

# The Winnipeg Strike

By FRANCIS FENWICK WILLIAMS in the Liberator

The strike at Winnipeg is a critical and significant event in the labor and political history of America, as a test of the attitude of the returned soldiers who can be used to break the strike, or can they be counted on to carry it to victory? Upon the answer to this question depends the immediate future of Canada.

I went to Winnipeg to find out. On my way I read in the newspapers the familiar comfortable assurances of the editorial column that the Canadian soldier was immune to "bolshhevik propaganda," and that he was proving himself in Winnipeg, as everywhere and always, loyal first of all to the sacred cause of law and order.

There was nothing to be seen in the quiet and orderly streets of the strike-bound town, when I arrived, to show the contrary. But in the eminently respectable pages of the Winnipeg Citizen I found a piece of news which was in sharp contrast to the picture of the returned soldier in Winnipeg: did not precisely conform to the editorial ideal. It was a description by Premier Norris of Manitoba, of his meeting with a delegation of returned soldiers at the Winnipeg city hall:

The soldiers had presented a resolution to him in which they had expressed the desire that the government should try to bring about a settlement of the strike, and in which they had asked that "collective bargaining" be made compulsory. They had also complained of the action of the city council in dealing with the police. They claimed that the ultimatum to the policemen was a serious mistake and that unless the ultimatum were withdrawn serious trouble would ensue.

They also strongly objected to certain statements in the local press where it was said that trouble was caused, "not only by foreigners but also by a number of Scotch and English renegades." The premier had promised that he would see that no similar statements would again appear. "I had to do this," he said, "as the soldiers were very angry and were in a very bad temper."

It seemed sufficiently clear that when the premier of Manitoba "had ro" do something because the soldiers were "very angry," and confessed the fact very simply in the city hall of Manitoba's capital, something new was happening.

And on the day following the visit of the delegation, as I learned, the Great War Veterans returned, five or six thousand strong—and it appeared, more "angry" than before. Outside the city hall they found various citizens who in order to show their loyalty to the established order and their contempt for the so-called "reds," were sporting tiny British flags in their buttonholes. The soldiers tore these flags away.

"We fought for that flag!" they yelled, or so I was told. "We won't see it used that way!"

The city fathers came out and tried to quiet them. The veterans howled them down.

"We want what we fought for!" they shouted. "Democracy!"

Their immediate demand was the withdrawal of the ultimatum to the police. When the strike first began, the police voted to join. The strikers asked them to remain on duty. They did so. Then the city government attempted to make them sign an agreement never to take part in sympathetic strikes, on pain of instant dismissal. They refused to sign it. This was the ultimatum to the police of which the soldiers were demanding the withdrawal.

"Do you think the ultimatum will be withdrawn?" I asked a husky young policeman at a street corner that night.

"Do it!" he responded. "Well, I guess it will! The soldiers will see to that."

And they did. A few days afterwards, it was announced in the press that "as the police are taking no part in the sympathetic strike, it has been decided to withdraw the ultimatum." Also, "the soldiers who marched on the city hall recently have decided to refrain from further demonstrations."

All this, however, does not mean that the Great War Veterans' association has formally lined itself up on the workers' side of the class struggle. As an organization, it has officially disclaimed any responsibility for the delegations to the city hall. And the employers were not without hopes that as an organization it might be used in some way to hinder the strike. But as an organization, it is still "neutral." Its individual members, however, are not neutral—and they have given the Winnipeg strike its specific color and significance.

I talked to innumerable soldiers in Winnipeg. I did not find one who was not hotly in favor of the strike. Any every one of them assured me that all the soldiers held the same views.

Senator Robertson, Canada's minister of labor, thought such a statement an exaggeration. "Why, 100 returned soldiers have taken the place of the strikers in the postoffice," he said. "That speaks for itself."

I had not at that time heard the charge—unfounded, I believe—that the board of trade had secretly offered \$25,000 to the first 100 soldiers who would take the place of the postoffice strikers. When the soldiers heard of it they were so infuriated that some of them, after the demonstration at the city hall, rushed on the board of trade building, and were only prevented from wrecking it by the persuasions of their leaders.

In any case, a hundred out of ten thousand is not a large proportion. And the other nine thousand and nine hundred or so are enough to give the strike situation a new quality.

Why are the soldiers so heart and soul with the strike? It must be remembered that the strike had its origin in a particular quarrel of "master" and men over specific grievances in the iron-smelting industry, that it has spread by "sympathetic" strikes to other unions who have an interest, as unions, in the settlement, and that the discussion of immediate issues largely obscures the significance of the strike as an event in the class-war. The soldiers have been particularly interested in these particular interests. It might, viewed superficially, not seem their cause. Why do they make it theirs?

The answer came from another soldier. He said to me: "The soldier is thinking hard these days. He reads of the large fortunes made during the war, and the honors showered on the profiteer, and compares it with his own hand-to-mouth existence. He is groping toward the light, and when he comes to a full realization of the causes, there will be, in the army vernacular, 'something doing'."

