

“I’VE TRIED SO HARD TO MAKE GOOD AMERICANS OUT OF YOU”: LEGACY,
MEMORY, AND THE SEATTLE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1919

by

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Abstract:

This historical project explores competing legacies and formation of memory within the Seattle General Strike of 1919 both in its after effects on the Seattle Labor Movement and the nation as a whole through the First Red Scare. This paper is divided into three chapters, an examination of the strike, national and local media coverage of the strike, and an examination of national and local repercussions from the strike. The Seattle General Strike of 1919 existed within an intersection of many disparate movements—and truly has been memorialized as more than the sum of its parts. The Seattle General Strike has not been evaluated within the context of differing pro-capitalist and pro-worker solidarity viewpoints and how these two stories split, which this thesis will do.

Introduction

It was ten in the morning of February 6, 1919 when the church bells in Seattle, Washington rang out their usual chimes. Several schoolchildren, likely as young as nine years old stood up, quietly packed their bags, and walked out of their school room. As they walked out the double doors of the school, one teacher yelled after them. “There you go,” said the teacher, “to join those Bolsheviki, when I’ve tried so hard to make good Americans out of you.”¹ These children were not just school pupils—they were workers with a union job, specifically, they were members of the newsboys’ union.

That morning was the start of the largest general strike in United States history, when 60,000 laborers in Seattle walked off their jobs. These 60,000 laborers were members of craft unions that were affiliated with both the national American Federation of Labor and the Seattle-based Central Labor Council. Everyone from metal workers to waitresses and milk delivery drivers listened to orders from their union delegates and went five days without pay as nasty stories and rumors swirled around the people out on strike. This was a feat of organization and mobilization like nothing else in American labor history. However, the Seattle General Strike is not remembered as a triumph of populism and labor union power, but as an act of foreign and communist agitation meant to destabilize the United States government. How did the dissonance within the legacy and memory of the Seattle General Strike develop?

To start, nineteen-nineteen was truly a momentous year. This year marked the ending of a decade that started with the work and expansion of rights of the Progressive Era, and continued through the Great War, and even through the unrest and fear of the Russian Revolution. 1919,

¹ “Children in the Strike,” *Seattle Union Record*, February 10, 1919.

the year of the Seattle General Strike, sat at a crossroads of domestic progressive movements and a yearning for normalcy, troops coming home from Europe, and the revolutions in Russia that would install a new form of government. 1919 was a year of unrest, of a nation struggling to manifest its place in the world, and internally struggling between a desire to create a new normal, and a better world. As will be touched on later in this thesis, a decade of progressivism and populism ending in a general strike over wage conditions seems logical—until other factors like the Russian Revolution, unrest in Germany and Hungary, and hyper-nationalism in the wake of World War I swirled together to work against the labor movement the previous years has supported.

Looking at this Seattle General Strike through the lens of the First Red Scare is only part of the social movements that impacted it. A cursory glance through the history of economic structures and labor agitation in the United States seems to reveal a mostly peaceful relationship between worker and boss. Certainly, before the United Auto Workers and the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) unified in the 1950s, the history of American labor seemed rooted in agricultural populism, and a few isolated fights for better working conditions. However, an examination of the early years of the AFL before 1920 reveals that unions held a firm hold in several urban areas in the United States. One of those was Seattle. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, strikes and walkouts became a more common method of bargaining between workers and businesses, especially as the second Industrial Revolution wound to a close. At the time of the Seattle General Strike, Seattle had maintained an active Central Labor Council for about 20 years.² The working class in Seattle

² Central Labor Council Minutes, Seattle, Washington, 1900.

was organized, enthusiastic, and experiencing a period of tremendous growth due to wartime manufacturing transforming their shipyards.

While the Seattle General Strike was the first general strike in American history and the first major strike of 1919, many other strikes would occur this year, including, the 120,000 textile mill workers who struck in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to the Boston Police, and the steel workers who struck in Pennsylvania.³ For all these strikes and all the unrest that would follow, Seattle was the first one of the most memorialized. The actors, and actions studied within the Seattle General Strike have fluctuated over time, but since Robert Friedheim wrote the first book on this topic in 1965, the narrative remains focused on the failure of this strike, the perceived communist leanings of the Seattle labor movement and what the negative costs were to the Seattle labor movement and to the United States.⁴ This strike has been buried within a field of history that attempts to write it off as a failed communist action, a “revolution in Seattle,” or something else as open-and-shut, but the truth is much more complicated than that. This thesis aims to complicate both these recollections.

