

publication of certain socialist newspapers. All of the resolutions were defeated.

In response, the western group decided to organise its own conference in March 1919 in Calgary to further their aims. Speakers at the Calgary conference shockingly denounced Samuel Gompers, an action comparable to hearing Catholic speakers criticise the Pope. There were several heated speeches on the state of labour and politics, and radical action was proposed. Ultimately, a resolution was passed, approving the formation of the One Big Union (OBU) and its weapon of choice – the national general strike. The call was for a Canada-wide strike beginning on June 1, 1919.

Dick Johns of Winnipeg and thirty-year-old Bill Pritchard of Vancouver were among those elected to the central executive of the OBU at the Calgary conference. Pritchard, the son of a coal miner, was an athletic and eloquent Welshman. Because of his oratorical ability, he was recognised as one of the Socialist Party of Canada's leading speakers. His speeches contained humour, sarcasm, stinging criticism, personal modesty, and warmth. Despite their length, he had no trouble holding the attention of his audiences. Religion was frequently a target of the Marxist socialists who regarded it as "the opiate of the people." In a speech at the conference, Pritchard ridiculed an opponent's theological foundation with a reference to "the late Mr. Christ." His use of sacrilegious remarks as a weapon during verbal sparring established his reputation as a formidable opponent, but would be later turned against him.

Whether or not there was an attempt at a revolution in Canada, as was later charged against many of the socialist speakers, remains debatable. But there is no doubt that the supporters of the resolutions proposed at the Calgary conference intended a true revolution in the ranks of labour. The employers, however, were equally determined. A chasm had formed and the two sides would endure a long and arduous battle.

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### CHAPTER THREE

In Winnipeg, like elsewhere in Western Canada, a large percentage of the labour force was seasonal workers struggling to earn a living. Even if a person had steady employment, it was not likely to pay a subsistence wage. According to Manitoba's Minimum Wage Board, twelve dollars per week was

needed to provide one person with the bare necessities for survival. Typically, men worked up to fourteen hours each day to earn seventeen to twenty dollars per week, and most supported families on this meagre income. Meanwhile, the cost of living was spiralling. It took one dollar in 1919 to buy what had cost twenty-five or thirty cents in 1913. Wage increases lagged far behind. These conditions prompted the labour movement into solidarity and action.

As a result of rising prices and insufficient wages, the working class became increasingly dissatisfied. These feelings were aggravated by the knowledge that not everyone was in similar need of food, clothing, suitable residence, education, or medical attention. Employers were not obliged by law to recognise collective bargaining or the workers' right to bargain through their own designated representatives. However, collective bargaining was being demanded, resisted, and debated across North America, and Winnipeg was no exception.

In 1918, Winnipeg's civic employees went on strike to demand wage increases and collective bargaining rights. Rather than placating the situation, Alderman Frank Oliver Fowler introduced a motion to City Council, denouncing strikes by public employees. When the motion was passed, numerous unions went on strike in sympathy. Senator Gideon Robertson, the federal Minister of Labour, persuaded City Council to give civic employees the right to strike. After the Fowler resolution was rescinded, the City of Winnipeg agreed to recognise the principle of collective bargaining. Despite the progress, overall conditions remained disappointing and a spate of strikes followed.

By early 1919, labour conflict surfaced in the building industry. In February, the unions represented in the Building Trades Council and the employers represented by the Builders' Exchange began negotiations. The workers wanted the Builders' Exchange to recognise the Building Trades Council – comprised of representatives from the various craft unions (painters, plumbers, and bricklayers) – as its bargaining agent, along with higher wages. The discussions were lengthy and unproductive.

The facts presented by the two sides differed only slightly, but they could not reach an acceptable compromise. Both agreed that the cost of living had risen about eighty percent since 1914, with wages rising only eighteen percent. In addition, building costs had increased thirty-five or forty percent. The workers wanted an across-the-board wage increase of thirty-two percent, approximately twenty cents per hour. The employers offered an average increase of about fifteen and one-third percent, insisting that a further increase would make building costs prohibitive. The *Western Labor News* captured the dilemma being faced by the workers: "His only recourse and his

only alternatives are work and starve, or strike for a high enough wage to live.” As anticipated, members of the Building Trades Council and its allied unions went on strike on May 1, 1919. The strike vote was 1,199 to 74.

