

# Obtained

What was gained and lost during the Seattle General Strike of 1919

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# Part One

Seattle in 1919 would not have been much quieter than the city of today. Automobiles were on the streets. Much like today's buses, streetcars rumbled throughout downtown. Overhead, the clatter of construction sounded off. And Seattle was no less dominated by pedestrian traffic then as now.

But one winter morning there came a new sound. From ships docked at the waterfront. From mills downtown and throughout the city. Throughout the streets pealed the shriek of steam whistles, a sound one might associate with the changing of shifts at a factory.

There was a lurch, and then the streets flooded with people walking out of the buildings, out of their places of employment, making their way home.

The traffic stopped. The streetcars stopped. The construction stopped. And then there was silence.

All that those in the streets could hear now was the sound of the wind, and the waves, and the seabirds. They looked up at the grey canyons around them that suddenly echoed with the sound of their own footsteps, and found the city foreign. What had it become? A prison? A grave? Or something more? As they looked up around them, they were as bewildered as any of us would be at that moment.

## The Change In Tone

The Democratic National Convention of 1912 was held in Baltimore, Maryland, and was the venue for a contentious battle for nomination. It was here that candidate Woodrow Wilson would state a key plank of his campaign: "Our industries have expanded to such a point that they will burst their jackets if they cannot find a free outlet to the markets of the world."

During his first failed attempt at the White House, he'd put it more succinctly. "Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process... the doors of the nations which are closed must be battered down." After winning the nomination, then the Presidency, Wilson put his words into action.

A change in the way America viewed the world had marked its entrance into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1897 and 1914, US foreign investment almost quadrupled to \$3 billion — about sixty billion in today's dollars. (All inflation-adjusted dollar amounts in this article are given in 2006 dollars.) Having conquered a continent, the US would turn to the world stage in pursuit of treasure. For that, Wilson could not have asked for a better political climate. The Central and Allied powers were mobilizing in Europe. As a third party, the US found it could trade with both sides.

## Under Their Own Management

World War I ground hard into the coming years. By 1917, American business saw trade with the Allies increase seven-fold. Seattle now possessed three modern shipbuilding facilities, including the huge Skinner and Eddy yard at the foot of Atlantic Street. The massive need for labor had forced employers to make serious concessions, and those new to the city quickly saw the advantages of joining a union. Owners presided over a workforce virtually 100 percent unionized, into which even members of the International Workers of the World (IWW) had gained dual membership in the American Federation of Labor (AFL); this was what was then called organizational “boring.”

There was much trepidation throughout the country that labor power was growing out of hand. That fear was only exacerbated in February of that year, when Russia’s poor and destitute began to take power, kicking off a “Red Scare” that would bleed into the coming decades. It was feared that capitalism might be truly beginning to crumble — a fear skillfully and deliberately manipulated against the labor movement. Idaho and Minnesota were the first states to pass Criminal Syndicalism laws, making it illegal not only to join or create a group advocating illegal action to bring about change in government or industrial ownership, but any statement of support for such a group as well.

The events of 1917 would make businesses look even harder at their investments. And there they discovered a new problem. Allied powers were relying on US banks to pay for US military and civilian products, thus becoming incredibly in debt. The repayment of these loans now depended on an end to the war. On April 6, 1917, Woodrow Wilson signed the declaration of war on Germany, thus dragging the US into World War I.

Government now moved to formalize its already tight relationship with business. On April 16, the US Shipping Board created the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC). The EFC would subsidize shipyards with government funds, then purchase the ships made for the US Merchant Fleet. For shipyard owners, this arrangement resulted in even more massive profits. For shipyard workers, it meant the US government now had a direct stake in labor relations. With more and more workers drafted, and a dwindling supply of immigrant labor — employers’ traditional strike-breaking resource — a strike could completely grind to a halt a critical enterprise. The power that the alliance of business and government had now placed in the hands of workers was limitless.

The time had come for government to move against radicals with direct force. On June 16, as part of a series of nationwide attacks, hundreds of soldiers and sailors stationed at Bremerton, Washington were given several hours of “special leave.” During this time they would travel to Seattle, to Second Avenue, and swarm the IWW Labor Hall there. Seattle Police stood aside, only intervening to arrest 41 of the Wobblies themselves.