In contrast to the established narrative, modern historians taking a fresh look at primary sources from the Seattle General Strike Committee seem to view the strike as a different type of story. This is what the striking laborers would have wanted told, a story about the intentions, perceptions, and repercussion of the Seattle General Strike, with a focus on what these laborers thought, what they wanted, and what happened after the strike failed. More scholarship is needed to center the common laborer, the everyday experiences of people living through an extraordinary moment, and to reconcile these competing narratives. This is essential towards

³ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1997), 129-144.

⁴ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*.

creating a more complete narrative of this history. The Seattle General Strike was made up of everyday laborers who likely had vastly different reasons for striking than business or even their bosses would imagine, but the perception of why they were striking is what was reported and analyzed—creating an inherently inaccurate narrative. By analyzing the actors and their intentions before and during the Seattle General Strike, the media perception of the strike, and the immediate repercussions of the strike within Seattle and across the United States, this paper will uplift a narrative that has been hidden behind the broader American anti-communist, anti-Soviet Union narrative: the story of the 60,000 Seattle laborers, and how a local labor dispute became the first step into the First Red Scare, and a decline in nationwide union power.

During this period, this country was involved in a struggle with the Soviet Union, and more broadly, communism. A history about the complicated interactions between workers and bosses and the use of strikes to promote tangible and ideological beliefs was complicated by growing fear of communism and the instability plaguing Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution. The good intentions of the strike were made irrelevant by the global conditions of the era. The strike was perceived as a communist, or, at the very least, a rebellious action at a time the country needed to unite, not further divide. Even though the field of history has involved, and embraced both social history and postmodernism, labor history has been on the decline since around the 1970s. However, current events in the United States and the demise of the USSR have led historians to revisit the narratives constructed during and before the Cold War. This thesis continues that recent and necessary trend and is revisiting one of the more controversial parts of the American labor movement in order to center the workers and explore an alternative legacy of the strike.

The historiography of the Seattle General Strike is anchored by Robert Friedheim's *The Seattle General Strike*, published in 1965.⁵ Friedheim was the first person to write about this strike, and his work concerns itself with why the strike failed, but does not interrogate the strikers and the actions that took place within the strike.⁶ For comparison, a more recent book written by Victoria Johnson, *How Many Machine Guns Does It Take to Cook One Meal?*, is a comparative study of the Seattle and San Francisco General Strikes.⁷ Johnson, a sociologist, frames the strike in the broader history of American resistance to perceived injustices and links rhetoric used in this strike to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and other founding texts of the American republic and questions whether a strike of this magnitude could be recreated today.⁸ Friedheim's work is situated in the trend of studying labor history as a subset of social history, or history from below, after World War II. His work, and that of his contemporaries was interested in examining strikes and labor, but they had to do this within a lens of a world at war with communism and the USSR. Labor history fell out of fashion, and then resurfaced in the 2010s, a time where historians are grappling with daily issues like wealth inequality and the lack of union support and are using this post-communist, late-stage-capitalist lens to reevaluate American history to find and uplift a legacy of radicalism and workplace democracy.

Unlike Robert Friedheim's *Seattle General Strike*, this thesis will examine the choices made by the striking workers, the perception of the strike in newspapers, and the immediate repercussions of the strike.⁹ This thesis will incorporate a post-modern or "uplifting" lens similar

⁵ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*.

⁶ Ibid, 179.

⁷ Though the inclusion of this in the main paper is redundant, attention will also be paid to Johnson's 1996 PhD dissertation "Get Together, Stick Together and Tell the Boss to Go to Hell."

⁸ Victoria Johnson, *How Many Machine Guns Does It Take to Cook One Meal?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.)

to work from recent scholars like Johnson and complicate Friedheim's retelling of the strike by revealing the intent of the striking workers. This will promote an alternative depiction of the meaning of the Seattle General Strike independent from the anti-communist lens that would later obscure it. Questions about what the workers intended, like solidarity with the already-striking shipbuilders, and their actions during the strike were colored by narratives that view the strike solely from the lens of failed communist rebellion. Most importantly, an analysis only focusing on the work of past historians before the postmodern turn would obscure the individual actions of people striking, and in doing this, obscure the goals of the strike.