Around the same time, the status of the Metal Trades Council was in dispute. Winnipeg’s iron companies refused to recognise the Metal Trades Council – comprised of representatives from various metal shops – as a bargaining agent for the workers. Rather, the owners were determined to deal separately with their own employees’ unions – not a collective body. Negotiations and deliberations came to a standstill and, in response, the metal workers went on strike.

On May 6, 1919, the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council met at the Labour Temple to hear reports on the efforts to settle the strikes. Alderman Ernest Robinson stated that City Council endorsed the struggle for collective bargaining and suggested to the rank and file of the trade unions that they take whatever course they deemed appropriate to help the men on strike, including a sympathetic general strike. Some opposed the idea and even those in support knew the timing was bad. Public suspicion of foreigners, radicals, and labour groups was running high and a general strike would only intensify this hostile climate. Nevertheless, the seventy unions affiliated with the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council decided to participate in a strike vote.

Ballots were sent to the various locals of the affiliated unions and were to be returned within seven days. Throughout the city, thousands of workers filed to and from the ballot boxes in their union offices casting their votes for or against the controversial general strike.

On May 13, a special meeting of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council was called to tally and announce the results. Every seat in the Labour Temple was occupied. “Never before in the history of Winnipeg has there been such a Trades Council session,” reported the *Western Labor News*. “It was tense, electric and determined [...] seized with wonderful gravity.”

Robinson read the ballot results and the decision was clear – 11,000 to 500 in favour of a general strike. When the cheers subsided, a motion was passed to determine that the general strike would commence on Thursday, May 15 at 11:00 a.m.

In a last-minute attempt to forestall the inevitable, Mayor Gray telegraphed Ottawa for assistance. Senator Robertson informed the mayor that little could be done to alleviate the situation and that the city must suffer the consequences of a general strike. But Senator Robertson’s hands-off policy was short lived, and his involvement at a later time would have a profound influence on the events to come.

At strike time, men and women streamed out of shops and factories giving the streets an unusually busy air for that time of day. Despite having no

union, many waitresses and cooks also joined the strike. At first, the mood was jubilant and optimistic. The workers believed they were uniting in a cause that would ultimately improve their working conditions and quality of life.

The murmuring crowds spread and dissipated. The streetcars' rattling iron wheels and whining electric motors were quiet. By noon, no one was to be seen and an eerie silence filled the streets. People soon understood the gravity of the situation. An article in the *Manitoba Free Press* accurately reflected the changing mood:

On the afternoon of Thursday, May 15, Winnipeggers found themselves unable to eat in restaurants, to ride streetcars, to see picture shows. The realisation struck also that there would be no bread or milk deliveries on the morrow and that some of the public utilities essential to the city's life might be shut off at any moment. There was such a rush to lay in supplies of bread, flour and other food necessities and a condition almost akin to panic prevailed in some sections of the city during the day.

Despite such alarmist reports, the City of Winnipeg attempted to minimise disruption and panic. Civic officials pledged to operate all utilities but notified residents that street lighting would be slightly curtailed because of the absence of lamp trimmers.

The Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council shared this interest in maintaining essential services. A Strike Committee was formed to supervise the strike, and each union was asked to appoint three delegates to its membership. Later, an executive committee of fifteen was chosen from the larger group of three hundred. Meanwhile, the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council appointed five men as a provisional Strike Committee until the full Strike Committee could be created.

The first thing the provisional Strike Committee did was to ask the police force to remain on duty in the interest of law and order. The police had supported the call for a general strike but agreed to stay on duty, even offering to work during their days off. Other necessary services were maintained by agreement with the unions. For example, employees of the waterworks department would maintain a supply of water for domestic use. Also, the fire department kept a crew available to fight fires.

Alarmed at the labour action, a group of citizens formed a committee intended to protect the interests of the employers and the welfare of the city. They called themselves The Citizens' Committee of One Thousand. The members of this organisation were anonymous and one's identity was revealed only when he appeared as a spokesman. One of the earliest spokesmen for the Citizens' Committee was former Winnipeg mayor and respected lawyer, Alfred J. Andrews, K.C.

The Citizens' Committee was determined to keep the city's affairs moving forward. It recruited volunteers to maintain utility services and ensured the

distribution of bread, milk, and other necessities. It heard that City Council, fearing the police were answering to another power, no longer trusted the loyalty of the force and recruited volunteers to receive basic training. It was anticipated that these volunteers could replace the city police or fight against a coming revolution if necessary.