So far, and in the mass, his interest in the strike is based on his deep resentment of profiteering. He feels himself against the men who made fortunes out of the war in which he fought and suffered and in which his comrades died.

He is for any effort to take away some of those fortunes. He is for the unions as the immediate means of wreaking retributive justice upon the profiteers. A soldier said to me: "It would have been a revelation to any capitalist to have witnessed the enthusiasm aroused by the president of the Trades and Labor Council in his speech on the strike situation at the general meeting of the Great War Veterans."

And his ire is further aroused by his knowledge that the profiteers complacently expect to use him to crush the unions. The soldier whom I just quoted above told me of the "deep and growing resentment at the efforts of the (employers) committee to use the soldier as the 'goal' in the labor struggle."

The same bitterness at profiteering, masquerading as patriotism, which made the soldiers tear the British flag from the lapels of the partisans of the employers at the city hall, makes them feel that they and not the employers, represent—and are—Canada. Conversely, the employers are trying to make the strike appear the work of "aliens." But a soldier said to me:

"We're not going to be drawn into any fuss over aliens, you bet! This isn't an aliens' strike—it's a Canadian's." The alien strikers have been warned to keep out of sight as much as possible. We're picking out the city hall as a place to start and fastened on aliens so as to get the soldier excited and make him forget the strike. The aliens know which side their bread's buttered on, and they're lying low. Anyhow, this talk about aliens is tommy-rot. The 'citizens' aren't saying a word about the aliens who're scabbing—not a word! It's only the ones who are loyal to the strike."

How deep this soldier loyalty to the cause of the workers is, may be seen from the fact—too puzzling for the citizens committee to comprehend—that they do not seem to bother about the circumstance that one of the strike leaders is a pacifist. The prejudice against pacifism is strong in the army, and this peculiar pacifist, the Rev. William Ivens—had openly declared that it was our duty to pray for the Germans! Nevertheless, the soldiers are for him—he is in fact one of the leaders who has most influence with them. I asked some of them about it. They shuffled a little, and grunted, and then one of them spoke.

"Ivens may be a bit of a fool in some ways," he growled. "But he's straight. It's better to pray for Germans than to steal from Canadians."

That is the issue as the soldiers feel it—whether the thieves—the profiteers who grew fat on war—shall have their way in Canada.

Technically, the strike situation is not quite so simple. The trouble began last April, when the Metal Trades Council presented certain schedules to the various metal trades employers. One of their demands was for a raise in wages. The cost of living, according to government statistics, has risen over 80 per cent since 1914; wages in the metal trades have risen 18 per cent in that period.

The men asked for a 32 per cent increase making a 50 per cent increase altogether.

Another demand was for the eight-hour day; and the third was for recognition of the right to organize, which had been denied by the most powerful of the employers.

When this schedule was presented to the employers, they gave an answer to the third of these demands by honoring the representatives of the council, and calling in their separate offices committees of their own employees. To these committees the employers stated that they were willing to consider the question of a nine-hour day, but that they would not even discuss the eight-hour demand. When this was reported back to the Metal Trades Council, the men decided to strike May 1.

At the same time, the men in the building trades, who had gained recognition for their union the year before, were negotiating an increase in wages with the organization of their employers, the Building Exchange. The employers offered half of the increase asked, and the negotiations were prolonged through April, but a strike was finally called for May 2.

business increase." And this refusal was part of a campaign which was started through Canada as soon as the war ended to have organized labor have just one answer—"Never." Realizing that neither civic, provincial nor federal governments are doing anything to bring about a settlement we are enlisting the aid of the entire labor movement throughout the country and trying to bring about a settlement through our economic forces. We have been very successful in this and we expect if our demands are not complied with that many more cities will join in the sympathetic strike. At present Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, a large part of Toronto and many smaller cities are all general strikes to mark their disapproval of the situation."

And I heard from the lips of one of the citizens, at the meeting before the strike, of the grave charge for the strikers' paper, the Labor News, that in spite of its disclaimer of revolutionary intentions, printed a chart showing the plan of the Russian soviet system of government, with the caption: "Study this!" Also that a pamphlet, "The Bolsheviks and the Soviets," had been openly sold at an evening strike meeting.

In short, if the Canadian strikers do not learn that this demonstration is their ability to run things themselves is the beginning of revolution, it will not be the fault of the citizens! But the struggle has not yet been lifted to the level of full intellectual consciousness of its class character. Yet, take for example, Mr. Thomas Deacon of the Vulcan Iron Works, one of the three iron masters whose abhorrence toward the unions created the strike. There is doubtless an affection in his inability to understand what is happening.

"I don't understand the men at all," he said to me. "And I don't understand the public who sympathize with them. Why, I've always paid the wages, the best I could afford, and I've always treated the men well. I seem as if it was only necessary nowadays to buy a bit of land with my savings, build something on it that's useful to the community and that gives employment to a lot of men, in order to be looked upon as the worst of scoundrels. The men can't even pretend that I underpaid them. They want a wage schedule by which the inefficient man will get as much as the efficient; they want an eight-hour day, although I've told them that I'm willing to give it if the government makes it compulsory for all, but that if I give it now I'll be ruined."

