

“On behalf of the great mass of the public”: The Citizens’ Committee of 1,000,
Constituted Authority, and the Capitalist State in the Winnipeg General Strike

Cameron Mitchell

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Mount Royal University

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Throughout the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, ‘constituted authority’ served as a rhetorical banner under which the interests of the state and capital overlapped. Throughout the six-week walkout, representatives of all three levels of the state and members of the shadowy Citizens’ Committee of 1,000 repeatedly returned to the language of ‘constituted authority’ in order to illustrate what was threatened by the strikers. Tapping into post-war fears of ‘enemy aliens,’ Bolsheviks, and Soviet revolution, the *Winnipeg Citizen*, capital’s mouthpiece during the strike, was adept at conflating the goals of the strikers with those of an attempted revolution. Even when the *Western Labour News*, the newspaper of the strikers, emphasized that the strike’s goal was simply an increase in the standard of living conditions – one particularly blunt edition of the paper spelled out in clear terms “WHAT WE WANT” and “WHAT WE DO NOT WANT”¹ – the Citizens’ Committee of 1,000 was particularly efficient at manipulating appearances so as to turn both public sentiment and that of various statesmen against the strike. In this manner, one effect of the General Strike was to expose the mechanisms of the democratic state in the early 20th century. Capitalists and statesmen comprised the upper echelons of Canadian society, and as such the democratic state consistently moved against labour in defense of capital. The ‘constituted authority’ that the Citizens’ Committee of 1,000 was so concerned with defending was the upper class’s ability to defend its interests at the expense of labour.

Enemy Aliens and Mere Citizens

Labour had three main goals in the Winnipeg General Strike: the right to collective bargaining, a living wage, and the re-instatement of all workers.² Though many of the strike’s key

¹ “WHAT WE WANT,” *Western Labour News*, June 2, 1919.

² “LABOR’S DEMANDS,” *Western Labor News*, June 2, 1919. *UM Digital Collections*.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10719/2758585>

organizers came from radical backgrounds (George Armstrong, for instance, had helped found the Socialist Party of Canada's Winnipeg branch),³ the actual aims of most strikers were rather limited in scope. Wage increases had failed to keep up with inflation⁴ even as a small number of capitalists profited greatly through the war years,⁵ and most strikers simply wanted a living wage to be paid out of the profits of their labour. On May 15, some 30,000 workers walked off the job in support of the building and metal trades. Taking non-working family members into account, the strikers represented between 70,000 and 105,000 Winnipeggers, around half the population.⁶

Despite the strike's decidedly non-revolutionary goals, the Citizens' Committee missed no opportunity to emphasize that it was an attack on 'constituted authority.' "Make no mistake about it," warned the *Citizen*, "this is not a strike at all. It is a conspiracy to subvert the ordered government of this country and put in its place a revolutionary dictatorship."⁷ Though the fears of many upper-class Winnipeggers were no doubt genuine, this framing was tactical. In order to rally opposition to the strike, it was key that the public perceived the strikers as attempting to subvert the democratically elected government. A.J. Andrews, de facto leader of the Citizens, leveraged this fear in his initial meetings with acting Minister of Justice Arthur Meighen. On May 21, the Citizens' Committee were given advanced warning of Meighen's arrival and a delegation was sent to intercept him.⁸ From the start, Andrews positioned himself to influence the federal government's response to the strike by manipulating Meighen's concerns about the breakdown of law and order.

³ David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike*, (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1974), 26.

⁴ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 33-34.

⁵ Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 428.

⁶ Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell, *When the State Trembled: How A.J. Andrews and the Citizens' Committee Broke the Winnipeg General Strike*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 11.

⁷ "Revolution, or Law and Order?" *The Winnipeg Citizen*, May 22, 1919.

⁸ Kramer and Mitchell, *When the State Trembled*, 54.

Andrews, a wealthy lawyer who had previously served as mayor of Winnipeg, had the ear of Meighen before even Mayor Charles Gray and, as Kramer and Mitchell argue throughout their book-length study, he kept it throughout the six weeks and beyond. Utilizing correspondence between Meighen and Andrews, Kramer and Mitchell suggest that it was in fact Andrews who dictated many of Meighen's actions during the strike. It is important to emphasize this relationship because it provides some insight into the way capitalist interests dominated the response to the strike on all three levels of the state. Meighen was familiar with each of the Citizens' who met with him on May 21⁹ and even had business connections with lawyer Isaac Pitblado.¹⁰ These connections made it easy for Andrews to bring Meighen "more or less under reign"¹¹ and through him carry "the unofficial imprimatur of the state".¹² In this way, the state response to the strike was ultimately mediated by the concerns of wealthy professionals, business owners, and lawyers, all of whom had a vested interest in maintaining the economic and social status quo. The irony here, of course, is that even as Andrews played up the supposed threat to democratically elected 'constituted authority,' he was able to, in effect, usurp many of the 'constituted' powers of the state.

Winnipeg's upper classes were understandably alarmed as factories fell silent, streetcars ground to a halt, and a great stench rose from undelivered milk left to sour.¹³ The issue of milk delivery would become a key talking point for the Citizens' Committee in the early days of the strike: "Sick people and hospitals are suffering; lack of ice and lack of milk is causing privation and hardship for even the babies – who did not start the strike."¹⁴ Manager of the Crescent

⁹ Ibid, 54.