However, if the powerful men who then controlled Seattle’s fate thought that their shipbuilding enterprises would be eased by the persecution of the IWW — little more than 2.5 percent of Seattle’s shipbuilding labor force — they had missed the bigger picture.

Namely, the map of Seattle itself.

## Part Two

Seattle sits more than a hundred miles, and an international border, from the nearest comparatively sized city, with Puget Sound to the west, the Cascade Mountains to the east, and rugged stands of open timber everywhere in between. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this meant Seattle was isolated. Compared to other cities, it was much harder for workers here to connect with their international unions. Rather than accept isolation, workers in Seattle developed a very simple solution: Band together. Every union in the city, shipbuilding or otherwise, used one single body in the majority of their bargaining and decision-making: The Seattle Central Labor Council (SCLC). In the SCLC, the average worker who wanted to take the floor could reasonably expect to have their opinions taken seriously and used to shape policy. The unions of Seattle were truly under their own management. Workers thought of themselves not as members of a particular trade, but as part of a single unified body to which an attack on one was indeed an attack on all.

### The Demands of the Owners

With labor in high demand and well organized, Seattle shipyard workers found themselves in a good position to ask for a much needed cost of living wage increase. Their terms were not exorbitant: a pay scale topping out at \$8 a day, the equivalent of just \$15.87/hr, roughly the starting wage for today's shipyard worker, and, rich with fresh government contracts, Skinner and Eddy would initially agree.

However, the situation changed radically in August of that year, when the EFC would join with the AFL to produce the Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board. The SLAB was formed to establish standardized nationwide and regional pay scales for all subsidized shipyards. Workers in Seattle had good reason to fear the SLAB. A standardized pay scale would effectively slam the door in the face of local unions, rolling back years worth of gains made and completely destroying any negotiating power. Outraged, the SCLC's Metal Trades Council, which encompassed all of Seattle's shipbuilding unions, moved to strike.

Rather than see the closing of some of its most important yards, the EFC would call for a Seattle delegation to come to Washington, D.C., and state their case before the SLAB. Three Seattle union leaders would pack their things and make the long journey cross-country. But even as they went on the road, government was moving against them. On September 7, the EFC demanded veto power over the SLAB, making any negotiations with it meaningless. The Seattle union leaders, arriving to find a board without the authority to hear them, would simply turn around and go home. After the delegation left, however, the EFC withdrew its veto request and restored the board's authority.

The gambit would fail. On September 29, the shipyards were on strike, and now it was the SLAB's turn to run cross-country to meet with Seattle unions. However, what the board had in mind was not a negotiation, but a series of public hearings that lasted five days. After this, the SLAB would leave Seattle without resolving anything.

Even without a contract, the AFL would prove its compliance in the process, demanding that workers leave the picket line. At first they resisted. But five international shipbuilding union presidents were called upon to pressure workers back on the job. Using strenuous appeals to patriotism, they would succeed.

After holding hearings in other West Coast towns, the SLAB finally announced the establishment of a uniform wage scale for the Puget Sound district. The SLAB — a board on which sat an AFL secretary, and which had been backed by five international union presidents — had returned a wage scale that cut pay for entry-level workers to a level lower than comparable work outside the field. However, in what was advertised as a concession, Skinner and Eddy's regionally leading pay for skilled workers — \$10.97/hr in today's dollars — was made the standard for skilled labor throughout the Puget Sound district.

The AFL then forced local unions to accept the new contract, violating the law and the AFL's own constitution. The reason given for workers to stay on the job was, again, patriotism — an argument the workers of Seattle would not fight against.

## The Problem of Propaganda

The SCLC was thought of as being “red,” and fully aligned with the IWW. Nothing could have been further from the truth. While there were radical elements capable of exerting considerable influence, this was a union of the Seattle working man, easily susceptible to the appeals of the state and to the racism and sexism of the time.