The formation of the Strike Committee and the Citizens' Committee of One Thousand initiated a polarisation of opinion within the city. Both sides published a newspaper during the strike in an attempt to sway public opinion. The Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council spawned a second publication called the *Strike Bulletin* to specifically express the strikers' views. *The Winnipeg Citizen* was published to voice the views of the Citizens' Committee.

As expected, the newspapers offered contrasting accounts of the strike situation. In its first edition of the *Strike Bulletin* the Strike Committee stated, "There is great cause for congratulations during this struggle. Until the present moment, the participants are more orderly than a crowd of spectators at a baseball game [...] There has evolved a weapon of great power — orderliness."

On the contrary, *The Winnipeg Citizen* consistently described the events in Winnipeg as the start of a Bolshevik revolution in Canada. In fact, the first issue of *The Winnipeg Citizen* cited an alleged quotation from the *Western Labor News* in which Ivens was said to have boasted, "Winnipeg is now governed by a Soviet; the seat of authority has been transferred from the city hall to the Labour Temple." The truth of that report is suspect. Ivens' statement never appeared in the *Western Labor News*, the cited source, and Ivens publicly denied having made the statement. He asked *The Winnipeg Citizen* to publish a retraction, but none was forthcoming.

Many of *The Winnipeg Citizen's* doom-laden stories were carried by newspaper wire services. On the day the strike began, the *Victoria Times* provided a frightening description of the events in Winnipeg:

It looks as if Winnipeg's troubles were about to begin today with a general strike, and it might not be very surprising to find that Bolshevik pedagogues were at the back of the whole business. According to a press dispatch from the Manitoba city [...] ten thousand copies of a socialist organ containing a letter from Lenin have been scattered.

Such accounts, particularly those provided by publications with a vast readership, had tremendous influence on public opinion.

The fear of a Bolshevik revolution began to run rampant in some of the wealthier sections of the city. Some people refused to sleep in their homes and asked for sanctuary in barracks and churches. The *Free Press* set up a telegraph transmitter on its roof and sent out wireless reports on life in the "besieged" city. Across North America, newspapers reported that the labour

strike was a thin façade. Rather, the real purpose of the strike was to destroy the existing social system and replace it with a Soviet form of government. The reports spread quickly to the rest of Canada and to the United States as evidence that Winnipeg was in the throes of a Bolshevik revolution. Newspapers became a powerful weapon and were used by both sides to gather strength in numbers.

The war had recently ended and the returned soldiers formed organisations with increasing importance. The soldiers' support would add an invaluable physical and psychological advantage to one of the sides.

At a general meeting, the executives of the three veteran groups – the Great War Veterans, the Army and Navy Veterans Association, and the Imperial Veterans of Canada – presented a resolution. The resolution called for a policy of strict neutrality to combat “any attempt to introduce into Canada the doctrines of the so-called Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic.” But one large faction had other ideas. After heated discussion, it introduced its own resolution declaring “full sympathy with the purposes of the present strike to meet the general conditions of the people.” The faction planned to use every legitimate means to preserve law and order. As well, they pledged that talks would be held with the labour groups about the controversial subject of deportation of “enemy aliens” when the strike was over. The executives who posed the first resolution were aghast. The motion was put to a vote, and the results removed any doubt about how the majority of the veterans felt about the general strike. The first resolution was defeated, with most voting in support of the strikers. However, it was not unanimous and those opposed to the motion would not be easily silenced.

The second day of the strike brought the first crisis: the cessation of bread and milk deliveries. The Citizens' Committee blamed the Strike Committee for the situation. However, the Strike Committee argued that the problem was caused by a general lack of foresight. Regardless, the matter was urgent. City Council arranged for a meeting with the bread and milk companies and the two opposing committees to seek a solution.

The Citizens' Committee of One Thousand sent two representatives to this meeting: J.E. Botterell, a successful grain merchant in the city, and Alfred Andrews. The Strike Committee sent a subcommittee, consisting of Bob Russell and James Winning. Edward Parnell represented the bread companies, while James Carruthers represented the milk company. Aldermen Queen, Heaps, and Fisher were in attendance on behalf of the City of Winnipeg. Fred Dixon, who was volunteering as a newspaper reporter for the daily *Strike Bulletin*, was also on hand.