¹⁰ Ibid, 55.

¹¹ Ibid, 146.

¹² Ibid, 5.

¹³ Ibid, 10.

¹⁴ "THE STRIKE SITUATION IN WINNIPEG," *The Winnipeg Citizen*, May 19, 1919.

Creamery James Caruthers would continue to belabour the point in legal testimony some six months later.¹⁵ What the Citizens' really feared, however, was how quickly the Strike Committee solved the issue of essential goods and services distribution after a few days of confusion. Even as the *Winnipeg Citizen*, the mouthpiece of the Citizens' Committee, complained of suffering babies, distribution of bread, milk, and other essentials was already getting underway again.¹⁶

That the Strike Committee took over the management of essential services terrified both government officials and members of the Citizens' Committee. The adoption of state responsibilities provided rhetorical ammunition to those crying revolution: "Is Winnipeg to submit to her citizens being told that they cannot get bread, they cannot get milk, they cannot be supplied with water, they cannot buy gasoline and they cannot go to theatrical performances except by the permission of the strike committee, which in its public press and public utterance aims at establishing the Soviet system of government?"¹⁷ Though one wonders just how concerned impoverished North End residents were with needing permission to go to the theatre, the argument was effective. Throughout the six weeks, paranoia about Soviets and Bolsheviks would hamper the strikers' attempts to maintain the support of middle-class Winnipeggers and patriotic veterans.

The target of the anti-alien rhetoric was overwhelmingly the Ukrainian and other Eastern European residents of the North End, and the Citizens' Committee merely had to capitalize on already present post-war racial tensions. Prior to the strike there had been incidents of violence. In January, for instance, a large crowd of returned soldiers gathered outside the Swift Company meat-packing plant to protest the employment of foreign workers. Chaos ensued, and foreigners – or

¹⁵ "GRAY REFUSED TO CALL MILITIA DURING STRIKE," *The Globe*, December 09, 1919. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail*. <http://libproxy.mtroyal.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.mtroyal.ca/docview/1351798126?accountid=1343>.

¹⁶ Kramer and Mitchell, *When the State Trembled*, 24.

¹⁷ "More Facts on the Strike Situation," *The Winnipeg Citizen*, May 20, 1919.

those mistaken for foreigners – were set upon as soldiers ransacked the offices of the Austro-Hungarian Society and the Socialist Party of Canada. After trashing the store of Samuel Blumenberg, a Jewish immigrant and business owner, veterans humiliated his wife by dragging her into the street and forcing her to kiss the British flag.¹⁸

During the strike, the Citizens had the full support of government in their efforts to target non-Canadians. In April, the House of Commons tabled a bill to amend Section 41 of the Immigration Act to allow for the deportation of non-Canadians who preached anti-government rhetoric¹⁹ and a second amendment was rushed through parliament on June 6 to ensure this clause could also apply to the British-born strike leaders. This second bill would pass through the House and the Senate in an impressive forty-five minutes.²⁰ Though the strike leaders were never deported, the fact that the generally laboriously slow Parliament was able to pass this legislation so quickly speaks to the level of fear felt by many middle and upper-class Canadians in both of the major political parties.

The *Winnipeg Citizen* was responsible for fanning the flames, claiming in its first edition that “Bolsheviks who have attached themselves to the labor movement boldly declare that Winnipeg is under Soviet rule, that the Soviet just now is the General Strike Committee of the Trades and Labor council.”²¹ Legal historian DeLloyd Guth explains: “People living in the more posh areas of Winnipeg were promised by A. J. Andrews and the Committee of 1,000 that the mob would soon liberate and everything would become *collectivized, communized, Bolshevized.*”²²

¹⁸ McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 476.

¹⁹ Donald Avery, “The Radical Alien and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919” in *Canadian Working-Class History: Selected Readings*, edited by Laurel-Sefton MacDowell and Ian Radforth, 217-231, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2006), 225.

²⁰ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 163.

²¹ “TO THE CITIZENS OF WINNIPEG,” *Winnipeg Citizen*, May 19, 1919.

²² Andy Blicq, “Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike,” YouTube video, 19:30, posted October 8, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1_oKcXn8vs&t=14s.

Throughout the years surrounding the strike, Bolshevism had become “the new name for the monstrous Other.”²³ In the minds of Winnipeg’s middle and upper classes, it was easy to tie the image of the Bolshevik revolutionary to that of the “barbarism of the North End”²⁴ which, they feared, continually threatened to spill into the rest of the city. One poster published in the *Winnipeg Telegram* characterized Bolshevism as a wolf, warning that “The Frozen Breath of Bolshevism” would “do here what it has done in Russia and what it seeks to do in Germany.”²⁵

The fear of a revolutionary knock-on effect was present throughout the country, compounded by numerous sympathy strikes and the looming possibility of a nation-wide railway strike.²⁶ The seeds of these fears had been present for years. As Tom Saunders, the great grandson of A. J. Andrews put it, “By the time 1919 came along we really had the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution, neither of which were particularly happy results for those who may have been in the ‘business class.’ So I think there must have been at that time genuine concern about where this was going.”²⁷ In December 1918, Prime Minister Borden had been informed by British intelligence officers that Russia’s revolutionary government was engaged in a propaganda campaign designed to destabilize North American democracy.²⁸ Given the domestic turmoil Russia faced in 1918 it seems unlikely that the Soviet government was engaged in any such efforts, yet western security services who tend to understand the world in confrontational geopolitical terms would have seen any display of support for the Soviet Revolution as part of an international revolutionary conspiracy. These reports go a long way to explaining the government’s willingness – and the willingness of Arthur Meighen in particular – to follow the lead of the Citizens’

²³ McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 423.