In summary, the historiography around the strike has shifted from Friedheim arguing if the striking workers were trying to promulgate a revolution, to questions on if the strike failed, to questions about why this strike is such an important event in the history of labor and unions. This thesis will address that last point and do so by adding in the intentions of the strikers. Academics have proved that the strike was not an attempted revolution, and that by the benchmarks they set and the statistics on post-1919 Seattle, the strike was a failure, and now the historical question concerns the discrepancy between mainstream and radical legacies and memory of the strike, and how this developed¹⁰ With the inclusion of more primary sources written by laborers and Seattleites during the strike, this paper will be more successful at analyzing the legacy of the general strike than Friedheim. In short, academia already knows what happened during the strike, and has questioned whether or not it was a failure, but this paper is concerned with why prior historiography has interpreted primary sources in such a narrow view and wants to interrogate

¹⁰ Ibid, 162.

why perceived ramifications of the General Strike far surpassed what the striker's intended, and what this means for the strike's legacy, and for labor unions and other forms of organizing today.

Some of the primary research in this thesis comes from works published by both actors in the strike and academics who were alive in this time period, namely *Americanism versus Bolshevism*, written by the mayor of Seattle during the strike, Ole Hanson, and by Wilfred Cook. These books concerned themselves with a focus on the Strike as an act of communism and an attack on American values, and do not directly address the striking workers. Instead of looking at this event for what the workers intended, these authors wrote from the lens of the First Red Scare, and argue against communism in the US labor movement, not about the Seattle General Strike itself. Because of its unique positioning within the crossroads of several ideological shifts, the strike became a physical representation of the ideological debates that plagued the US at this time, to the detriment of the striking workers.

Other primary sources in this thesis come from the Labor Archives of Washington State, located at the University of Washington.¹¹ This paper will weave together unpublished manuscripts from striking Seattleites, taped interviews with workers, correspondence between strike leaders, the minutes of the Seattle General Strike committee, the Central Labor Council, and the AFL, newspapers, and leaflets produced by both the AFL and the International Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies).¹² These will add the voices of workers to this narrative and complicate some of the claims the secondary sources make about this topic, especially in contrast

¹¹ I would like to extend a special thanks to fellow historian and life-long friend Brandi Henry at Seattle Pacific University for hosting me on her couch during my five-day adventure to the Pacific Northwest. This paper would not exist without your generosity and feedback.

¹² These newspapers include *Seattle Union Record*, *Seattle Star*, *Seattle Times*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Washington Post*.

to what was published in the newspapers. The most crucial primary source is a pamphlet entitled “Seattle General Strike: An Account of What happened in Seattle and Especially the Seattle Labor Movement between February 6 to 11 1919,” written by the historian of the Seattle General Strike Committee, Anna Louise Strong. This pamphlet was published by a communist group from Massachusetts in 1972, and published Strong’s original words in their entirety. This source is one of the most comprehensive ways of examining the strike, and fits into the web of interviews, newspaper articles, and other primary sources of the era, while acknowledging the inherent bias present in Anna Louise Strong’s recollection of the narrative. This prologue and epilogue of this strike are also being evaluated to demonstrate the memory of the strike inside modern radical political movements.

In order to discuss the events that occurred in Seattle, and where the missteps and tensions began between the Seattle labor movement and the broader Seattle public, this thesis is divided into three chapters. The first gives an overview of the strike, the major actors involved, how theories were combined with actions, and where differing opinions on strike events started to turn into alternative narratives. The second chapter focuses on the role of mass media, specifically Seattle and national newspapers before, during, and after the strike. Attention will be paid to the known leanings of each paper and what coverage the strike received. The purpose of an analysis of the national and Seattle newspapers is to establish the discrepancies between what labor-owned and national newspapers that worked off the Associated Press reported, and how this affected the development of anti-strike and pro-strike legacies. Then, the third chapter discusses the immediate repercussions of the strike on the laborers in Seattle, the state of Washington, and the larger national scene. This chapter will juxtapose narratives from within Western Washington State and throughout the nation to examine what subsequent events and

actors said about the General Strike and how it was framed throughout the rest of 1919. This paper will conclude with a discussion of how the legacy of the Seattle General Strike plays out in organizing and political rhetoric today, including a comparison to the common mass strikes in European countries.