The First World War was sold to the public as “The War to End All Wars,” a horrifically violent struggle to end ages-old European autocracy and militarism, sure to usher in a long-term era of peace, prosperity, and participatory democracy on the world stage. Any group perceived as standing in the way had to be shut out, both nationally and by Seattle workers. In particular, the “boring” IWW members would be allowed to participate but denied a vote, and the unionized Japanese were excluded from the SCLC altogether.

African-Americans also found themselves a union target. Called upon to take the place of drafted workers, Blacks received a warm reception within the IWW, but would be shut out of mainstream unions in a tide of bigotry — a racial disparity employers gleefully exploited. With few opportunities, Blacks made perfect strikebreakers. Only after strenuous appeals by the dual-card IWW, would some unions ease their “color bar” and allow Blacks to join — but this was little more than an attempt by the SCLC to break independent Black organizations. Even with Black unionists in the workforce, employers continued to abuse the tension through the use of segregation.

Observing the racial situation, one young reporter would opine:

And I thought: WHEN  
Will the workers be as clever  
At STICKING TOGETHER  
As the boss is  
At DIVIDING THEM?

In her writings as part of the Seattle labor movement, Dr. Anna Louise Strong spoke out against the racism and sexism of the unions many times.

Attracted to both the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest and the exciting progressive attitude of Seattle, Strong was imbued with a sense of independence, a deep love of nature, and a high-quality education. After receiving her doctorate, she covered progressive causes for a Chicago paper, before traveling the world with a roving children's exhibition.

She would become well acquainted both with the people of Seattle — becoming the “best known of the respectable women in town” — and with its surrounding countryside. Within a year of moving to the city, she was considered for the Seattle School Board. The only published Ph.D. to run, she won easily. She would later call the position “the most completely boring of my life.”

All of this changed, however, when America entered WWI. Convinced the nation she loved was dead, Strong spent the summer mountain-climbing and soul-searching, until she chanced upon a copy of a small socialist newspaper, the *Seattle Call*, one of many publications relaying stories from Russia of a nation truly being run by its people. Stories that were not true. By this point, the authoritarian rule of the Bolsheviks was firmly in place. Cut off from the truth by propaganda, Strong and many others would take hope from such publications that a great change was indeed about to sweep the world. Strong wrote several anti-conscription articles for the *Seattle Call*. For Strong's upper-class constituency, radical politics was simply out of bounds. A recall vote was called, and Strong was ousted from the board.

## Part Three

Anna Louise Strong, despite having been ousted from the Seattle School Board in 1918, was not out of a job for long. Harry B. Ault, editor of the Northwest's largest newspaper, the Seattle Central Labor Council's *Seattle Union Record*, would quickly snatch her up and make her the paper's star reporter, in spite of her new status as a controversial communist sympathizer. Strong had found the perfect home in the Seattle labor movement. While there was support for America within the SCLC, there was no love for the bosses. "I believe 95 per cent of us agree that the workers should control the industries... but very strenuously disagree on the method," Ault would state. For the paper, Strong would contribute a daily ragged-verse-style poem under the pen name Anise, and an advice column under the pen name Ruth Ridgeway.

Strong's writing was most concerned with labor's treatment of women, who were being called to take the place of men sent overseas. Her advice column, in particular, became a forum for men and women to discuss the complex issues of gender in union politics. The majority of working men simply did not believe that women belonged in the workplace; however, their opposition may have had less to do with gender than with unfair competition. As women were not allowed to join unions, owners simply paid them less for the same work, much to the ire of unionists. When women attempted to join industries that unions had successfully made "closed shop," requiring membership to join, male unionists were outspoken in their support of female workers. In direct defiance of international union regulations, the SCLC would organize and recognize these all-female unions, even giving women official positions in the unions of their male counterparts.

### Joy and Sacrifice in the "New Era"

For more than a year, Seattle shipyard workers labored under a contract they had not voted on or approved, and tensions between owners and workers, already strained, neared the breaking point. The state would again crack down on the IWW, arresting and deporting nearly a quarter of their Seattle organization.

It was into this contentious political climate that an aggressive mayoral candidate would appear. On March 5, 1918, riding a tide of labor support, reform candidate Ole Hanson [<http://depts.washington.edu/labhist/strike/williams.shtml>] would take city hall. Labor had high hopes for this powerful new ally. However, the short, fiery, red-haired man now in charge of Seattle could not have been more strange.