²⁴ Avery, “The Radical Alien,” 219.

²⁵ “The Frozen Breath of Bolshevism,” *Winnipeg Telegram*, May 27, 1919.

²⁶ Avery, “The Radical Alien,” 225-226.

²⁷ Blicq, “Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike,” 19:05.

²⁸ Avery, “The Radical Alien,” 221.

Committee: in the eyes of many parliamentarians, the strike in Winnipeg no doubt represented a genuine threat to the very fabric of British liberal society.

Key to the Citizens' perpetuation of these fears during the strike was a calculated slippage in terminology that allowed Andrews and the others to claim to represent the majority of Winnipeggers while positioning themselves against supposedly subversive enemies. As Kramer and Mitchell note, a week into the strike members of the 1,000 "were learning to toggle between identities – between 'Citizen' and mere 'citizen'; on the one hand, the lawyer who is so closely tied to the concerns of capital that capital entrusts him with its public face and, on the other hand, the average man who knows that he is the humble inheritor of the great traditions of British liberty."²⁹ It was in this manner that the *Winnipeg Citizen* was able to claim it was "issued solely in the interests of the general public".³⁰ Even the Citizens' Committee's name marks a disingenuous claim to speak for the interests of the average Winnipegger: though the number of members is unclear they certainly numbered far fewer than 1,000 and its members were certainly not representative of the average Winnipegger.³¹

In these circumstances, the substance of the strikers' demands didn't matter as much as how they were perceived. In the eyes of the Citizens' Committee, any concessions to organized labour would mark a weakening of capitalist interests and had to be stifled. That the Strike Committee took on the role of managing essential services provision only served to bolster the rhetorical armoury of the Citizens' Committee: "This is a strike to establish the Russian Soviet system of government. All other issues have lapsed completely pending the decision of this all-important question of revolution."³² The *Winnipeg Citizen* was constantly on the watch for further

²⁹ Mitchell and Kramer, *When the State Trembled*, 67.

³⁰ *Winnipeg Citizen*, May 19, 1919.

³¹ Mitchell and Kramer, *When the State Trembled*.

³² "More Facts on the Strike Situation," *The Winnipeg Citizen* May 20, 1919.

evidence of a revolution: “By interpreting the strike leaders’ slips, the *Citizen* also strove to *create* the news of revolutionary intention before reporting it.”³³ This can be seen at work in the paper’s interpretation of the strikers’ demands published in the *Western Labour News*: if the motivation of the strikers was simply improvement in living standards, rather than revolution, why did a living wage and an eight hour work day come after collective bargaining rights on their list of demands? Something other than living conditions must be taking priority in the minds of the strikers.³⁴ In the eyes of capital, collective bargaining rights represented a grab for power on the part of organized labour.

Special Police

The tactic of recruiting private citizens to act as strike breakers was not unique to the Citizens’ Committee of 1,000; a group of Minneapolis businessmen had employed a similar tactic nearly two years previously, hiring special police to guard replacement workers during a machinists’ general strike, and private detective agencies had long been used as go to strike breakers.³⁵ It is easy for historians of the Winnipeg General Strike to dismiss the specials as simply another example of capital’s brute force instruments, yet it is worth paying close attention to the uniqueness of the Citizens’ Committee’s Special Police.

Military leader General Herbert Ketchen had suggested the recruitment of special police on May 29 before an attempt to put get street cars running again, and a campaign to recruit a special police force began in earnest a week later.³⁶ A popular conception is that their ranks were drawn from out-of-work veterans, men who had fought for democracy in Europe and were willing to do

³³ Mitchell and Kramer, *When the State Trembled*, 26.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 46.

³⁶ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 151-152.

it again. These men, it goes, fell pray to the fearmongering and scapegoating of the Citizens' Committee, directing anger and frustration at their economic destitution towards the Eastern European radicals and Bolsheviks they had been led to believe were behind the strike. While this was certainly the case for many of those who joined the Special Police, the reality about the Citizens' recruiting tactics is not so simple. Many, if not most, members of the Special Police were employed by the local businesses the Citizens' Committee of 1,000 lobbied for support in the form of finances, vehicles, and labour power.³⁷ For many who marched against the strike on Bloody Saturday, it was a choice between joining the militia or the Special Police, or risk losing their jobs.