The group decided to ask the bakers and milkmen to return to work. Edward Parnell suggested that identification cards be prepared for the

workers to show they were not acting as scabs. The group unanimously agreed that these permit cards should be issued. As Andrews and Botterell left the meeting, they stated that they were satisfied arrangements had been made for the resumption of milk and bread deliveries.

The identification cards were simple twelve-by-sixteen-inch white cards bearing the words "Permitted by Authority of Strike Committee." After this meeting, the permit cards were seen on every milk and bread truck in the city. The wording on the cards was unfortunate. The Strike Committee had rushed through the printing of the cards without anticipating the effect of their word choice. To many people, this phrase was evidence that the Strike Committee was exercising an authority gained through usurpation.

The strike was spreading. Postal workers had walked out the first day; there was no mail service. On May 16, the telephone operators and repairmen walked out; there was no telephone service. At noon the same day, the stereotype operators and pressmen joined them; there were no newspapers. And on May 17, the commercial telegraphers struck.

Despite the loss of services, there were no major disturbances in the city. Volunteers for the Citizens' Committee manned the fire engines, made emergency transportation available, and patrolled the streets to guard against the setting of false alarms. The Strike Committee requested that elevator operators and engineers at city hospitals return to work, and it sent volunteer carpenters to remove storm windows and place screens on hospital windows.

The federal government was prepared for the worst and remained in close communication with the situation in Winnipeg. Men and materials were readied for action. Four militia units – the 90<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 79<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Fort Garry Horse, and the 13<sup>th</sup> Battery – were fully armed and standing by in Winnipeg. A squadron of Mounted Police was placed at the disposal of RNWMP Commissioner A.B. Perry, and a special shipment of Lewis machine guns had been dispatched to reinforce the existing arsenal.

Arthur Meighen, the acting Minister of Justice, and Senator Robertson were sent to Winnipeg during the first week of the strike. Not wanting to rely on potentially misleading newspaper reports, these two men were sent to investigate the situation and report back to Ottawa.

Before they reached the Manitoba border, two members of the Citizens' Committee met their train in Thunderbay, Ontario. Because the Citizens' Committee operated under a cloak of secrecy, it is doubtful that the identity of the two members will ever be known for certain. It is believed, however, that Alfred Andrews was one of the men and that he and his associate sought to convince the cabinet ministers that the true motive behind the strike was to overthrow the government. While Meighen and Robertson were in

Winnipeg investigating the strike, Andrews remained their constant companion.

Upon hearing of the cabinet ministers' arrival, the Strike Committee asked Senator Robertson for a meeting, but he declined saying, "It would not be consistent with the dignity of a minister of the Crown to attend a Strike Committee meeting." Apparently, the same was not true for all meetings because Senator Robertson appeared at a public meeting called by the Citizens' Committee on May 22 at the Board of Trade Building.

The meeting at the Board of Trade Building drew a large, unruly crowd. Speakers for the Citizens' Committee were confronted with boos from the strikers in the audience. Waving his arms, Mayor Gray appealed to the audience for a fair hearing. When Andrews addressed the crowd, the audience became more agitated. Andrews lectured, "If you don't give me a hearing, I will say to the people of Winnipeg you are afraid to hear the truth." As the crowd settled down, he continued. "The Strike Committee wished to set themselves up in place of Parliament," he warned. "In interfering with the constitutional rights of the citizens, you will line up people like myself, neither an employer nor an employee, on the side of constituted government, and you must lose." The crowd roared its displeasure and, sensing danger, Andrews announced that Senator Robertson would not be speaking as planned. Fortunately, the crowd left without incident.

On May 24, Mayor Gray continued his efforts to settle the strike and invited representatives of both committees to a meeting at City Hall. As the meeting proceeded, it was soon apparent that there was little hope for a settlement. Andrews stated that there could be no further negotiations until those providing essential services returned to work, insisting that the principle of collective bargaining would not be recognised otherwise. With the prospect of securing collective bargaining rights, Bob Russell was ready to deal. Likewise, James Winning, the president of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council, asked for a guarantee that collective bargaining would be recognised and, in exchange, offered to have the strikers back at work within forty-eight hours. Although Andrews agreed that "legislation should be passed guaranteeing the right of collective bargaining," he explained that it should be "accompanied by a Dominion law making it a crime for unions to violate agreements" by going out on sympathetic strikes. Andrews was adamant: "I will not make a bargain that I am forced to make by present conditions [...] I will not negotiate until the men on the public utilities are back. I will not bargain." There would be no compromise and the meeting was unsuccessful.