Hanson had come to the city nearly two decades earlier, after a severe spinal injury in Butte, Montana, left him partially paralyzed. Emulating his hero Teddy Roosevelt, who had conquered illness through exercise, Hanson would physically attach himself to the back of a covered wagon and walk the 700 miles to Seattle's Beacon Hill. Here a physically fit Hanson declared to amazed onlookers that he would be mayor of the city someday. He was a Bull Moose Republican, before becoming a Democrat, because they "kept us out of the war," before becoming an avid pro-war advocate, proclaiming his mayoral candidacy a "patriotic duty."



He would become well known for his fiery diatribes, delivered in the frenzied shrill of his high voice, earning him the nickname “Holy Ole” from his critics. Hanson was a man who “seemed to be wound up too tight,” according to a political associate years later. “I never heard anything like Old Ole until Hitler came along. He’d get so worked up he’d be almost screaming. He sure sounded sincere.”

Throughout all his histrionics, however, Hanson remained sincere on only one thing: Ole Hanson. Every stance he took on every issue was designed to insure that he held onto support and power.

On November 11, 1918, the First World War finally came to a close. There was dancing all over town. People gathered in the streets to celebrate not only the end of a war, but perhaps the end of all wars.

However, at the SCLC, post-war glee was short-lived. Months passed and the wartime wage controls of the SLAB showed no signs of being removed. With absolutely no legitimate reason for them to continue, government and business were sending a clear message to the workers of Seattle. They would hold this contract designed to destroy union power as long as it took.

However, as a new year dawned, it became clear how far they had misjudged. Seattle entered 1919 in peace, with flu deaths on the decline, and a population of about 400,000. In its five modern shipbuilding facilities, union organizing was stronger than ever. The SCLC now boasted over 60,000 members, an all-time high. But this “new era” promised by the elite had turned out to be one of crushing inflation, with employers content to allow real-world wages to decline. The cost of living would soar to nearly twice that of pre-war levels. Seattle unions would take a stand in this unbearable situation.

Skilled workers had voted against a contract that had personally benefited them. On January 16, with the possibility of a strike on the table, the SCLC’s Metal Trades Council would again meet with owners, demanding the same thing they had in 1917: a scale topping out at \$8 a day, knowing full well this now meant a wage of just \$13.33/hr in today’s dollars.

The appearance of a mysterious telegraph at the Labor Temple would end the negotiation. It was from EFC General Manager Charles Piez, and had been addressed to the Metal Trades Association, a group representing the shipyard owners — not the SCLC’s Metal Trades Council. Similar names, and a delivery boy’s mistake, had placed in the hands of the union Piez’s stern warning to the shipyard owners: If they gave in to worker demands, he would not let them have their US Steel allotments. Union anger was finally directed at government. On January 18, the Metal Trades Council distributed formal notices that all shipyard work would end in two days. In response, employers spread rumors that workers did not truly wish to go on strike. They would distribute petitions to their workers, non-binding under any legal standard, requesting a revote on the strike. Skinner and Eddy management held a straw vote “revealing” 95 percent opposition to the strike. Unbeknownst to them, however, in only one of the smaller unions had majority support for the strike not been attained.

## Part Four

January 21, 1919, would see the orderly walkout of some 35,000 workers from Seattle's shipyards and allied trades. In the meantime, Charles Piez, General Manager of the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC), would act in the most schizophrenic manner possible. First, he told yard owners they could re-enter talks without penalty. Then, just as suddenly, he would threaten the cancellation of any outstanding government contracts if the wage scale was changed. He would say the government didn't have the power to dictate wages for yard owners, then state that the SLAB contract was unchangeable and publicly declare it unpatriotic for owners to grant a wage increase. Shipyard owners would wash their hands, going on vacation, leaving the strike to simply starve itself out.