From the onset of the strike, members of the Citizens Committee had pushed for the creation of a special police force. Some had attempted to take over the role of policing early in the strike, though initially without official permission. When a fire broke out on May 23, men wearing armbands emblazoned with the letters S.P. were seen directing traffic and potentially performing other policing tasks. Chair of the Police Commission Alderman John Sparling would later call this something he "would not have allowed... for 45 seconds."³⁸ Despite these reservations, Sparling was a staunch ally of the Citizens' Committee and opponent of the strike. On May 29, he delivered an ultimatum to Winnipeg city police officers who were sympathetic to labour, demanding all officers sign an oath of loyalty that strikers called 'The Slave Pact.'³⁹ The majority of the Winnipeg Police Service was dismissed on June 9 for refusing to sign.⁴⁰ One member of the Police Commission referred to the dismissals as a "purg[ing] of all unruly and incompetent members,"⁴¹

³⁷ Mitchell and Kramer, *When the State Trembled*, 103.

³⁸ As quoted in *ibid*, 136.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 111.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 149.

⁴¹ As quoted in *ibid*, 140.

but it might more accurately be described as the purging of officers disloyal to the upper class and the state.

To be fair, one could hardly call the majority of Winnipeg police officers unbiased. With low pay and their grievances ignored,⁴² it made sense for officers to throw in their lot with the strikers. The majority voted to join the strike, only remaining on the duty at the request of the strike leadership,⁴³ and throughout the strike there was strong evidence of police solidarity with strikers. Police allowed strikers to intimidate workers who didn't wish to strike, allowed mobs to close down gas stations, and, according to some Citizens, failed to protect private property.⁴⁴

One particular incident involving Mayor Gray sparked the ire of the *Winnipeg Citizen*, “serv[ing] first to illustrate the state of lawlessness prevailing in Winnipeg at the present time.”⁴⁵ After a Dominion secret service major was arrested for carrying a revolver (which he had been given permission to carry by the police chief), Mayor Gray “sped towards the police station” to inform “the policemen that the major was a federal officer and should be released.”⁴⁶ When the officers refused, since it would have constituted a crime to release an arrested prisoner without permission from the station,⁴⁷ a “mob of strikers piled on to his worship”. According to the *Citizen*, the police officers present merely watched while the mayor defended himself, the attackers “suffer[ing] somewhat from his worship’s vigorous use of his fists”.⁴⁸ Even the *Western Labour News* only notes one plainclothes officer stepping in to defend the mayor.⁴⁹

⁴² Ibid, 111.

⁴³ Ibid, 110.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 140.

⁴⁵ “City Police and Lawlessness,” *Winnipeg Citizen*, June 6, 1919.

⁴⁶ “Lawlessness in Winnipeg,” *Winnipeg Citizen*, June 6, 1919.

⁴⁷ “Mayor Gray Goes Crazy,” *Western Labor News*, June 6, 1919.

⁴⁸ “Lawlessness in Winnipeg,” *Winnipeg Citizen*, June 6, 1919.

⁴⁹ “Mayor Gray Goes Crazy,” *Western Labour News*, June 6, 1919.

Though propagandized, what such anecdotes illustrate is that the Citizens' Committee and government officials had good reason to worry. The function of the police within the state is to enforce 'constituted authority,' yet police in Winnipeg displayed a clear deference to the Strike leadership. Bryan D. Palmer has written that "Winnipeg's General Strike revealed, as had no other single development in the 1895-1920 period, the power marshalled by the state and capital in the age of monopoly."⁵⁰ Yet the reality demonstrated by the rebellion of the Winnipeg police and the necessity of recruiting the Special Police from among private businesses is the extent to which the strike exposed the decentralized state's weakness in the face of mass working class resistance. Conditions on the ground determined the state's power to enforce its authority in Winnipeg, and the reality of the working conditions for Winnipeg police officers resulted in a severe weakening of the state at the municipal level.

Though fears of revolution were overblown, the creation of the One Big Union a few months prior and sympathy strikes occurring across the country meant that Canada's upper classes were right to fear for capitalist class divisions. As Kramer and Mitchell have argued, Winnipeg was merely the tip of the iceberg, "the place where Canada and Canada's liberal order trembled".⁵¹ The situation in Winnipeg had the potential to spark a nationwide general strike. Only a combination of state and capitalist power proved sufficient to resolve "a crisis with the potential, so business leaders reasonably feared, to erode the foundation of commercial society, threaten private property, and undermine the decorum by which individuals of all ranks lived together in seeming peace."⁵² As commissioner of the Royal North-West Mounted Police A.B. Perry remarked, "The greater number of labour men, and probably the community as a whole[,] are in

⁵⁰ Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc, 1992), 204.

⁵¹ Mitchell and Kramer, *When the State Trembled*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid*, 5.

an uncertain, apprehensive, nervous, and irritable temper. Perhaps these agitators are but the foam of the wave.”⁵³

In this context, the role of the Special Police cannot be understated. While other capitalists in other strikes might have hired such police forces, the significance of the Winnipeg Specials is that they did not supplement the official police force: they *replaced* the police. When the RNWMP broke the strike on June 21 it was not municipal police that marched with them, but a private organization recruited by capital. The official protectors of ‘constituted authority’ in Winnipeg had sided with labour for the simple fact that they themselves were working-class. What is revealed in the laughable attempts by members of the Citizens’ Committee to fulfill the role of Special Police themselves and their subsequent recruitment from local business and through the rhetoric of ‘enemy aliens’ is capital’s reliance on labour. Even in opposing organized labour, it was only through labour power that the state was able to uphold its ‘constituted authority.’

