

STRIKE

Seattle General Strike Project

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.”

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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.



Front page of the *Seattle Union Record*, February 3, 1919, announcing the decision of the General Strike Committee.

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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.



Shipyard workers congregate outside the Skinner and Eddy building.

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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

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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.

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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

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.

♦ ♦ ♦
LABOR WILL FEED THE PEOPLE.

Twelve great kitchens have been offered, and from them food will be distributed by the provision trades at low cost to all.

LABOR WILL CARE FOR THE BABIES AND THE SICK.

The milk-wagon drivers and the laundry drivers are arranging plans for supplying milk to babies, invalids and hospitals, and taking care of the cleaning of linen for hospitals.

LABOR WILL PRESERVE ORDER.

The strike committee is arranging for guards, and it is expected that the stopping of the cars will keep people at home.

♦ ♦ ♦
A few hot-headed enthusiasts have complained that strikers only should be fed, and the general public left to endure severe discomfort. Aside from the inhumanitarian character of such suggestions, let them get this straight—

NOT THE WITHDRAWAL OF LABOR POWER, BUT THE POWER OF THE WORKERS TO MANAGE WILL WIN THIS STRIKE.

What does Mr. Piez of the Shipping Board care about the closing down of Seattle's shipyards, or even of all the industries of the northwest. Will it not merely strengthen the yards at Hog Island, in which he is more interested?

When the shipyard owners of Seattle were on the point of agreeing with the workers, it was Mr. Piez who wired them that, if they so agreed—

HE WOULD NOT LET THEM HAVE STEEL.

Whether this is camouflage we have no means of knowing. But we do know that the great eastern combinations of capitalists could afford to contribute liberally to Mr. Skinner, Mr. Ames and Mr. Duthie a few millions apiece in eastern shipyard stock.

RATHER THAN LET THE WORKERS WIN.

The closing down of Seattle's industries, as a MERE SHUTDOWN, will not affect these eastern gentlemen much. They could let the whole northwest go to pieces, as far as money alone is concerned.

BUT, the closing down of the capitalistically controlled industries of Seattle, while the WORKERS ORGANIZE to feed the people, to care for the babies and the sick, to preserve order—THIS will move them, for this looks too much like the taking over of POWER by the workers.

♦ ♦ ♦
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.

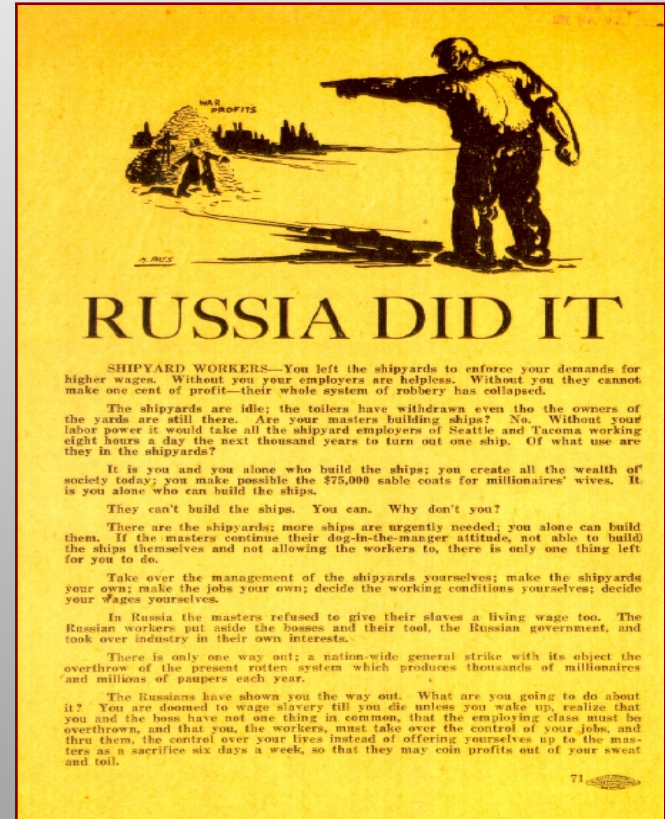
And that is why we say that we are starting on a road that leads—NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!

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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

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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.



Workers eating at labor-managed dining halls. There were twenty-one such halls throughout the city during the strike, serving from 20,000 to 30,000 meals per day.

