

HS

# Winnipeg General Strike

On May 15, 1919, members of the Building and Metal Trade Councils in Winnipeg went on strike. They demanded a minimum wage, a forty-eight-hour work week, and collective bargaining, which is the right to bargain as a group for an agreement on working conditions. Thousands of supporters from the private and public sectors joined them on strike. A smaller general strike in Winnipeg in 1918 had resulted in some success for the workers, but this strike would be different.

With 27 000 workers off the job, almost all city services were disrupted, including mail, telephone, streetcars, and even the police and fire departments. A group called the Citizens' Committee of 1000 formed to work against the strikers. The committee included wealthy Winnipeg businesspeople, professionals, and government leaders. The committee completely rejected worker demands and blamed the strike on the political influence of a few European immigrants with communist views. Newspapers spread fears of a violent communist revolution like the one that had occurred in Russia just two years earlier.

Sympathy strikes were held in many towns and cities across the West. The federal and provincial governments were alarmed and feared the unrest would spread. The federal government passed legislation permitting, among other things, the government to deport foreigners suspected of revolt against the government. Ten strike organizers were arrested in an effort to intimidate the movement.

After two weeks of demonstrations, growing tensions and violence led the mayor to ban marches. On June 21, after the Royal North-West Mounted Police tried to stop a march through Winnipeg streets, a riot broke out. Two men were killed. Dozens more were injured by "special" police armed with baseball bats who had been brought in by the government to end the strike. Army trucks carrying machine guns began patrolling the streets. Fearing more violence, organizers ended the strike on June 26.

Dozens of strikers were arrested and deported. Several of the strike leaders were tried and went to jail. Many workers lost their jobs due to their participation in the strike. Those who returned to work found the strike had not improved working conditions. The Winnipeg General Strike had a profound effect on the labour movement in Canada. In the 1920s, some workers became more politically radical, but most workers were demoralized and retreated from the labour movement. It took decades before legislation was enacted to allow collective bargaining and to recognize workers' rights.

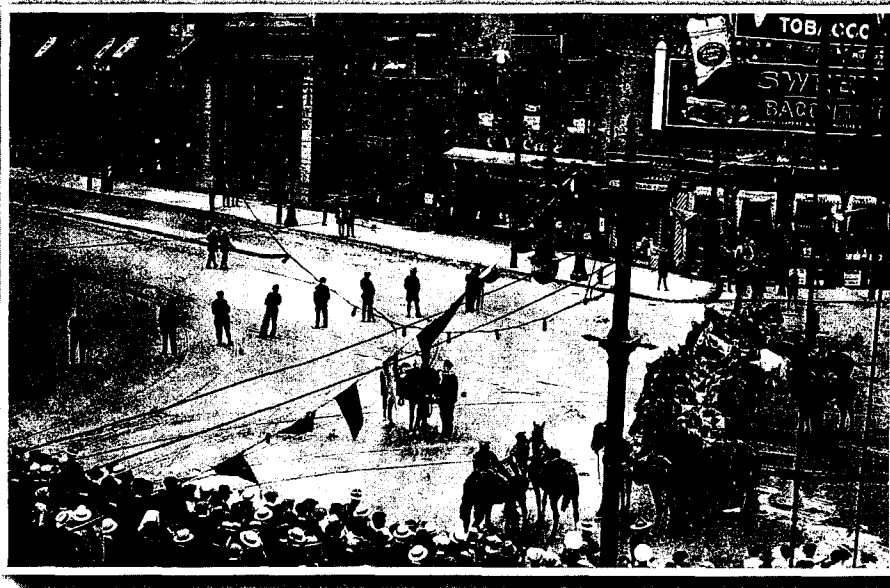


Figure 8-31 Militia and special police clashed with strikers on June 10, 1919, in the strike's first violent confrontation.

HS

1. In what ways was the Winnipeg General Strike historically significant?
2. In what other way might the government have responded to the Winnipeg strikers? How might this different response have changed the outcome of the strike?