But in the Seattle Central Labor Council (SCLC), the wheels were already in motion. The SCLC's Metal Trades Council had requested a sympathetic strike action to be held by all unions throughout the city, i.e., a general strike. By January 29, 110 unions, virtually every member of the SCLC, risking years worth of their own hard-fought concessions and, in some cases, their unions and very jobs themselves, had agreed. The City of Seattle was to be shut down.

### The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour

Nearly all of Seattle's labor union leaders were in Chicago, working to organize a national general strike to free famously railroaded labor leader Tom Mooney. According to Anna Louise Strong, among the leaders at the Mooney Congress, they would have spoken against the strike had they been in town. The fear was it "might easily smash something — us, perhaps, our well-organized labor movement."

Businessmen would react by arming themselves in droves. Riot insurance was taken out on Seattle warehouses. Some wealthy families simply moved to Portland. The people of Seattle prepared for a long, drawn-out siege, with runs on supplies leaving store shelves bare.

The strike began to take shape on February 2 with the first meeting of a General Strike Committee. Composed of three rank-and-file members for each striking union, it was a large and unwieldy body of unacquainted individuals. The meeting would last 16 hours. In addition to fixing a date for the strike — Thursday, February 6 — subcommittees on tactics, publicity, and finance would be formed. Immediately, the committee was faced with how unique an undertaking this was. The Garbage Wagon Drivers would ask the floor to state that Seattle Health Commissioner Dr. J.S. McBride had told their union that if they did not take away hospital garbage, infested with the flu, they would be arrested. The General Strike Committee realized it was not simply to govern a walkout. It would need to be a functioning counter-government for the entire city. It appointed an Executive Committee of 15, which the General Committee would have veto power over.

In its last order of business before reconvening on the 6<sup>th</sup>, the General Strike Committee would set the strike's slogan. Proving themselves once again not to be the radicals they were portrayed

as, they rejected the incendiary “We have nothing to lose but our chains and a whole world to gain” in favor of the union stock “Together We Win.”

The Executive Committee would get to work right away, and kept working at virtually all hours of the day and night until the strike ended. It would create subcommittees on exemptions for construction, transportation, and provisions, and a subcommittee to hear general welfare grievances. Its first exemption was to allow firefighters to stay on the job, with the Transportation Subcommittee producing the signage and papers necessary to indicate that those exempted were not scabs. Two days before the strike, Mayor Hanson called Seattle union leaders to a friendly lunch meeting. There he would say, “Now boys, I want my street lights and my water, and the hospitals. That’s all.” Confident they had city support, the Executive Committee began working on the flood of city exemptions, granting only those absolutely necessary for health and welfare. However, they would realize they could not simply state who would work and who would not. They would be forced to proscribe at-work behavior. In the most complicated example, the Laundry Truck Drivers and Workers formed a plan with their employers to leave one shop open to handle hospital laundry only, and to work in the other shops for a short period after the beginning of the strike to insure that wet laundry did not pose a health problem.

Rounding out that day’s meeting, the Executive Committee created subcommittees on public relations, the care of destitute homes, and a Law and Order Committee. Then, as the day’s final order of business, it would ask the most important question so far unresolved: When should the strike end? Should they even set a date? Harry Ault was joined by the head of the SCLC, James Duncan, in ardently pushing for a closing date. They would forward the question to the Metal Trades Council. But the Council simply did not believe that an end date would be effective, so the Executive Committee would not set one.

In an editorial that ran that day, Anna Louise Strong wrote:

On Thursday at 10 A.M.

There will be many cheering, and there will be some who fear.

Both these emotions are useful, but not too much of either.

We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by LABOR in this country,  
a move which will lead — NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!

We do not need hysteria.

We need the iron march of labor.

Her editorial had captured the spirit of the moment: Hope. But it was, for them, “a road that leads — NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!” and none could even say exactly where they hoped it would go. Nevertheless, for the American elite, Strong’s editorial was a declaration of revolution, and the eyes of the nation were firmly fixed on Seattle.

