

WAS THE WINNIPEG GENERAL STRIKE A SUCCESS?

Background Causes of the Strike

Veterans came home from World War I wanting to restart their lives. Many felt that they had sacrificed a lot for Canada and that they deserved to come home to jobs and their old way of life. But what kind of country were these men coming home to?

Cause: SOCIAL CONDITIONS

In 1919, working conditions were very different from today's conditions. Workers did not have protections like minimum wage and the right to refuse unsafe work. Many were unhappy with their poor working situations and looked for a way to improve wages and conditions. One of the few ways they could force employers to deal with their concerns was by going on strike. In Canada, workers began to join **unions** in an attempt to negotiate better wages. However, many employers refused to accept unions and their requests for **collective bargaining**.

unions

organized groups of workers formed to protect their workplace rights

collective bargaining

the representatives of workers and of their employer negotiating wages and working conditions; this is the main function of labour unions

Cause: POLITICAL CONDITIONS

The idea of communism—the political system in which everyone shares in the wealth of a country equally—was gaining popularity around the world. In 1917, Russian workers had walked off the job in general strikes across Russia, setting off the Communist revolution and overthrowing the government. Since there were large numbers of Russian immigrants in Canada, the government feared that general strikes in Canada could lead to a revolution.

Cause: ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

As veterans returned from the war, they faced limited job opportunities and a rising unemployment rate at home. The lack of materials during the war had quadrupled the prices of bread and other staple foods. Yet wages stayed the same because of the oversupply of workers. This rapid increase in prices is called inflation. Workers hoped that with unions and collective bargaining, they could get higher wages and be able to afford the cost of living.



▲ **Figure 11** A streetcar operated by strikebreakers (people who were working during the strike) in Winnipeg on June 21, 1919, was overturned by the veterans and set on fire. The Royal North-West Mounted Police charged and fired into the crowd.

Strike!

On May 15, 1919, hundreds of workers left their jobs and went on strike in Winnipeg. It quickly escalated into a “general” strike of over 30 000 workers, and the entire city shut down for 37 days.

During a parade supporting the strike on June 21, now known as Bloody Saturday, the mayor of Winnipeg called in the Royal North-West Mounted Police. In the resulting clash between police and striking workers, one man was killed, and dozens were injured. The strike leaders were arrested.

Long-Term Consequences

On June 25, 1919, the striking workers returned to their jobs. Some workers got a decrease in hours, but most had to return to the same jobs for the same pay. Employers continued to ignore unions, and workers also did not win the right to collective bargaining.

After the strike, labour unions banded together and opposed the federal Conservative government who had sent in the police. The Conservatives lost the 1921 federal election. The strike sparked other workers across Canada to take action. That year, strikes broke out from Nova Scotia to British Columbia.

Labour laws today include the right to join a union and the right to collective bargaining. Workers who want to join a union do not need to strike or have an agreeable employer. If the majority of workers vote to join, the union can then represent them in labour negotiations.

CITIZENSHIP

What would you do if you were the mayor during a 37-day general strike?

CHECK IN

1. Cause and Consequence

Which cause do you think triggered the start of the Winnipeg General Strike? Explain, using evidence.

2. Formulate Questions

Write an inquiry question that would help you get more information on a current strike or labour issue in Canada.