"What ails these men? Why, when I was a boy I worked hard, harder than any of them. I put myself through college on much less than they're getting. I lived on less than rationing and saved every cent. No matter what position I took, my wages were raised—why? Why because I gave all my thought, all my attention to my work instead of to adding. Why can't these men do like me?"

Mr. Deacon does not even understand why there should be unions, strikes, and to resign from the Trades and Labor Council.

"To this demand organized labor has just one answer—'Never.' Realizing that neither civic, provincial nor federal governments are doing anything to bring about a settlement we are enlisting the aid of the entire labor movement throughout the country and trying to bring about a settlement through our economic forces. We have been very successful in this and we expect if our demands are not complied with that many more cities will join in the sympathetic strike. At present Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, a large part of Toronto and many smaller cities are all general strikes to mark their disapproval of the situation."

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In fact, it is the citizens' committee which most loudly advertises the earnings of the strikers toward revolution. They refer to the cards issued by the strike committee to protect the strikers from being thought of as loafers when released for necessary work—the famous cards bearing the simple words, "By Order of the Strike Committee," as proof that "a soviet government" has been established in the labor temple. It appears that the Manitoba government thought the same thing; at a cents, the premier offered to help bring about a settlement if the strikers would withdraw the cards.

Upon these representations, and at the urgent request of the troubled mayor, the strikers did withdraw the cards. But, said one of the "red five" to me, "not one move was made by the premier of mayor to bring about a settlement." Evidently thinking we were weakening, they announced that before question of collective bargaining could be discussed, the sympathetic strike must be called off, the policemen's, firemen's, postal workers', telephone workers' and all other civic workers' unions must either leave, or sign agreements never to take part in sympathetic

nothing left but the social revolution—or so they say:

"Now understand me," he added. "I am a union man. I stand for the unions. I am and always have been a labor man. If this attempt on the part of the strikers were a forward movement—a movement which made for good—I should be the first to approve it.

"But its aims are different from those of crafts unionism. The strike, for instance, must be rightly used. In this instance it has been abused. The various unions have broken their agreements with their employers, in order to join in the sympathetic strike. Tactics of this sort do not commend themselves to honest men.

"In this strike three employers—three iron masters—are to blame. Let us allow, for the sake of the argument, that they are to blame. Very good; why then should the whole community be made to suffer? During the first few days, children could not get milk in some instances and were brought near to death."

I thought of how in Montreal, my home, 50,000 babies have died in the past thirteen years, of whom nearly all might have been saved had the conditions for which these men in Winnipeg were now striving been attained. But we continued the discussion.

"They refused," went on Senator Robertson. "He submitted to arbitration the first few days, children could not get milk in some instances and were brought near to death."

"Then it is not true," I asked. "That you and your associates are, directly or indirectly, fomenting revolution?"

"We are doing everything in our power to avoid it. Personally I believe that what brains cannot accomplish bullets cannot."

"You are not then attempting to establish a bolshhevik party in Canada?"

"No. Absolutely not. Four out of five of the so-called 'Red Five' are always in trouble with the real 'Reds' because they want everything done constitutionally that can be done."

"Senator Robertson says the O. B. U.—I repeated the senator's arguments.

Crafts Unions of which the Trades and Labor Council is composed," he said, "were the first step. They did excellent work. The Industrial Union is the next logical step. That is all.

"This is a strike for a living wage and recognition of unions."

"But our enemies are right in asserting that there was more behind the strike. There was. After the war ended, the board of trade sent out a circular letter to merchants, editors, public speakers, commending their opposition to bolshevism and asking them to keep it up. The Canadian manufacturers started a campaign to lower wages so that they might be able to compete successfully with the manufacturers of other nations. Three demands were made:

"(1) Greater production. (2) Thrift (among workers, of course). (3) Increased population through immigration (and this in spite of the ever-increasing army of the unemployed)."

"Now with all this in plain view, we realized that there was a definite

"I have no hesitation in saying that this strike is not for the purposes alleged, but is on the contrary an attempt of certain radical forces in the community to seize control of the government."

I asked him just what he meant. His reply was specific. "It is," he said, "an insidious attempt to force the One Big Union—which is nothing more or less than the Russian soviet system—on Canada."

I asked him what aside from its identity with the soviet system—was the matter with the idea of One Big Union?

"I will tell you my objection to the O. B. U.," he said. "It is an attempt to use the crafts unions, and then what? I asked.

"It would serve to break up the power of the crafts unions, and then when it didn't work, there would be

nothing left but the social revolution—or so they say:

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# The Butte Daily Bulletin

—Is the Workingman's Paper



The work of making this paper successful depends not so much on the management as it does upon the efforts of its supporters. The Workers should encourage the merchant whose advertisement is found in the columns of the Bulletin by giving him a liberal patronage. It requires some nerve these days of Iron Heel suppression to stand up and be counted. All lovers of liberty and a square deal must **STAND TOGETHER**

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