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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.

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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."

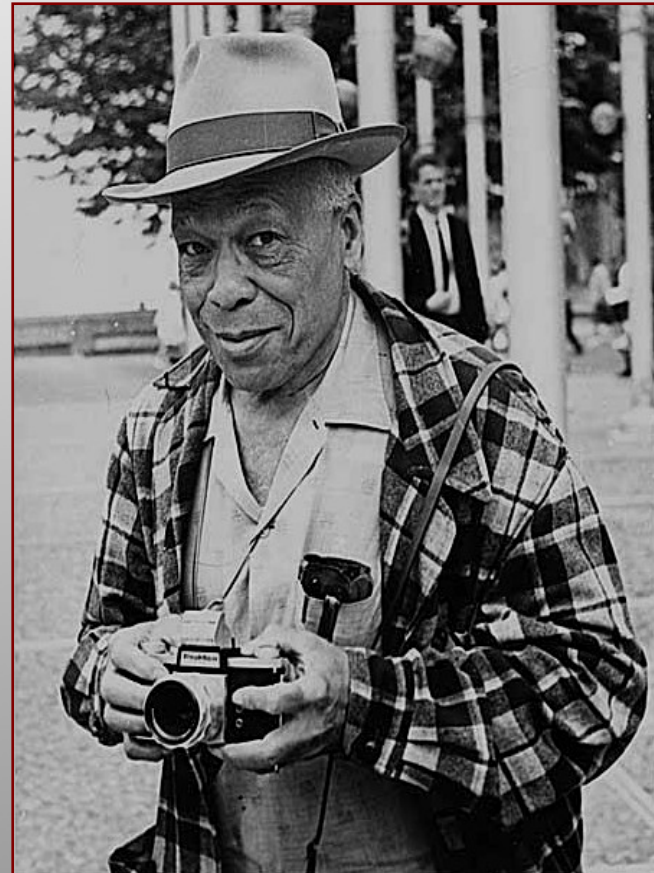
– Dave Beck, 1977

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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."

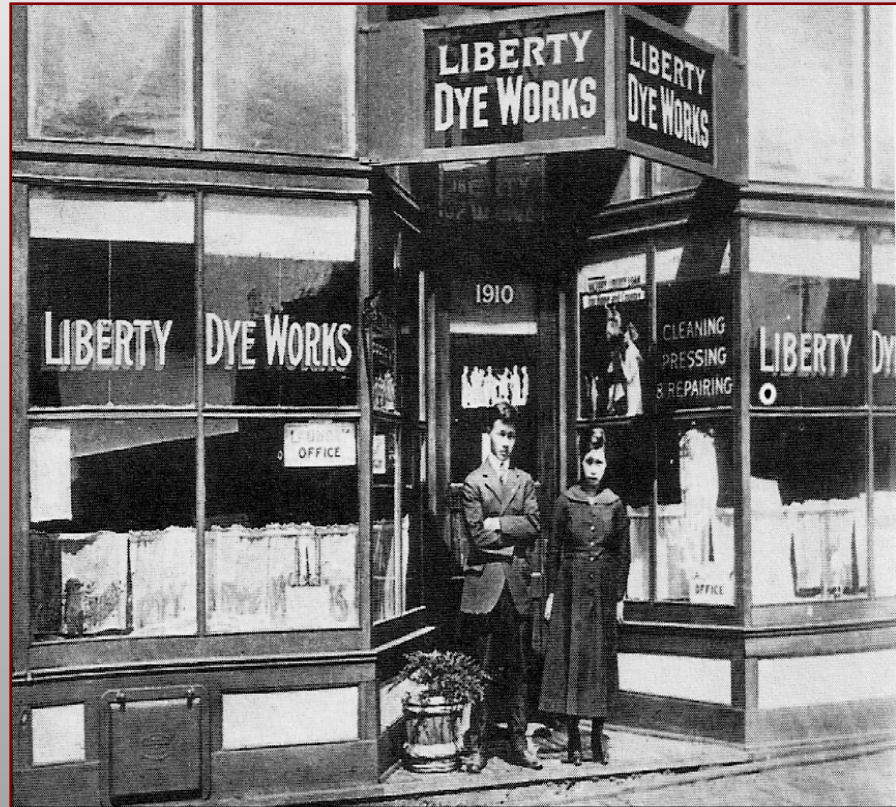
-Earl George, 1977

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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.