## Part Five

Wednesday, February 5, 1919, was the final day before the Seattle General Strike, and for the strike's Executive Committee, many questions were still unanswered. Most outstanding was that of city power. Officials had complained of the mass chaos, and the public health and water supply crises, that would result from a full shutdown of Seattle City Light. Unbeknownst to all, however, the city's weak electrical unions were not in a position to accomplish a full shutdown. They would, however, attempt to bluff the mayor into allowing one by giving a newspaper interview that morning stating they were to receive "no exemptions," not even for the sake of public health and safety. The interview caused panic in the streets and anger within the Seattle Central Labor Council. After a meeting with the SCLC's Metal Trades Council, the electrical unions suddenly announced they would be open to some exemptions. The mayor, however, would state that City Light would run in its entirety even if he had to use soldiers to run it.

With tensions on the rise and the hours before the strike ticking away, the Executive Committee would call the mayor to an 11<sup>th</sup>-hour meeting. Hanson, who had been working on "plans for defense, including securing cartridges, shot guns and machine guns, and drawing a map showing the places where men were to be stationed," would head to the Labor Temple and restate his intention to use troops to run City Light. However, he would also again declare his support for the remainder of the strike. After he had left, at 3:30 a.m. on Thursday morning, the Executive Committee would vote to allow all of City Light to run, except for the commercial service. For the average Seattle resident, no change in service would be noticed.

### A Quiet Appeal

On the first morning of the strike, curious people gathered in the streets long before the 10 a.m. call. They would be joined by 1,500 soldiers from Ft. Lewis (then "Camp Lewis"), who would then be stationed at the armory and seen by virtually no one. For international union leaders, it was also an early morning, as they arrived in town with the first train, hoping to shut the strike down. The steam whistles blew, and the streets emptied. Then quiet. An eerie calm that strikers and observers alike would note. The riots did not come. In their place were rumors of assassinations, arson, imprisonment, poisoning, pillaging, and destruction. None were true. The streets of Seattle were empty but for the occasional truck marked "Exempted by the Strike Committee," and arm-band-wearing Labor War Veteran Guards. These men, approximately 300 in number, had been organized by the Law and Order Committee to enforce Seattle Health Commissioner McBride's ordinance against public gatherings, and, consequently, to prevent the strike from coming to violence. They were unarmed, believing in a "big idea," that, in the words of one guard, shunned "police force with clubs" in favor of "officers [who] understand human nature and use brains and not brawn in keeping order." In the eyes of this guard, "if you explain it to them reasonably," people will respond reasonably.

For the mothers of Seattle, the morning might have been met with concern for keeping their babies fed. But 35 milk stations had been established around the city by the Milk Truck Drivers to supply young children. The Drivers had rejected a plan they created with their employers that might have let many poor children go hungry, in favor of purchasing milk from dairies outside the city with their own money. At the strike's height, the Milk Stations distributed a full 30,000 gallons of milk a day.

At noon, the second meeting of the General Strike Committee commenced. Virtually all the SCLC's 60,000 members had struck as promised, and they had been joined by the Japanese unions as well. They would be invited to send a delegation to the General Strike Committee, in spite of being denied any say in the strike's conduct. In addition, 40,000 non-union workers had walked out, with no assurance of a job to go back to.

About 100,000 people were now part of the Seattle General Strike, and with their families, this comprised well over half the city's population. "The strikers were at once brought face to face with the way in which the whole community, including their own families, is inextricably tied together," Anna Louise Strong would later write. No longer a union slogan, in a city without a functioning ruling class, an injury to one *family* was an injury to all.

By late afternoon, the first meals were finally served at the 21 union-run dining halls around the city, serving an all-you-can-eat buffet of beef stew, spaghetti, steak, pot roast, bread, and coffee for \$4.07, or \$2.91 with a union card, in today's dollars. Those with IWW cards initially paid full price, but by the strike's end even members of the public were given the discount.

By all accounts the streets were safe. The completeness of the peace would surprise many — not the least of which was Ole Hanson. But with no blood on the streets, there was no blood on his hands, and a man famous for changing his position was free to change it once more.

Friday the 7<sup>th</sup> rolled in, and with it a different air. The rumors were gone. The fear was gone. No longer something ethereal, the end of all work in the City of Seattle was something real. Something tangible.