Bloody Saturday

What is perhaps most striking about the Citizens’ Committee’s rhetoric of revolution is just how little it reflected reality in the strike’s early days. Arriving in the city on May 20, *Toronto Daily Star* reporter W. R. Plewman “was prepared for news that bloody riots on a scale suggesting civil war had taken place.” What he found instead was more like a city on holiday: “The first picture glimpsed by the writer was a hundred schoolboys playing baseball.” By Plewman’s assessment, at least half of the city’s population was in support of the strike, and while the “strikers have gone pretty far and they have made some mistakes... they have not perpetuated

⁵³ As quoted in Reg Whitaker, Gregory S. Kealey, and Andrew Parnaby, *Secret Service: Political Policing in Canada from the Fesians to Fortress America*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 67.

Bolshevism... the whole thing is a delusion and a figment of the imagination. There is no Soviet.”⁵⁴ Plewman, whose reporting has been noted for its impartiality,⁵⁵ depicts a situation far removed from that described by Charles Gray, for instance, who likened the situation to “sitting on a volcano”⁵⁶

Yet by the third week of June, the situation was arguably somewhat closer to the one described by Gray. At 2am on June 17, several of the strike leaders were arrested and jailed under the amended Immigration Act.⁵⁷ Outraged veterans held large protests in Victoria Park Tuesday and Wednesday evening and the Strike Committee demanded the release of the prisoners.⁵⁸ The *Western Labour News* was defiant: “Will the arrest of a half dozen of the prominent strikers put an end to the strike? Hardly.”⁵⁹ A letter to the editor described the arrests as “ill advised and cowardly in the extreme.”⁶⁰ Other articles expressed outrage at the violation of British homes, with the wife of a Russian editor supposedly going so far as to say “the methods used by the police were worse than those of the gendarmes in benighted Russia.”⁶¹ The arrests were labelled “an attempt by the other side to win at any cost.”⁶²

This assessment was not far from the truth. The arrests were planned in advance and timed to coincide with the Strike Committee’s rejection of the latest collective bargaining proposals.⁶³ More to the point, they were illegal. Since they were made under the auspices of the Immigration

⁵⁴ W. R. Plewman, “OUTWARD APPEARANCES SHOW NO SIGN OF ANY BIG STRIKE,” *The Toronto Daily Star*, May 23, 1919. *Proquest Historical Newspapers: Toronto Daily Star*.

⁵⁵ Michael Dupuis, “William R. Plewman, ‘The Toronto Daily Star’, and the Reporting of the Winnipeg General Strike,” *Labour / Le Travail* 57, (Spring 2006): 167.

⁵⁶ “GRAY REFUSED TO CALL MILITIA DURING STRIKE,” *The Globe*, December 09, 1919.

⁵⁷ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 164-165.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 165.

⁵⁹ “Putting Pep into the Strikers,” *Western Labour News*, June 17, 1919.

⁶⁰ A. Macdonald, “A BIG BLUNDER,” *Western Labour News*, June 20, 1919.

⁶¹ “Constitutional Methods,” *Western Labour News*, June 18, 1919.

⁶² “Arrest 35,000,” *Western Labour News*, June 17, 1919.

⁶³ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 164.

Act, the arrests required the approval of Minister of Immigration J. A. Calder who was unaware they were happening until the afternoon of the 17th.⁶⁴ In the following days, there was much debate over how to handle the incarcerated men so as not to turn public sentiment against the government. On Friday morning the British-born strike leaders were released under the condition that they cease all engagement with the strike.⁶⁵ Those with non-Anglo-Saxon names weren't so lucky.⁶⁶ Though the *Western Labour News* proclaimed that the strike was still going strong,⁶⁷ the arrest of the strike leaders marked the beginning of the end for the strikers. And while the newspaper might have been correct in saying that "[t]hese men are not primarily responsible for the strike", it was certainly erroneous to suggest that other "men are ready to step into the places left vacant."⁶⁸ Deprived of key radical voices, the strike leadership began to flounder just at the moment when the state was preparing to act.

From almost the first walkouts five weeks earlier, Ketchen had been quietly organizing a militia to supplement the city's original compliment of 27 Mounties.⁶⁹ A consignment of machine guns was secretly delivered by rail, and the Citizens' Committee provided Ketchen with vehicles sourced from local businesses. An armoured car and several other trucks armed with machine guns were kept at the ready. Throughout the strike, the Citizens' Committee had helped Ketchen organize recruitment efforts so that by the week of June 17 there was a force of eight hundred immediately available to him, with many more ready to be called into action at a prearranged signal.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Ibid, 165.

⁶⁵ "CAPTIVES RELEASED," *Western Labour News*, June 20, 1919.

⁶⁶ "Justice for Foreign Born," *Western Labour News*, June 17, 1919.

⁶⁷ "The Strike Still On," *Western Labour News*, June 17, 1919.

