

The day everything stopped— The Seattle General Strike, Part 2



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Continued from last month's issue: As momentum toward a general strike built, newspapers and politicians denounced the strikers, labeling the strike a Bolshevik revolutionary plot. Groups of vigilantes began rounding up "reds," and Secretary of War Newton Baker ordered National Guard troops to the city. Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson deputized 3,000 soldiers, sailors, guards and a machine gun squad while urging civilians to stay out of the streets.

On the morning of Thursday, Feb. 6, 1919, Seattle, a city of 315,000 people, was shut down as 25,000 union members from other locals joined the 35,000 shipyard workers already on strike. Most of the remaining workforce was idled as stores closed and streetcars stopped. A cooperative body made up of workers from all the striking locals was formed (called the General Strike Committee) and acted as a virtual counter-government for the city. The committee organized to provide essential services for the people of Seattle during the work stoppage. For instance, garbage that would create a health hazard was collected, laundry workers continued to handle hospital laundry, and firefighters remained on duty. Exemptions to the stoppage of labor had to be passed by the Strike Committee, and authorized vehicles bore signs to that effect. In general, work was not halted if doing so would endanger lives.

In other cases, workers acted on their own initiative to create new institutions. Milk wagon drivers, after being denied the right by their employers to keep certain dairies open, established a distribution system of 35 neighborhood milk stations. A system of food distribution was also established, which throughout the strike distributed as many as 30,000 meals each day. Strikers paid 25 cents per meal, and the general public paid 35 cents. Beef stew, spaghetti, bread and coffee were offered on an all-you-can-eat basis.

Army veterans created an alternative to the police to maintain order. Called the "Labor War Veteran's Guard," it forbade the use of force and did not carry weapons, and used "persuasion only." Peacekeeping proved unnecessary. The regular police forces made no arrests in actions related to the strike, and general arrests dropped to less than half their normal number. Major General John F. Morrison, stationed in Seattle, claimed that he had never seen "a city so quiet and orderly."

However, it quickly became clear that there was not enough public support to maintain the general strike for very long. Additionally, the American Federation of Labor's national officers, concerned that backlash from the Seattle strike would hamper organizing efforts in the East, declared the strike an unauthorized action, withheld support funds and threatened to revoke locals' charters.

Feeling attacked on both sides, enthusiasm among the

strikers quickly waned, due in part to the orderly nature of the strike. The sense of solidarity and camaraderie that was so vibrant before the strike was crushed, due to the lack of activity and gatherings during the strike itself. A trickle of workers went back to work on Saturday. That evening, a resolution was presented to the General Strike Committee calling off the strike but was voted down. By Sunday, only longshoremen and cooks continued the sympathy strike with the shipyard workers. Finally, on Tuesday, Feb. 11, the Seattle Central Labor Council declared an end to the strike, its demand not met.

The consequences of the strike were mixed. From a striker's perspective, it was a defeat. Not only did they not achieve their goals of increased wages, Seattle business owners soon launched a successful attack on the closed shop. In the aftermath, many local labor leaders were ousted, solidarity among the unions was greatly diminished and government repression increased as union leaders were arrested and charged with sedition. National headlines declared that Seattle had been saved from revolution. The mayor became a national hero for "facing down Bolshevism" and, like a certain governor from Alaska, capitalized on his 15 minutes of fame by resigning from office, becoming a handsomely paid lecturer on anti-radicalism. In 1926, he used some of his newly acquired wealth to purchase a 2,000 acre tract of land, which he named the city of San Clemente, CA.

From a working person's perspective, the strike was more of a tactical failure than a last stand. Though it did not break the business owners' control of waged work, it demonstrated that working people could organize cooperative modes of production and distribution. This cooperative approach that helped to support the strike did not die in February 1919; indeed, it grew dramatically in the months after the strike, until it included stevedoring, butchering, barbering and savings establishments, as well as numerous grocery and dry goods stores. Many of those who lost control in the unions took up cooperative work instead and so stayed active in progressive causes for years.

The Seattle strike left a memory of worker solidarity and social vision that far outlasted 1919 and can still be seen in such ventures as the Puget Sound Consumer's Co-op (food and groceries), Group Health Cooperative (medical care) the Seattle Farm Co-op (feed and supplies), as well as numerous credit unions. Similar ventures in other cities also sprung from the spirit of organization and cooperation found in the labor movement.



The Seattle waterfront in 1917