Chapter One: Only a Middling Step from Petrograd to Seattle¹³

The Russians have shown you the way out. What are you going to do about it? You are doomed to wage slavery till you die unless you wake up, realize that you and the boss have nothing in common, that the employing class must be overthrown, and that you, the workers, must take over the control of your jobs, and through them, the control over your lives instead of offering yourself up to the masters as a sacrifice six days a week, so that they may coin profits out of your sweat and toil—"Russia Did It"¹⁴

This flier containing the above quote littered the streets and lampposts of Seattle during the General Strike. This anonymous pamphlet that has been referenced in almost every work on the Seattle General Strike. Entitled "Russia Did It," the pamphlet referred to a revolutionary desire to overthrow the bourgeoisie class—the people who owned the means of production and got rich off the bodies of the common laborer. However, the leaders of the Seattle General Strike, the Central Labor Council, and the editors of the labor-owned *Seattle Union Record* all denied authorship and association with this pamphlet. Furthermore, writers and organizers that were union-affiliated, as well as rank-and-file laborers denied revolutionary tendencies as a possible reason for striking. However, the perceived revolutionary nature of their actions, and other social themes of the year 1919 shaped the way the Seattle General Strike has been both erased and misremembered. This pamphlet is an example of the type of publications that scared the residents of Seattle and promulgated the worries about communist interference.

This chapter will first delve into an account of the organization of the Seattle Labor Movement, the shipyard strike as a catalyst for mass rebellion, a brief overview of the strike, a discussion of the main actors presents in the strike, and lastly, a contextualization of the events that served as a backdrop and context for the Seattle General Strike. As with many historical

¹³ Chicago Tribune, February 7, 1919, 6.

¹⁴ "Russia Did It," Industrial Workers of the World, Seattle, Washington, 1919.

events, the seeds of the strike's legacies were planted well before the workers laid down their tools and returned to their homes on the morning of February 6th. At several key points in this strike, the strikers and their leaders had chances to endear themselves to the general public and reframe the narrative to labor struggling against both an oppressive governmental structure and their bosses. At each of these junctions, a path was chosen that further alienated the laborers from the general public. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Seattle labor did take care of its own physical needs, but account for the emotional well-being of the, or even take care of its branding and messaging.

When teachers develop lesson plans concerning this era, they usually contain only Eugene V. Debs, the IWW, and the First Red Scare. However, the structure of the Seattle labor movement contradicts anything that is commonly taught or exists as common knowledge about American labor. The Seattle labor movement incorporated about 70 percent of all workers eligible to be unionized in the city of Seattle.¹⁵ Across the United States at-large, only 19 percent of non-agricultural workers were unionized in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), indicating labor participation in Seattle was abnormally high.¹⁶ This is partially due to the rapid growth in trades during World War I as well as a long-standing Western populist tradition of self-reliance and progressivism. The largest union present was AFL, led on the national stage by Samuel Gompers, a moderate who advocated for collective bargaining, but wanted the labor system to stay as it was: workers working for a boss that controlled the decisions and owned the means of production.

¹⁵ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*, 54.

¹⁶ Paul Le Ban. *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class*. (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016), 61.

Seattle was what was called a “closed-shop” town.¹⁷ This meant that most industries could only hire laborers that were enrolled in the AFL. The national AFL was federated, which means that each city had its own branch of the AFL that it could for the most part, operate autonomously. AFL unions were craft unions, which arguably held less power than the industrial unions proposed by the IWW. To explain this difference, a craft union would be something like “waitresses” or “cooks,” while industrial unions would be “restaurant laborers.” The linguistic difference appears subtle but is profound. Organizations based on craft unions were less effective in organizing mass acts of retaliation against bosses because it was harder to cripple an entire industry when subsets of employees in that industry were not organized together.