⁶⁸ "Arrest 35,00," *Western Labour News*, June 17, 1919.

⁶⁹ By Bloody Saturday there would be 245 RNWMP officers in Winnipeg.

⁷⁰ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 167-169.

Clearly, tensions were running high on the eve of Bloody Saturday. The resumption of streetcar service on June 18 enraged the veterans meeting at Victoria Park and it was difficult for the speakers to urge calm.⁷¹ With a large portion of the strike leadership in jail, it was becoming more and more difficult for the Strike Committee to contain the anger of the striker soldiers. Though they had previously been kept from gathering in public,⁷² on Friday June 20, the veterans demanded an end to streetcar service and declared they would hold a silent parade the following afternoon. Mayor Gray reissued a proclamation banning public demonstrations, but the veterans were defiant.⁷³

That the state planned their response in advance was clear. Ketchen's forces were ready to mobilize at a moment's notice and he wired Ottawa warning of the parade.⁷⁴ On the morning of the strike, Gray warned that "Any women taking part in the parade do so at their own risk."⁷⁵ The strike organizers were well aware that the state had no qualms about using force to quell labour unrest, as there were many incidents within living memory of militia being used to violently end walkouts. The previous summer, a general strike had been called in Vancouver to protest the killing of Albert "Ginger" Goodwin, a prominent socialist and draft dodger who had been shot supposedly in self-defence by Dominion Police.⁷⁶ It seems likely that on the morning of Bloody Saturday, many of the more experienced labour leaders had an idea of what was coming.

The events of June 21 have been well-documented and historians continue to pore over them. What is striking is just how fast the tensions of the previous weeks exploded into violence. One eyewitness described the initial silent march outside of city hall as peaceful: "They were

⁷¹ Ibid, 170.

⁷² "NO PARADE," *Western Labour News*, June 18, 1919.

⁷³ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 171.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 171.

⁷⁵ "BLOODY SATURDAY," *Western Labour News*, June 23, 1919.

⁷⁶ Whitaker, Kealey, and Parnaby, *Secret Service*, 66.

orderly. They were just walking. They weren't running or swearing. It seems to me that they were just marching seriously."⁷⁷ And as the *Western Labour News* pointed out, "[h]ad [the veterans] intended violence they would hardly have invited their wives to join in the parade."⁷⁸ Yet as a streetcar began to roll towards the gathering crowds at 2:30pm it was swarmed by an angry mob. After an unsuccessful attempt to tip it on its side, the veterans began slashing the seats and set it alight. Another eyewitness describes the streetcar's vandalization as her first memory: "We heard a lot of noise and shouting and confusion and we caught a glimpse of that streetcar on fire."⁷⁹

Inspector Mead, the officer in charge of the Mounted Police, gave the order for the crowd to be dispersed. As Mounted Police made their way down the street, the crowd pressed itself against the sides of the street to let them pass. On the officers' second pass the situation deteriorated further as bottles, bricks, and other missiles were thrown while some strikers attempted to spook the horses into bucking their riders. No injuries were yet sustained. On their third pass, the officers had their revolvers drawn. One of the horses tripped and its rider was dragged along until a man pulled him free and began to beat him. At this point, Mayor Gray, who was watching from the city hall building, read the Riot Act. Shots were fired and the crowd scattered, fleeing down alleys and side streets where the Special Police waited, "swinging their big clubs".⁸⁰ Only five minutes had passed since the arrival of the first streetcar.⁸¹

Though it was later claimed that the order to fire on the crowd was only given after the Mounties themselves were fired upon, the only gunshots on Bloody Saturday came from police revolvers. Mead ordered his officers to fire at almost the exact moment Mayor Gray read the Riot

⁷⁷ Blicq, "Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike," 27:56.

⁷⁸ "BLOODY SATURDAY," *Western Labour News*, June 23, 1919.

⁷⁹ Blicq, "Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike," 29:27.

⁸⁰ "BLOODY SATURDAY," *Western Labour News*, June 23, 1919.

⁸¹ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 172-173.

Act; in a later recounting of this decision, Mead made no mention of coming under fire. To be sure, the officers were on the receiving end of hurled bottles and bricks and one was assaulted, but its hard to imagine any of the mounted officers were in mortal danger. In the final count, only four RNWMP officers were reportedly injured, none of them with bullet wounds,⁸² while police bullets killed one man instantly and at least a few dozen more injured.⁸³ However, as historian Nolan Reilly notes in an interview, “We don’t know, in fact, how many people were actually injured on Bloody Saturday because many of those demonstrators were immigrants. Therefore, they feared that if they went to a doctor or to a hospital they would then be identified as having been at the corner of Portage and Main and they feared that the government would deport them.”⁸⁴

At the sound of the first gunshots, Gray had driven to Fort Osborne and requested that Ketchen deploy his troops. Within minutes, Winnipeg was under military occupation as Ketchen’s well-prepared deployment plans were enacted.⁸⁵ Cavalry and armoured vehicles rolled through the streets, mounted machine guns and fixed bayonets on full display. As Reilly puts it, “The message about the occupation of the city by the government and the state was clear: the government was prepared to take whatever means it thought necessary to end the strike.”⁸⁶ In the following days, the *Western Labour News* would publish under the masthead “STRIKE UNBROKEN,”⁸⁷ yet the truth was undeniable: the strike was over.

