

1919: The Seattle general strike



A general strike of 100,000 workers, which saw the city shut down and all essential services provided under workers' control.

The First World War was hardly over, it was February 1919, and the leadership of the revolutionary rank-and-file union the Industrial Workers of the World was in jail. However, the IWW idea of the general strike became reality for five days in Seattle, Washington, when a walkout of 100,000 working people brought the city to a halt.

It began with 35,000 shipyard workers striking for a wage increase. They appealed for support to the Seattle Central Labor Council, which recommended a city-wide strike, and in two weeks 110 locals - mostly American Federation of Labor, only a few IWW - voted to strike. The rank and file of each striking local elected three members to a General Strike Committee, and on February 6, 1919, at 10:00 a.m., the strike began.

Unity was not easy to achieve. The IWW locals were in tension with the AFL locals. Japanese locals were admitted to the General Strike Committee but were not given a vote. Still, sixty thousand union members were out, and forty thousand other workers joined in sympathy.

Seattle workers had a radical tradition. During the war, the president of the Seattle AFL, a socialist, was imprisoned for opposing the draft, was tortured, and there were great labour rallies in the streets to protest.

The city now stopped functioning, except for activities organised by the strikers to provide essential needs. Firemen agreed to stay on the job. Laundry workers handled only hospital laundry. Vehicles authorized to move carried signs 'Exempted by the General Strike Committee'. Thirty-five neighbourhood milk stations were set up. Every day thirty thousand meals were prepared in large kitchens, then transported to halls all over the city and served cafeteria style, with strikers paying twenty-five cents a meal, the general public thirty-five cents. People were allowed to eat as much as they wanted of the beef stew, spaghetti, bread, and coffee.

A Labor War Veteran's Guard was organised to keep the peace. On the blackboard at one of its headquarters was written: "The purpose of this organisation is to preserve law and order without the use of force. No volunteer will have any police power or be allowed to carry weapons of any sort, but to use persuasion only. During the strike, crime in the city decreased. The commander of the U.S. army detachment sent into the area told the strikers' committee that in forty years of military experience he hadn't seen so quiet and orderly a city. A poem printed in the Seattle Union Record (a daily newspaper put out by labour people) by someone named Anise:

*what scares them most is
That NOTHING HAPPENS!
They are ready
For DISTURBANCES.
They have machine guns
And soldiers,
But this SMILING SILENCE
Is uncanny. The business men
Don't understand
That sort of weapon . . .
It is your SMILE
That is UPSETTING
Their reliance
On Artillery, brother! It is the garbage wagons
That go along the street
Marked EXEMPT
by STRIKE COMMITTEE.
It is the milk stations
That are getting better daily,
And the three hundred
WAR Veterans of Labor
Handling the crowds
WITHOUT GUNS,
For these things speak
Of a NEW POWER
And a NEW WORLD
That they do not feel
At HOME in.*

The mayor swore in 2,400 special deputies, many of them students at the University of Washington. Almost a thousand sailors and marines were brought into the city by the U.S. government. The general strike ended after five days, according to the General Strike Committee because of pressure from the international officers of the various unions, as well as the difficulties of living in a shut-down city.

The strike had been peaceful. But when it was over, there were raids and arrests: on the Socialist party headquarters, on a printing plant. Thirty-nine members of the IWW were jailed as "ring-leaders of anarchy.

In Centralia, Washington, where the IWW had been organising lumber workers, the lumber interests made plans to get rid of the IWW. On November 11, 1919, Armistice Day, armed thugs attacked their union hall and later castrated and killed one Wobbly*, [Frank Everett](#). No one was ever arrested for Everett's murder, but six Wobblies spent fifteen years in prison for killing one of the attacking bosses thugs.

Why such a reaction to the general strike, to the organising of the Wobblies? A statement by the mayor of Seattle suggests that the Establishment feared not just the strike itself but what it symbolised. He said:

The so-called sympathetic Seattle strike was an attempted revolution. That there was no violence does not alter the fact [...] The intent, openly and covertly announced, was for the overthrow of the industrial system; here first, then everywhere [...] 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 of itself the weapon of revolution, all the more dangerous because quiet. To succeed, it must suspend everything; stop the entire life stream of a community [...] That is to say, it puts the government out of operation. And that is all there is to revolt - no matter how achieved.

Furthermore, the Seattle general strike took place in the midst of a wave of postwar rebellions all over the world. A writer in *The Nation* commented that year:

The most extraordinary phenomenon of the present time . . . is the unprecedented revolt of the rank and file [...] In Russia it has dethroned the Czar [...] In Korea and India and Egypt and Ireland it keeps up an unyielding resistance to political tyranny. In England it brought about the railway strike, against the judgement of the men's own executives. In Seattle and San Francisco it has resulted in the stevedores' recent refusal to handle arms or supplies destined for the overthrow of the Soviet Government. In one district of Illinois it manifested itself in a resolution of striking miners, unanimously requesting their state executive "to go to Hell". In Pittsburgh, according to Mr. Gompers, it compelled the reluctant American Federation officers to call the steel strike, lest the control pass into the hands of the I.W.W.'s and other 'radicals'. In New York, it brought about the longshoremen's strike and kept the men out in defiance of union officials, and caused the upheaval in the printing trade, which the international officers, even though the employers worked hand in glove with them, were completely unable to control.

The common man [...] losing faith in the old leadership, has experienced a new access of self-confidence, or at least a new recklessness, a readiness to take chances on his own account [...] authority cannot any longer be imposed from above; it comes automatically from below.

Edited from 'Self Help in Hard Times' Chapter 15 of *A People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn.

*Wobbly; affectionate nickname for IWW member