With the morning had also come an additional 950 federal troops under the command of Major General John F. Morrison. They would be stationed at various strategic points around the city. In addition, Hanson would hastily hire an additional 600 police officers. The only requirement for receiving a tin star and a gun that day in Seattle was to be a white male capable of standing in a room with a hand raised, reciting a pledge. Approximately 2,400 stars and guns were distributed in this way, many to youths from University of Washington fraternities who would then attempt to provoke fights with anyone they thought was a striker.

Hanson's set pieces were in place for a play before the national media. He would contact the United Press bureau to declare the strike "a treasonable Bolshevik uprising" that he intended to put down. A messenger was sent to the Labor Temple to read an "Ultimatum to the Executive Committee," in which Hanson stated that, unless the strike was ended by noon, he would declare martial law and use soldiers to run all industries in the city. There were two problems with this, however. First, the authority to declare martial law had been vested in Maj. Gen. Morrison only. And second, it was already past noon when the message had been delivered.

Hanson would state that "the faces of the very men who had been loudest in egging on the workers turned pale, for they knew we were prepared to go the full limit in defeating their nefarious and un-American aims." He spoke of faces that he, of course, had not seen because he had not been there. The actual reaction at the Labor Temple was confusion, caused both by the clock, and by the sudden change in attitude. Hanson would call for the Executive Committee to

come before him, and six members would. The committee members stated that, if martial law was declared, they would call out workers in allied unions across the state. "If you want the strike to spread," they told him, "declare martial law." Proving that business was still in power in the Mayor's Office, the Conciliation Board, a body which represented Seattle business leaders, would be called to join the meeting. But the officials declared they would have no dealings with revolutionaries. Hearing this, Hanson would tell the committee members, "Then that's all there is to it, boys." The new deadline for martial law was 8 a.m. Saturday morning.

## Part Six

Eight a.m. on Saturday, February 8, 1919, had been set by Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson as a “new” deadline for martial law to be declared in Seattle if the general strike in effect that week had not been called off by its leaders. The time and date would come and would go. And workers were not back on the job.

When asked, Maj. Gen. Morrison stated that if it were necessary, he alone would declare martial law, and it would be no bluff. The mayor, however, would keep his fantasy going in the national press, branding himself the savior of Seattle: “I issued a proclamation that all life and property would be protected; that all business should go on as usual. And this morning our municipal street cars, light, power plants, water, etc., were running at full blast. There was an attempted revolution. It never got off first base.” Even those who had ardently supported an end date for the strike were now angry at the mayor’s sudden and irrational behavior and felt strong for having violated “two” calls for the strike’s end.

But the strike’s own success was beginning to take its toll. Anna Louise Strong would later write, “As soon as any worker was made a leader he wanted to end that strike... workers in the ranks felt the thrill of massed power which they trusted their leaders to carry to victory. But as soon as one of these workers was put on a responsible committee, he also wished to stop ‘before there is riot and blood.’ The strike could produce no leaders willing to keep it going. All of us were red in the ranks and yellow as leaders.”

On Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup>, bowing to the massive pressure applied by their international unions, several unions would go back on the job. Most crushing of these were the Street Car Men and the Teamsters. Both declared they would return if called by the General Strike Committee. However, the roll call for Monday the 10<sup>th</sup> saw even more unions missing, including the Stereotypers, Auto Drivers, Barbers, Bill Posters, and, most critical to the strike, the Milk Truck Drivers. Now, under pressure from smaller unions worried about their jobs, the Executive Committee voted to reconvene the strike the next day for its final day.

At noon on Tuesday, February 11, 1919, the longest and most successful General Strike in American history would come to a close.

### What Was Gained and What Was Lost?

For Seattle unions, tangible gains from the General Strike were hard to find. Shipyard workers continued to labor under the SLAB’s wage scale until later that year, when, with government contracts drying up, all of Seattle’s shipyards were shut down. They were the first in the nation to be shuttered, closed a full year before the subsidized yards of other cities.

For Ole Hanson, the strike would bring fame. He was front-page news across America. He would resign as mayor in order to attempt to parlay his notoriety into what seemed to have been his goal all along: a run at the White House. He would make it as far as the Republican National

Convention, but, with his endless tirades on Bolshevism growing stale, he would be shut out entirely. In the aftermath of the strike, Seattle Labor pursued political goals much less lofty, but no less failed.

