

Calgary convention set the stage for 1919 strike

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THE path to the Winnipeg General Strike of May and June 1919 saw the city's increasingly militant labour movement active on many fronts in the year prior to the dispute.

May 1918 saw civic workers strike. A tentative agreement was hammered out, but Winnipeg city council adopted a resolution calling for a permanent ban on civic-employee strikes, and stated such a clause must be part of any agreement. This was a move labour viewed as a declaration of war.

The Trades and Labor Council successfully called for sympathetic strike action, and thousands of non-city staff walked off the job, responding to the call from machinist Dick Johns, who said, "You have the right to demand anything you have the power to enforce."

Senator and federal labour minister Gideon Robertson and Winnipeg business leaders moved quickly to conclude an agreement based on the previous tentative deal, minus the offensive no-strike edict. In the end, it was a near-total victory for civic employees and the broader Winnipeg labour movement.

In December 1918, the Trades and Labor Council moved to strengthen its hand as the body that would conduct general strike votes. It further decided that a majority of the total membership voting would authorize general strikes, thereby reducing the role of locals and individual unions, in deference to the council.

The council also co-sponsored the now-notorious Walker Theatre meeting along with the Socialist Party of Canada. More than 1,700 workers called for the repeal of federal wartime legislation that

suppressed labour rights. The meeting also called for withdrawal of all Allied troops from Russia, and sent solidarity greetings to Russian workers.

In March 1919, Winnipeg sent a large contingent of delegates to a gathering of western Canadian unionists in Calgary. This convention arose out of western frustration with the September 1918 convention of the Canadian Trades and Labor Congress, where western delegates felt the conservative majority from Eastern Canada, one that still embraced craft-union principles, blocked adoption of a more militant agenda for labour.

Some 237 delegates from the four western provinces assembled in Calgary for a three-day convention that began on March 13, 1919. The delegation kicked off with the unanimous adoption of a resolution calling for the "abolition of the present system of production for profit."

The convention then moved to reaffirm the demand for the repeal of all wartime orders-in-council and the release of all political prisoners. It also called for withdrawal of all Allied troops from Russia by June 1, 1919.

The above decisions clearly indicate the influence of Winnipeg labour, as the resolutions mirrored those adopted at the Walker Theatre in December 1918.

The Calgary convention also demanded government agreement to movement toward a six-hour day and five-day work week, also by June 1, 1919.

The centrepiece decision of the gathering was an agreement to move away from craft unionism to an industrial organizing model, whereby all workers of an industry would be united through trade-union organizing and membership, thereby increasing the power of labour as a whole.

A convention committee took this decision and returned a day later to recommend the creation of "One Big Union" to achieve this movement to industrial unionism, calling for a vote of all workers on this recommendation. This, too, received support of the convention.

The convention ended with more resolutions and solidarity greetings to Russian workers. This was the political climate of labour in general, including Winnipeg workers, in the spring of 1919.

The Calgary convention received wide media coverage, not all of which was supportive. Winnipeg unionists were so frustrated with *Winnipeg Tribune* coverage that they called for a boycott of the paper. This concerned the *Tribune*, which offered to print verbatim the full transcript of the Calgary convention — 10 full pages. Winnipeg labour leadership agreed to call off the boycott once the *Tribune* agreed to print 20,000 extra copies of the 10-page spread, which labour used as a special insert in its own paper, the *Western Labor News*.

This development further served to educate Winnipeg workers, both union and non-union, on labour's developing views on a range of issues.

The convention was but one part of a complicated path to the Winnipeg General Strike. Labour's grievances regarding erosion of wages, unemployment, the evils of capitalism and the need to better organize itself had firmly taken root in Winnipeg. These grievances and demands for respect for industry-wide collective bargaining rights would soon erupt into Canada's largest open-ended general strike, later in that fateful spring of 1919.

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