The strikers proved to be similarly unwavering. Bill Ivens' Labour Church in Victoria Park had enjoyed a popularity boom since the strike began. On May 25, with a reported attendance of five thousand people, it was probably

the most attended service on that given Sunday. Ivens rallied the crowd. “The Citizens’ Committee says you must call off the sympathetic strike. What is your answer?” he asked the enthusiastic crowd.

“No!” they shouted in response.

“Jesus was a carpenter’s son, not a lawyer, a financier or an ironmaster – it is easy to guess which side he would be on in this struggle. He was on the side of the poor,” Ivens told them.

On that same afternoon, Senator Robertson called a meeting. He summoned the federal postal employees to meet at the Winnipeg Post Office and, when they arrived, he presented them with an ultimatum. They were instructed to either return to work by 10:00 a.m. on Monday, sign an agreement never to take part in a sympathetic strike, and cut ties with the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council, or be fired and lose the right of pension and employment by the federal government. The postal workers met immediately after the meeting to vote on Senator Robertson’s ultimatum. When the deadline passed, only sixteen men had returned to work. The majority had voted to defy the ultimatum and remain with the strikers.

A telegram sent to Ottawa gave a different story of the meeting: “I am happy to say that the majority of the employees are returning to work with the exception of a few incompatibles and those under Bolshevik influence.” This was far from the truth. In reality, new workers were hired to replace the striking postal workers. Despite intimidation, the strikers remained true to their cause. The federal government’s aggressive tactics foreshadowed the coming events.

Shortly after Meighen and Robertson returned to Ottawa, it was announced that their companion Alfred Andrews, a leading member of the Citizens’ Committee, was appointed as a special representative of the Department of Justice. This appointment was formally communicated to Andrews in a confidential letter from Meighen dated May 26, 1919:

I would ask you to represent the Justice Department and examine the evidence that may be available dealing with the conduct of the principal agitators of the present unfortunate industrial disturbance, with a view to ascertaining whether or not any of the actions of these men are of a seditious or treasonable character, and advise me as to what should be done in the premises.

Andrews was given wide powers, yet the federal cabinet ministers left Winnipeg having never met with the Strike Committee.

As Andrews settled into his new position, the world waited for the next move in the increasingly tense stand-off. Cartoons began to appear in newspapers at home and abroad showing citizens in the grip of bearded Bolsheviks. A *Washington Post* article proclaimed, “Winnipeg Roused Will Fight Reds.” On May 29, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, “We have had nothing as

serious as the Winnipeg Strike [...] we think the evidence strongly points to an effort to introduce Bolshevik methods and a Soviet system of government in the western hemisphere." From coast to coast across America, the newspapers delivered a similar message.

The situation in Winnipeg was nearing a climax when Mother Nature decided to make the environment even more uncomfortable. On May 30, the *Free Press* reported, "Such a heat wave as Winnipeg has experienced during the past eight days, when the temperature varied from 82 to 95 degrees, is unprecedented for the month of May [...] To get anything like this, one has to turn to records for July and August, which are the most torrid months." June, however, would prove to be the hottest month for the strikers.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

As the tension in Winnipeg increased, the Citizens' Committee bombarded the federal government, headed by Prime Minister Robert Borden, with calls for action. They wanted the immediate arrest and deportation of the agitators.

Isaac Pitblado, the head of a large legal firm, was fifty-two years old in 1919, and he would continue to practice law well into his nineties. Having earned three university degrees, Pitblado had a strong academic background and even received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Dalhousie University. Between 1891 and 1899, he worked with Alfred Andrews and, like Andrews, was similarly interested in crushing the strike effort.

In the political arena, Major G.W. Andrews, war veteran and the Member of Parliament for Winnipeg Centre, was the lone defender of the strikers. "Gentlemen," he said, "if you apply the term [Bolshevik] to those men, you apply it to me because they are my friends [...] I know these men and for their force would be absolutely the last recourse [...] They want a change because they are not satisfied with present conditions. How many Honourable gentlemen in this House are satisfied?" Unfortunately, this view was outnumbered.

On June 5, RNWMP Commissioner Perry sent Justice Minister Meighen a telegram stating that the "Citizens' Committee waited today on provincial government and Dominion authorities urging immediate arrest [sic] Strike Committee [...] Pitblado thinks government should arrest strikers [...] Hope legislation dealing specifically with Bolshevism may be rushed through."