Interpreting the Strike

⁸² Ibid, 173.

⁸³ “BLOODY SATURDAY,” *Western Labour News*, June 23, 1919.

⁸⁴ Blicq, “Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike,” 32:14.

⁸⁵ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 173-174.

⁸⁶ Blicq, “Bloody Saturday: The Winnipeg General Strike,” 33:00.

⁸⁷ *Western Labour News*, June 23, 1919.

Historian Ian McKay has argued that “[t]he events of 1915-1920 can best be interpreted as an organic crisis of the liberal order, in which the terms of hegemony shifted dramatically.”⁸⁸ 1919 was certainly the climax of this crisis. The events of the Winnipeg General Strike exposed as have few other events in Canadian history the relationship between capital and the democratic state. What is ultimately revealed is the extent to which their interests overlapped under the banner of maintaining the state’s ‘constituted authority.’ The crisis McKay identifies was the dramatic destabilizing of that authority. Or, as Kramer and Mitchell put it, the ‘trembling’ of Canada’s liberal order. Only through cooperation between representatives of capital – A.J. Andrews and the Citizens’ Committee of 1,000 – and the state – Mayor Gray, the Borden government’s representatives, military and police commanders – was the strike broken.

The relationship between the Citizens’ Committee of 1,000 and the various actors of the state was one of mutual benefit. Without the fear of revolutionary Bolshevism disseminated by the Citizens’ Committee, the democratic state would have had no social license to violently crush the strike as it eventually did. Indeed, it would have potentially been unable to maintain the support of Winnipeg’s middle-classes, who certainly had more potential than the upper class to sympathize with labour’s cause. Similarly, the mechanisms of the state were indispensable to capital: the enforcement wing of the federal state and license to recruit their own Special Police were crucial to the Citizens’ Committee’s tactics, while many of the Committee’s expenses were footed by the federal government.⁸⁹

Bercuson argues that the strikers “themselves became the chief strikebreakers when they accepted a responsibility to keep society functioning at the very beginning of the walkout.”⁹⁰ By

⁸⁸ McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 426.

⁸⁹ Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, 203.

⁹⁰ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 178.

adopting essential goods and services provision and thereby showing a willingness to prevent complete social collapse, the strikers gave rise to situation where they *appeared* to be challenging the authority of the state. Labour's rapid destabilizing of well-entrenched structures of authority "was a shock to the cosy arrangements and alliances that had existed for at least four decades. This threat to the status quo was compounded by the belief in some quarters that the workers were embarked on a campaign to supplant the municipal and even provincial and national governments."⁹¹ And as McKay points out, this fear was no doubt exacerbated by the fact that "socialists were organically linked to the strike" leadership rather than simply functioning as orators.⁹²

What Bercuson's interpretation seems to suggest is that to a large degree the strikers had only themselves to blame for the strike's failure: "The Winnipeg general strike had finally revealed the futility and tragedy of massive confrontation combined with hysteria and intransigence."⁹³ Yet such an interpretation is far too dismissive of the role played by the forces of capital. Kramer and Mitchell reveal that A.J. Andrews and the Citizens' Committee of 1,000 worked tirelessly to oppose the strikers at every turn: alarmed at the possibility of a settlement in the first week of June, Andrews actively sabotaged a potential early resolution to the strike by urging Meighen to go against the provincial Attorney General;⁹⁴ Andrews also had a hand in determining the nature of the legislation that would be used to arrest and prosecute the strike leaders;⁹⁵ Andrews directed the federal government onto an uncompromising path of confrontation from the beginning when he

⁹¹ Ibid, 180.

⁹² McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 469.

⁹³ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 175.

⁹⁴ Kramer and Mitchell, *When the State Trembled*, 146-150.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 146.

intercepted Arthur Meighen before Mayor Gray, who had refused to join the Citizens' Committee and, at least in the early days of the strike, seemed more inclined to negotiate in good faith.⁹⁶

These examples illustrate that while the state – particularly in the eyes of labour – is often conceived of as a single concrete entity, the capitalist state of the early twentieth century was in fact composed of various decentralized mechanisms. Andrews' manipulation of these elements exposed the early 20th century capitalist state as a set of instruments utilized by individuals to protect the interests of those already in power. While Palmer's argument that "the state, as a powerful national force, was engaged in a constant project of regulation and containment"⁹⁷ holds water, he fails to grasp that the state was only engaged in this project because the individuals in charge of operating its mechanisms were pushed towards confrontation by capital or already engaged in their own battles against labour. It is this interconnectedness between capital and the state that the *Western Labour News* referred to when it declared that "Behind the strike is a government that has allowed itself to become the creature of the big interests that have mercilessly bled the people."⁹⁸ In this regard, the examples of Meighen and Ketchen are instructive. Meighen was predisposed to the rhetoric of the Citizens' Committee and to follow Andrews' lead because of his personal and financial connections with numerous members of the Citizens' Committee. And Ketchen, like many members of the Citizens' Committee, was a member of the elite Manitoba Club and thus a natural ally of Winnipeg's capitalist class.⁹⁹

This understanding of the state, however, exposes its weakness. For on the flipside, the vast majority of those charged with enforcing its authority on the ground were themselves working-class. As Whitaker, Kealey, and Parnaby note, perhaps the biggest fear of the Canadian upper class

⁹⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁹⁷ Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, 207.