A Japanese-American-owned cleaning and dye shop in Seattle.

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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.



Switchboard operator, Seattle, 1923



**Above: Waitresses Union, Labor Day, 1917;
Below: Lady barbers, Seattle**



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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 Union Record, February 5, 1919

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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.



Hanson shaking hands with a shipyard worker in 1918

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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.

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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.



Front page, *Seattle Times*, February 10 and 11, announcing the end of the the general strike.

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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.”

NO OIL HERE FOR TROUBLED WATERS

Following is a statement written by Mayor Ole Hanson Saturday. It was published in papers outside of Seattle only, although it was sent over the United Press wires from the office of the Seattle Star:

“By OLE HANSON, Mayor of Seattle.”

The text follows. Read it carefully and draw your own conclusions:

Two years ago 15,000 workmen were employed in the industries of Seattle. There are now 65,000. The unions have admitted to their ranks under the stress of war conditions every Bolshevik and I. W. W. organizations. The conservative membership have shown their yellow streak by allowing the foes of organized government to run their unions and their affairs.

When the shipyard strike was called, the men went out unwillingly in most instances, although there is a feeling that the lower paid men were not getting sufficient wages when figured on the present cost of living.

Then the radicals, having read of the revolution in Petrograd, tried to duplicate the initial steps of the same here. They wanted to run our light plant and all industries, believing that we would surrender because of economic pressure and suffering of our people. They had forgotten the lesson Germany acquired when they tried the policy of ruthlessness. The city government told them to go to hell; that all things would run as long as there was a government and made no concession to the revolutionists. They closed down the newspaper plants through fear of injury of the employees of newspapers. Business, always cowardly, hunted its hole for a little time until I announced that all people would be protected to the last man and that we had 1,500 men armed with rifles to kill on sight anyone that caused disorder. Yesterday I notified the strike committee that at 3 o'clock this morning everything would operate. Everything is actively in Seattle this morning. Every municipal car is running. Our light plant has never shut down one minute. Neither has our water plant. Gathered together in Seattle are Jon Einar of Lawrence, Mass. fame; Mucky McDonald and men of his stripe from all over the union. Gathered here are hundreds and thousands of Russian Bolsheviks who have arrived here during the past two years. These scoundrels want to take possession of our American government and try to duplicate the anarchy of Russia.

The seat of government is the city hall. We swore in 1,000 extra police and held in reserve citizens armed with rifles and shotguns. I gave orders to shoot on sight any disturber of the peace. They knew from the experience they had at the riot a few weeks ago that we meant business and believe me, we did.

I wanted a showdown. If there is a majority of these (unprintable) in the United States I don't want to live here. They told me the troops were disloyal and would not help us. I told them that was a lie but even if it was so we would fight until we were dead before we even allowed them to turn out one eight-candlepower light.

Chief of Police Joe Warren is a real man who loves his country. We decided that we would not call in the federal troops. If they are called in to quell disorder someone else must call them. We won't be here. The great body of union men saw the light. Today they are bitterly resenting their false leadership and will overthrow their officers in many unions.

This is a test of unionism or I. W. Wism. If anyone owes higher allegiance to any organization than they do to this country, they are traitors and should be treated as such. That is all there is to it. This is a time when every American must forget all other allegiance and stand by the government.

The unions of the nation are on trial. They are either American Federation of Labor loyalists or Bolshevik traitors.

This morning the strike is broken. Business is resuming. Strikers are returning to work. Our city no longer lies prostrate. Ninety per cent of Seattle stands firm for Americanism. The other 10 per cent will be driven from this community.

“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

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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.



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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.



Smiling workers stockpile groceries in preparation for the strike.

Visit the Seattle General Strike Project at: <http://depts.washington.edu/labhist/strike>

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- “...Deep Sea Salvage Company ...”: Pemco, Webster and Stevens Collection, MOHAI
- “Earl George”: University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections, property of the Black Heritage Society of WA State, Inc.
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- “Issuing guns and badges ...”: Pemco, Webster and Stevens Collection, MOHAI
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