, was the rationale for organizing the Winnipeg General Strike Symposium.

Sponsored and financed by the University of Winnipeg's Canadian Studies Programme, in co-operation with the Manitoba Labour Education Centre, Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, and Provincial Archives of Manitoba, the four-day symposium received additional financial aid from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the British High Commissioner. Contributors to the programme included many well-known students of Canadian labour studies, as well as David Montgomery and Larry Peterson from the United States and John Saville from England. Attendance at the eight sessions was never less than 150 and three evening meetings drew audiences of over 400 each including students, trade unionists, and community activists. In addition to the academic sessions, the symposium sponsored the production of Ann Henry's play *Lulu Street*, a personal account of the strike, by the University's Theatre Department and a pictorial presentation on the strike undertaken by the Museum and the Archives. The symposium drew to a close with a tour of Winnipeg *circa* 1919 with transportation provided by the Amalgamated Transit Workers Union. The tour exposed the participants to the physical appearance of the city 65 years ago and identified sites of special historic significance to Winnipeg workers. Symposium organizers and the provincial government's Department of Cultural and Historical Resources are now preparing a pamphlet edition of the tour, which will be distributed throughout Manitoba. This publication will be unique because no other government in Canada has sought to celebrate its working-class record in this manner.

During the sessions of the conference, which were designed to progressively shift the focus of discussion from the particular circumstances in Winnipeg to national and international working-class activities in 1919, a consensus emerged that the Winnipeg confrontation was only the tip of an iceberg of class conflict that stretched from Nova Scotia to British Columbia. Although the intensity and institutional form of conflict varied somewhat across the country, workers in no one region were found to be exceptionally radical or conservative in their response to the post-World War I crisis. This line of reasoning marked a significant revision of the historiography and popular thinking on the 1919 General Strike. Many participants also agreed that the workers' immediate demands in Winnipeg and elsewhere must be viewed in the broader context of emergence of militant industrial unionism and the workers' call for social justice. Workers' actions in Winnipeg and throughout North America, in David Montgomery's phrase, "manifested the spirit of the One Big Union." As Canadian historians were reminded by their counterparts from Britain and the United States, beginning in Russia in 1917, and then rapidly spreading to almost every industrialized country in Europe and the Americas, massive numbers of workers mobilized to challenge the distribution of power

and wealth in their respective nations. The popularity of these vibrant oppositional movements could be measured in a negative sense, it was argued, by the violent attacks made upon them by the capitalist class and state in each of these countries. In this regard, incidents of employer- and state-instigated violence against the Canadian working-class movement, as evidenced in Winnipeg and elsewhere in the country, were also part of an international pattern of such coercion. This question of the role of the Canadian state in industrial relations from the 1850s to the present was the task of the symposium's final session. The use of the regular military for the first time in a strike, the creation of the RCMP, the extensive use of the legal system and the development of anti-communist campaigns to defeat workers' organizations and to discredit their leaders were viewed as the state's legacy from the Winnipeg General Strike. For many workers the strike had a different legacy. As Jacob Penner reminisced in 1950:

> The Winnipeg General Strike is the proudest achievement of the Canadian working class. The Winnipeg General Strike is immortal. It lives in the memory of those that are still with us and who took such an honourable part in the struggle for the rights of the producers of wealth. It lives in the memory of the sons and daughters of those that participated and to whom this story is being related by their parents during the quiet family hours.[1]

The papers published in this collection obviously do not represent the final word on the significance of the post-World War I revolt among Canadian working people. Many aspects of working-class life still require careful scrutiny before a satisfying synthesis of the period can emerge. Even Winnipeg workers — perhaps the most studied in Canada — are not well known to historians. We have an outline of the evolution of their workplace and political institutions before 1919, but actually know little about the labour process in the city's shops and factories which helped shape the workers' political ideas and practices. In the railway shops, factories, and foundries of Winnipeg, workers were divided by their ethnicity, sex, and skill, and yet in 1919 these divisions were at least temporarily overcome by the workers' sense of solidarity. What forged this unity in the workplace remains largely an unexplored question. If in reality historians know little about the events on the shopfloor, this knowledge still stands in sharp contrast to our almost complete ignorance of the life these workers led beyond the factory gates. The daily life of the workers in their neighbourhoods and homes, in their labour temples and churches, and in other dimensions of their cultural experiences were essential dynamics in the shaping of workers' consciousness in this period. On the other hand, as the evidence accumulated in the articles from the symposium reminds us, while sensitivity

[1] Quoted in Norman Penner, "Some Political Implications of the Winnipeg General Strike," a paper presented to the symposium which is being published in *Manitoba History*, Autumn 1984, a special issue of the journal on the province's labour history.

to individual locales and specific periods are essential ingredients of good social history, historians must not ignore the convergence of national class experiences.

It is impossible here to thank all those who assisted in the organization of the symposium. Two individuals, however, devoted enormous amounts of energy to the conference and deserve special recognition: Gerry Berkowski, who among other tasks, developed the splendid Tour of Winnipeg for the participants and Paul Stevenson who assisted me in all aspects of conference organization and also shared with me the initial editing of the papers reproduced here.