⁹⁸ "What is Behind the Strike?" *Western Labour News*, June 17, 1919.

⁹⁹ Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 118.

in this period was the unionization of police forces,¹⁰⁰ hence the previous year's prohibition on police unions at the federal level.¹⁰¹ When Winnipeg police officers failed to adequately fall in line, the upper classes panicked. Losing control of the municipal police force was an unparalleled blow to the ability of the state to enforce its authority. While the federal police and the military might have been on hand to step in, the much-emphasized *constituted* nature of its authority meant that the federal forces of the democratic state had to have explicitly justifiable grounds to step into municipal jurisdiction.

The strike leaders were well aware of this and walked a careful path. Throughout the six-week walkout, the Committee took great pains to ensure that the strike was conducted in an orderly fashion. After the supposed assault of Mayor Gray outside the police station, the *Western Labour News* ran a segment urging strikers to avoid causing trouble and avoid carrying weapons. "Leave this to your Enemies," they implored. "Continue to prove that you are the friends of law and order".¹⁰² On June 18, the paper emphasized the necessity of "maintain[ing] the splendid spirit of lawful and orderly passive resistance which had been so successful against all attacks during the past five weeks."¹⁰³ Such messages were repeatedly reiterated throughout the strike, their purpose clear; amidst all the tensions, the Strike Committee was wary of giving the state any excuse to violently end the walkouts. By and large, they were remarkably successful in doing so. Barring a few exceptions, passive resistance won out for five weeks. It took carefully orchestrated provocations on the part of the Citizens' Committee and the state (such as arresting key strike leaders and sending the slow-moving rail car into the crowd on Bloody Saturday) to cause the strike's unravelling.

¹⁰⁰ Whitaker, Kealey, and Parnaby, *Secret Service* 67.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 75.

¹⁰² "STRIKERS HOLD YOUR HORSES!" *Western Labour News*, June 6, 1919.

¹⁰³ "PASSIVE RESISTANCE URGED," *Western Labour News*, June 6, 1919.

Kramer and Mitchell suggest that Andrews “brought the state to the very brink of illegality”,¹⁰⁴ but it is arguable that he, Meighen, and others in fact crossed the line between legality and illegality when they arrested the strike leaders with only retroactive authorization. In deciding how to deal with the arrested leaders, capital and the state had to tread cautiously or risk stoking sympathy for the strike. It is here that the *Winnipeg Citizen* played an indispensable role in breaking the strike. By constantly refuting and confusing the aims of the strikers, the newspaper created an atmosphere in which observers could see in the strike what they expected to see. For most of the middle and upper-classes, and some segments of the working class, there was no questioning that the strikers were revolutionaries. By keeping public sentiment from swinging too far in the strikers’ favour, the *Winnipeg Citizen* allowed all three levels of government to wholeheartedly oppose labour while maintaining a democratic mandate. While it was the social relations of the upper-class that determined A.J. Andrews’ ability to take up the unofficial mantle of state authority, it was the fear of a revolution that legitimized it. His behind-the-scenes maneuvers were acceptable in the eyes of the statesmen for two reasons: many of them genuinely bought into the rhetoric of revolution and all accepted that the Citizens’ Committee was working “on behalf of the great mass of the public which is suffering from the strike’s effects.”¹⁰⁵

Whether a majority of elected officials genuinely believed that the Citizens represented the people of Winnipeg is a subject open for debate, but it is significant that the Citizens’ Committee came to represent ‘the public’ in the eyes of the state (or the individuals that operated the mechanisms of the state). The acceptance of the Citizens’ Committee’s identification of themselves as ‘mere citizens’ and the strikers as enemy aliens, Bolsheviks, or revolutionaries reveals the ideology of the early 20th century capitalist state. This ideology was such that labour

¹⁰⁴ Kramer and Mitchell, *When the State Trembled*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ “The Strike Situation in Winnipeg,” *Winnipeg Citizen* May 19, 1919.

was effectively constructed as a non-citizen group. It was under this ideology that the second amendment to the Immigration Act was passed, allowing the strike leaders to be arrested despite the British citizenship many of them held and it was under this ideology that capital recruited the Special Police and divided labour with rhetoric about revolution and enemy aliens. And it was under this ideology that the state and capital would work together on Bloody Saturday to violently end the strike in the name of maintaining ‘constituted authority.’

The flow of events throughout the strike turned on decisions made by individuals with their own interest in protecting the ‘constituted authority’ of the state. Manipulating the various mechanisms of the decentralized state, these individuals worked to ensure that capital would maintain its hold over labour. For this reason, one might well refer to the *democratic* state of the early twentieth century as the *capitalist* state. And as Bloody Saturday ultimately revealed, the true meaning of ‘constituted authority’ was the ability to use the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force to violently crush organized labour.

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