100 years since the Seattle General Strike—Part 2

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Seattle on strike

Despite the threats of repression and violence from Seattle's political and corporate elite, workers went ahead with their plans. The Central Labor Council's main paper, *Union Record*, published a response to the ruling-class hysteria on February 4, with an editorial written by Anna Louise Strong called "No One Knows Where":

"We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by LABOR in this country, a move which will lead—NO ONE KNOWS WHERE! Labor will feed the people. Labor will care for the babies and the sick. Labor will preserve order. Labor will not only SHUT DOWN the industries, but Labor will REOPEN, under the management of the appropriate trades, such activities as are needed to preserve public health and public peace. If the strike continues, Labor may feel led to avoid public suffering by reopening more and more activities. UNDER ITS OWN MANAGEMENT. And that is why we say that we are starting on a road that leads—NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!"

On Thursday, February 6, roughly 65,000 workers walked off their jobs across the city at ten o'clock in the morning, among them 60,000 workers organized in the various AFL unions, 3,500 hundred Wobblies, hundreds of Japanese and black workers, and an uncounted number of non-union workers. An additional 40,000 workers who did not formally vote to strike were blocked from going to work as well.

After the workers flooded out of factories, shops and stores, the city settled down into a quiet state. The downtown streetcars stopped running, factory machinery came to a halt, and public schools closed down. There were no major marches or demonstrations. Workers stayed in their neighborhoods. The largest gatherings of striking workers were in the 21 food halls that the Strike Committee organized across the city.

By the strike's fourth day, these food halls, were able to serve 30,000 meals. They were run by striking culinary workers, mostly women. Anyone could purchase the meal, usually beef stew or spaghetti with vegetables and bread, at the cost of 25 cents a for union workers and 35 cents for the general public. The Metal Trades Council, to which the shipyard workers belonged, paid for all the food, kitchen, and distribution expenses, which totaled close to $7,000. Factory workers and truckers also sacrificed their own funds to ensure unprocessed milk was distributed to stores and food kitchens across the city.

Labor leaders sought to prevent clashes with the police, which were armed and present across the city, but also to prevent the strike from "getting out of hand" and finding an independent or revolutionary outlet. Thus, they issued numerous statements to maintain order. Even the IWW leaders threatened punishment of their members if they were too agitational.

To assist with these goals of nonviolence, the Strike Committee established the War Veterans Guard as the official workers' police body. It was composed of roughly three hundred volunteers, without legal authority or arms, based on the assumption that "people want to obey the law if you put it to them reasonably" rather than through force. The strict code of conduct enforced by the War Veterans Guard proved worthwhile in one sense. Not a single worker was arrested or injured over the course of the strike. Even police criminal cases declined from the average 100 per day to 30, as workers refrained from illegal activities like gambling and bootlegging. In this way workers disproved claims by Seattle's media that the strike would lead to an eruption of working class criminality.

Due to the exemptions granted by the Committee of Fifteen to city and local union officials, all services essential to the running of the city continued. Telephone operators, hospital workers, butchers and food market workers, and government employees still worked, and thus the basic functioning of the economy did not stop.

Nonetheless, the threat of state violence against the strike remained. "Let us clean up the United States of America," Mayor Hanson stated. "Let all men stand up and be counted… We refuse to treat with these revolutionists. Unconditional surrender are our only terms."

On the third day, the conservative labor leaders brought a proposal to end the strike to the floor of the General Strike Committee. The majority of the representatives indicated agreement with the proposal, but after discussing with rank-and-file workers during the break, returned to unanimously oppose it and carry on with the strike.

Building on the relationships that existed between the labor bureaucracy and the political establishment before the general strike, Mayor Hanson repeatedly appealed to the trusted leaders to end the strike as quickly as possible. "Jim, this strike has got to be called off by noon," the mayor phoned to Duncan. After hearing that the leaders did not have the power to stop the momentum that had built up in the rank-and-file, the mayor invited the committee members to his office for a meeting where he threatened to impose martial law on the city unless the strike ended on the morning of Saturday February 8.

Though the Fifteen did not dare to shut it down yet, the strike had reached a crossroads. Either the working masses would push forward on a political basis, formulating clear demands and making an appeal to workers outside Seattle, or the union leadership and government would shut it down with nothing in hand.

The mayor's threats of martial law broke down some of the unions. Streetcar operators started working again that Saturday, along with workers in some restaurants, barber shops, and retail stores. Police also began arresting Wobblies, like spokesman and editor of *TheIndustrial Worker*, Walker C. Smith, for distributing a leaflet entitled "Russia Did It."

