

The day everything stopped— The Seattle General Strike



Director of Education
Jamie Lumm

On the morning of Feb. 6, 1919, Seattle, WA, stopped working. For five days, workers took control of the city in the nation's first general strike. This is another story you probably missed in history class.

Little more than a fishing and fur trade village, Seattle was founded in 1851, barely 40 years after Lewis and Clark first reached the Pacific Northwest. By the time it was incorporated in 1869, its population hovered around 1,000. Due to the ready availability of raw materials and resources, the timber and fishing industries boomed and, by the turn of the century, Seattle's population had grown to more than 80,000.

A second boom, triggered by the Klondike (Alaskan) Gold Rush, turned the city into a major transportation and supply hub, pushing the population to more than 235,000 by 1910. It was during this time that companies such as Nordstrom, Eddie Bauer and the American Messenger Service (later UPS) were founded there. But it was a shipbuilding boom in the early part of the 20th century that put Seattle on the map as a major player in that industry.

Shipbuilding had been a great American enterprise during the age of wooden ships, but due to the high price of American steel in the early 20th century, U.S. shipyards had not kept up with the new technologies required for steel-hulled vessels. In the years leading up to World War I, most American exports were carried on foreign-built and -owned ships.

When the war broke out in Europe in 1914, American access to European fleets was cut off, causing an abrupt need for merchant vessels to sustain the nation's trade. Congress responded by creating the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC), which subsidized, to the tune of almost \$3 billion, the construction of massive, privately owned shipyards as well as the manufacturing and purchasing of hundreds of merchant ships. Ship construction quickly became Seattle's most important industry, as 26.5 percent of all American ships constructed during the war were built there.

More than 35,000 people were employed in the shipyards and allied trades, drawing workers from other western cities and towns with the promise of higher wages. With the rapidly expanding industry, workers found themselves in a stronger bargaining position. To head off more radical labor organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the EFC tolerated the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) organizations and agreed to a closed shop, enabling the shipyard unions to greatly expand. In three years, Seattle's total union membership grew from 15,000 to 60,000 members.

Although times looked promising for labor, there were ominous signs looming as well. Labor unrest in other parts of America and Europe, including the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, stirred up fears of radical expansion in

America, which brought about a crackdown on the progressive left. These events set the stage for a confrontation between the unionized workforce and the government-backed shipbuilding companies. Additionally, inflation was rampant during the war; the cost of living doubled between 1915 and 1918 while wage increases lagged far behind.

Tensions began to mount during the summer of 1917. In July, the Metal Trades Council (MTC), negotiating for all of the shipyard unions in the city, presented the employers a set of demands: for a new industry-wide agreement, calling for wages of \$8 a day for skilled craftsmen, and increases in pay for semiskilled and unskilled workers as well. The largest employer, Skinner and Eddy, at first agreed to these demands, but the other shipyard owners complained to the EFC that they could not make a profit paying such wages.

In response, the EFC revoked its promise to let the unions negotiate directly with the shipyard companies. Instead, for the duration of the war, they imposed nationwide uniform wage rates that were significantly lower than the prevailing wage in Seattle where, due to its geographic isolation, the cost of living was significantly higher. The workers saw this attempt to impose a national wage standard as the first step toward removing the advantage that the Seattle labor movement had gained; the next step would be to destroy their unions. However, in a spirit of patriotism, the union leaders asked their members to remain on the job until the war was over.

In November 1918, less than two weeks after the armistice, Seattle metal trades officials asked their locals to vote on an authorization to strike; it was approved in early December. Emboldened by the vote, the MTC rejected the uniform wage structure and demanded increases for all workers. They were rejected. Negotiations broke off in January and the local leaders decided to proceed with the strike.

More outrageous to the unions, the ETC tried to intervene in the new peacetime negotiations by wiring the owners to stand firm or lose their steel ration. Through a messenger boy's "mistake," the telegram was delivered to union rather than employer offices. It confirmed labor's fears that more than shipyard wages were at stake; government and business owners were in collusion to drive back labor's wartime gains, including the closed shop. On the morning of Jan. 21, 1919, Seattle's shipyard workers walked silently off the job.

The silence didn't last long. Across the city, workers felt themselves under attack as grocers cut off strikers' credit and police raided a union cooperative that had stepped in to fill the credit gap. In response, the leaders of the metal trades asked the Central Labor Council (CLC) to propose a general sympathy strike of all union workers. Many from other unions felt that if the metal trades were forced to their knees, their turn would come next. Others felt that the federal government was using Seattle as an experimental station to find out just how much radicalism and unrest there was in labor. The vote by the CLC for a strike was overwhelming and a strike date of Feb. 6 was set.

To be continued next issue.