On the morning of February 6, 1919, Seattle, a city of 315,000 people, stopped working. The next three days would mark the first city-wide labor action in American history to be proclaimed a “general strike.”

This slideshow, created for the 90th anniversary commemoration of the Seattle general strike held at the Seattle Labor Temple on February 7, 2009, provides a brief historical introduction to the strike and highlights several features of the Seattle General Strike Project.
The Seattle general strike began in shipyards that had expanded rapidly with war production contracts. 35,000 workers expected a postwar pay-hike to make up for two years of steep wartime inflation and strict wage controls imposed by the federal government. However, the new agreement led to only meager gains, and these only for skilled workers.
The wage dispute led to a strike by the Metal Trades Council, the bargaining unit for unionized Seattle shipyard workers, which began on January 21, 1919. Tacoma shipyard workers followed suit.

The Central Labor Council believed that the struggle in the shipyards was the first salvo in a massive postwar open shop drive. Success there was pivotal to the strength of all organized labor in Seattle, and indeed throughout the nation.

Union leaders meeting inside the Seattle Labor Temple
The CLC called for a sympathy strike by all member unions to begin on February 6. Over 100 locals supported the strike, many without the sanction of their internationals. Radical unionists affiliated with IWW locals and members of the Japanese Labor Association also walked out in solidarity with the Central Labor Council. All told, over 65,000 workers went on strike.

“The eyes of the nation are fixed on Seattle.”

Seattle Star, January 30, 1919.

Workers fill the streets at the intersection of 9th and Pine.
A member of the General Strike Committee and columnist for the Seattle Union Record, Anna Louise Strong gained notoriety when on the eve of the 1919 strike she penned a front-page editorial (right) that seemed to call for revolution.

“We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by LABOR in this country, a move which will lead – NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!”
- Anna Louise Strong, February 4, 1919
The recent Russian Revolution was an inspiration to some striking workers, especially those sympathetic to socialism or syndicalism. Pamphlets and flyers such as this one put out by the IWW littered the streets of Seattle during the general strike.

Most workers were thinking not about revolution but about workplace rights and the need to maintain a strong labor movement. For them the strike was an important expression of labor solidarity.

“If by revolution is meant violence, forcible taking over of property, the killing or maiming of men, surely no group of workers dreamed of such action. But if by revolution is meant that a Great Change is coming over the face of the world, which will transform our method of carrying on industry, and will go deep into the very sources of our lives, to bring joy and freedom in place of heaviness and fear--then we do believe in such a Great Change and that our General Strike was one very definite step towards it.”

- Seattle Union Record, February 12, 1919
With the city shut down, unionists organized an entire network of worker-run institutions including kitchens, milk stations, laundries, garbage collection, and fire and police services.

Perhaps more than the strike itself, it was this largely successful demonstration of workers’ control that made the Seattle general strike one of the most radical labor actions in American history.
Many of Seattle’s worker cooperatives and labor-owned businesses predated the general strike and continued to thrive after the strike ended and into the early 1920s. The impetus the strike gave to “consumer organizing” on the part of the labor movement is one of the most important legacies of February 1919.

Inside a branch store of the Seattle Consumer’s Cooperative. This store distributed 1,000 free loaves of bread in a single day during the general strike.
The Seattle General Strike Project features audio recordings and transcripts of fifteen interviews with strike participants conducted by Rob Rosenthal in 1977.

Dave Beck can be heard in one of the interviews. Later to serve as President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Beck was just 24 years old in 1919. He had recently arrived in Seattle after being discharged from the Navy and was part of a group of Teamsters that opposed the strike.

“It was an avenue of direct action ... that was tremendously all out of possibility their being able to control, was not in harmony with a solution that could be built to function, and therefore, failed.”

– Dave Beck, 1977
The Project also includes an interview with Earl George, an African American longshoreman who participated in the strike. He would later become an important leader in the Washington State Communist Party and the first black president of an ILWU local - Seattle’s local 9.

George was one of only a few members of Seattle’s African American population to belong to a union in 1919. The interracial International Longshoremen’s Association was the exception in a nearly all-white Seattle labor movement.

“Nothing moved but the tide.”
- Earl George, 1977
Japanese Americans - who comprised Seattle’s largest community of color in 1919 - were also excluded from the mainstream labor movement.

Despite this, the Japanese Labor Association endorsed the general strike and offered its services to the Central Labor Council. The CLC responded by allowing the JLA to attend meetings, but not to vote on proposals.

Seattle’s labor movement was also male-dominated. Nevertheless, the general strike depended on the solidarity of thousands of white female unionists who supported the strike despite being denied a voice in central planning debates.
The general strike was headline news in Seattle, throughout the nation, and around the world.

Featuring a database of more than 180 digitized articles, the Seattle General Strike Project enables visitors to read a day-by-day account of the strike as reported in the city’s four major newspapers: the labor-owned Seattle Union Record, the Seattle Star, Seattle Daily Times, and Seattle Post Intelligencer.
Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson had been elected in 1918 with broad support from organized labor. The Central Labor Council initially hoped the mayor could be counted on as an ally.
However, when the strike began Hanson took a hard line against the unions. Comparing the strike to the Bolshevik Revolution, the mayor temporarily deputized and armed over 3,000 men and threatened to declare martial law if the strike was not promptly discontinued. Federal troops arrived in Seattle from Fort Lewis on February 7.

The mayor also turned to vigilante groups like the Minute Men, which patrolled residential districts and sent spies to infiltrate the Central Labor Council and the IWW.

Issuing guns and badges to newly deputized policemen.
Under pressure from AFL internationals and uncertain of the strike’s precise goals, some of the unions wavered on the strike's third day. Most others had gone back to work by the time the Central Labor Council officially declared an end on February 11.
By then police and vigilantes were hard at work rounding up Reds. The IWW hall and Socialist Party headquarters were raided and leaders arrested.

Federal agents also closed the *Union Record* and arrested several of its staff.

Meanwhile, across the country headlines screamed the news that Seattle had been saved, that the revolution had been broken, that, as Mayor Hanson phrased it in this editorial, “Americanism” had triumphed over “Bolshevism.”

“Our city no longer lies prostrate. Ninety percent of Seattle stands firm for Americanism. The other 10 percent will be driven from this community.”

-Ole Hanson, February 11, 1919
The Seattle general strike ended with few material gains won by workers, and the shipyard dispute that had ignited the action remained unresolved.

Over the course of the next decade, Seattle’s powerful labor movement would be severely weakened. For these reasons, the general strike is often judged to have been a failure.

*The Town Crier*, a Seattle literary magazine, ran this retrospective of the “late lamented strike” on February 15.
As a demonstration of American working-class solidarity on a mass scale, however, the Seattle general strike was unprecedented. The impetus the general strike gave to cooperatives and labor-owned businesses was also an important success story.

Moreover, the strike left a cultural legacy – a set of memories and symbols – that outlasted the events of February 1919 and continues to inspire today.

Visit the Seattle General Strike Project at: http://depts.washington.edu/labhist/strike
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Slideshow created by Daren Salter, February 2009