The strike had created an anger and fear of Seattle Labor to last a generation to come. In the 1919 municipal elections, every Labor candidate was defeated. For the IWW, 1919 was to spell the beginning of the end, both in Seattle and abroad. Within a month of the strike, its hall was again raided and 39 members arrested as the “ring-leaders of anarchy.” The SCLC, recognizing the existence of “one common enemy,” would finally come to the IWW’s legal defense. However, in response to the strike, early that year the Washington State Legislature would pass a Criminal Syndicalism law of its own, part of a new round of vicious repression nationwide which would ultimately break the back of the entire IWW organization. Though Wobbly unions are still in operation today, there are now as many members around the world as there were in Seattle alone during its height.

The new doors to be battered down were in Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua, and in Germany and Italy right up until the very moment of WWII. The elite would apply the lessons learned to insure that another Seattle would not happen during this war. For its part, the AFL was only too happy to remain loyal, the events of 1919 having spurred it to remove any trace of radicalism from its ranks. For others, though, the year had displayed the inability of business and government to insure a progressive increase in the happiness and well-being of its citizenry. Modern Progressivism would take shape, and separate itself from its previous ally, the Labor Movement — a rift perhaps not bridged again until another winter’s day in Seattle, when “Teamsters and Turtles” would stand together during 1999’s World Trade Organization protest.

With the shipyards closed, Strong would later write, “workers drifted to other cities to look for work. The young, the daring, the best fighters went... Workers fought each other for jobs and not the capitalists for power.” Once so unified, the SCLC was now bogged down in endless bickering and finger-pointing over the strike’s failure, and would oust many of its most radical leaders. Owners punished the now weakened unions, with many concessions laid on the line not returned.

The SCLC began to grow more comfortable with the female workers in its midst, and would gain a new racial tolerance, with several unions dropping their color bars. The non-voting Japanese delegation became a permanent fixture in the SCLC, and the Longshoremen, once so violent with African Americans, now proudly welcomed them. For Strong, however, the end of solidarity in Seattle was simply too much. She left the city for Russia, and then China, along the way writing the book “Children of the Revolution.” She would meet several notable leaders, including Stalin and Mao Zedong, becoming a party-line militant, though she was deeply disturbed by the abuses she would witness. Ultimately, under suspicion of espionage, she would be deported from Russia, but would return to China.

Ironically, the one who would best articulate what was perhaps the strike’s greatest victory was Ole Hanson himself. “True there were no flashing guns, no bombs, no killings. Revolution, I repeat, doesn’t need violence. The general strike, as practiced in Seattle, is itself the weapon of revolution, all the more dangerous because quiet.”

The strike had proven something that to this day is not well understood: Non-violent revolution is possible. In the words of one labor group, there were “[s]ixty thousand men out and not even a fistfight.” The streets of Seattle had been flooded with guns, armed businessmen, almost two and a half thousand soldiers, and 3,000 members of the public hired or deputized to the po-



lice, including armed fraternity brothers. But in spite of this, and not because of it, the strike was peaceful. The General Strike and Executive Committees established a real-world infrastructure that prevented violence by meeting the needs of Seattle's people. Its Labor Guards used consensus and understanding to defuse violence in the face of mass provocation. In the words of one reporter, "While the business men and the authorities prepared for riots, labor organized for peace."

In her history of the strike, Anna Louise Strong urges us to learn from its mistakes and successes, and there are many lessons here for those who fight for equality and justice today. Revolution can only be strong when truly in the hands of its people. No matter how radical or well meaning, at every point the leaders of the General Strike only served to weaken it. Fear of a world no one had seen before left them completely unprepared when the strike presented it to them. Now, after almost a hundred years of the "new era," as labor and progressivism inch closer together, we make the same mistake. Revolution seems intangible, ethereal. But simply because we cannot see it now doesn't mean it is not possible. The General Strike proved that it can be real. On the streets of Seattle, it was born and died. In response to a newspaper report amazed at how fully labor had "organized for peace and order," Strong would write: "And peace and order obtained."

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