By Saturday afternoon, the Fifteen drafted a resolution to send everyone back to work by Sunday, which they proposed at a meeting of the General

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Strike Committee. After long deliberation, the proposal was rejected by the vast majority of representatives. But on Sunday, the representatives fanned out to their various local unions and argued in favor of the proposition, returning by Monday evening to approve the strike's official end for Tuesday, February 11. The following announcement was made:

"Whereas, the Executive Committee is sufficiently satisfied that regardless of the ultimate action that the rank and file would take, the said committee is convinced that the rank and file did stand pat, and the stampede to return to work was not on the part of the rank and file but rather on the part of their leaders. Therefore be it resolved, that the following action become effective at once, February 10, 1919: That this strike committee advise all affiliated unions that have taken action to return their men to work, that said unions shall again call their men to respond immediately to the call of the rank and file until 12 noon February 11, 1919, and to then declare this strike at a successful termination, and if developments should then make it necessary that the strike be continued, that further action be referred to the rank and file exclusively."

Thousands of workers reluctantly stepped back to their workplaces at noon that day, often pressured by their own union's internationals and local executives. Labor leaders declared the strike a success. The mayor congratulated himself to the national press for heroically preventing a Bolshevik revolution in America. However, the working class knew that despite the great feats accomplished in carrying out the strike, they had not won a single demand.

Aftermath

Amidst the post-war recession, Pacific coast companies looked to scale back shipyard work, and those in Seattle were the first hit. Unemployment soared, and many of the workers who had joined the general strike were forced to move to find jobs.

The state helped the companies suppress the working class by cracking down on its labor and political organizations. *Union Record*, the paper published by the Central Labor Council, was shut down by federal agents that swarmed into the city after the strike's end. Many of the socialist and revolutionary leaders in the labor movement were arrested on charges of sedition, and the halls of the Socialist Party and IWW were raided.

Though they did not play a role in leading the strike, the IWW faced the worst of the capitalist reaction. Having already been made all but illegal by criminal syndicalism laws passed in various states in the preceding years, and targeted by the Wilson administration under the Espionage Act, Seattle's Wobblies were once again raided, arrested, and imprisoned. The vengefulness of Washington's capitalist class was graphically revealed nine months after the strike when five IWW members were murdered in cold blood in Centralia, Washington, on Armistice Day.

In this way, the reaction in Seattle predicted the nationwide Red Scare, and its vicious Palmer Raids, which aimed to terrorize militant workers. Thirty-one local IWW members were arrested for activity in the general strike, including prominent leaders like James Bruce, Harvey O'Connor and Walker Smith, and thirty-seven more were arrested during raids in August. The American state carried out this brutal campaign across the country in the years before and after the Seattle strike, arresting the organization's leaders and militant members, including Bill Haywood and James P. Cannon.

Lessons

The Seattle General Strike of 1919 can teach workers much today about their own militant traditions, from which they have been consciously separated by the ruling class and the bankrupt trade unions. One of many militant struggles in US history, it exposes as a historical falsification the claim that American workers can never mount major industrial struggles.

Workers must consider how a major struggle like the general strike can be carried out today. One critical difference between 1919 and the coming period is the role of the unions, with the organizations calling themselves "unions" today being fundamentally different than those that led the Seattle General Strike.

Fearful that they would otherwise be swept aside, Seattle's unions in 1919 conceded to workers' demands for a struggle that involved all branches of industry and convulsed a major city. Though the union leaders were conservative and defensive of the capitalist system, they were, to some extent, reactive to the demands of rank-and-file workers. Trade unions today fight tooth-and-nail against even the most modest forms of working class solidarity, as economic globalization has undermined the national basis for this once-useful form of workers' organization. When strikes take place, the unions seek to isolate and destroy them. In 2019, no existing American trade union will ever become the vehicle for a general strike.

More importantly, the Seattle General Strike demonstrates the critical necessity of socialist leadership. The strike was inspired by the example of Russia, as Seattle-based capitalists were painfully aware. Though it drew into struggle many thousands of socialist-minded workers, the leading trade union officials sought to exclude "politics"--by which of course they meant socialist politics—from the fight.

Seattle workers, in their struggle, drew out the basic class lines. On one side were all the city's workers—unified over the lines of craft, national, and racial separation that the unions had imposed on them. On the other side were the capitalists and the government, towing behind them the better-off middle class. But just as this basic division of modern class society came into the open in the Seattle General Strike, the trade union leadership enlisted itself with the city authorities. Their ability to do so depended on the absence of a socialist leadership. Union militancy by itself was not enough to overcome it.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have every confidence that struggles such as that which took place in Seattle, and far larger, will reemerge in the coming period. Workers will revive their militant traditions. The general strike will return. But precisely at that point, as the Seattle General Strike shows, the necessity for socialist leadership will become most acute.

Concluded

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