Seattle labor evaded the craft union restrictions of the moderate AFL by forming the Central Labor Council, a federated organization that all AFL affiliated unions in the city of Seattle could join. It resembled a representative legislative body, with people being elected from specific craft unions. These representatives would vote on issues that concerned the larger Seattle movement, or their representation in the broader AFL, like who would represent Seattle at the national conference and in the election of the AFL conference.¹⁸ As Friedheim reports, even the most moderate Seattle laborer was politically left of the average AFL member in the East, and Seattle had a long history of radical thought led by its relative geographic isolation and frontier spirit.¹⁹ Seattle contained both the frontier spirit that unified most of the American West, and was a large enough city to attract educated people who advocated for a different form of populism—worker control of industries.

¹⁷ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 86.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 91.

Of course, a discussion of the Seattle labor scene, or any labor scene in the 1910s, would be remiss without mentioning the Industrial Workers of the World. Members of this union were often loudly socialist or anarcho-syndicalist, radical, supportive of the Russian Revolution, and liked causing unrest. The IWW was even more loosely federated at the national level than the AFL, operating in an almost cell-type manner, and was more focused on creating industrial unions, promoting anarchy, and leading wildcat strikes.²⁰ Going with the earlier example, this would mean organizing all restaurant workers, or food service workers into one industry, which would arguably give them more bargaining power, as a walkout could cripple an entire industry and section of the economy.

The AFL held more influence than the IWW, both in Seattle, and the Central Labor Council. Because of the presence of “closed shop” industries and union enrollment in the AFL, many Wobblies were “double cards,” meaning they paid dues to both the IWW and the AFL and held an AFL card and a “red card.”²¹ They may have ideologically agreed with the IWW, but to work they had to affiliate with the AFL. The Central Labor Council knew about the practice of red carding and tolerated it as most Wobblies did not participate in the governing process. Some double cards did try to agitate within the AFL and push the organization further towards industrial unionism, but Friedheim notes that the IWW was very “obnoxious in these efforts,” and the AFL learned to tolerate them without endorsing their policies, and falling for their radical baiting.²² Wobblies tended to be unskilled laborers who worked with machinery, and many of them worked in the shipyards. The shipyards were the largest employer in Seattle, and were

²⁰ Neil Schagler, *St. James Encyclopedia of Labor History Worldwide*, (Detroit: St. James Press, 2004), 182.

²¹ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*, 91.

²² *Ibid*, 41.

“100% unionized,” according to union rolls at the time, about 25,000 men in total.²³ All these internal labor politics boiled over when looking at the event that was a catalyst for the Seattle General Strike—the Seattle Shipyard Strike of January 1919. To understand the strike there needs to be an understanding of who the strikers were. The next section concerns three individuals who played varying roles in the strike—their stories will be interwoven throughout the rest of the thesis.

Seattle’s Cast of Characters

Although the strike involved thousands of people, much of the drama and conflict of those days can be seen in through the lives of a few key individuals. Friedheim, the author of the *Seattle General Strike* conducted extensive interviews with Seattle residents in the 1960s, including some surviving strike leaders. This section will detail three specific people: Mayor Ole Hanson, failed lawyer turned politician; James Duncan, a Scottish clergy member who led the Central Labor Council; and Anna Louise Strong, poetess and historian of the Seattle General Strike Committee. These three people respectively represent three different facets of Seattle society: the political establishment, mainline laborers, and more theoretical radicals, respectively.

Ole Hanson was elected Mayor of Seattle in 1918, as the “labor candidate.”²⁴ Prior to the Strike, Seattle was heavily divided between business interests and the interests of labor. Business candidates were backed by money and the Seattle elite, while labor backed candidates had the sheer numbers often needed to sway the election. When the economic situation favored unions,

²³ Ibid, 59.

²⁴ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*, 14.

voter turnout was high, members saw the influence they held in the city, and labor-backed candidates won. One can easily see how the wartime boost in production from 1914-1918, and low unemployment propelled Ole Hanson into the Mayor's office.

Ole Hanson was opportunistic in his political and public endeavors. A lawyer who never practiced a day in his life, Hanson moved to Seattle seeking real estate opportunities when he sensed he could get elected into local politics and grow his power there.²⁵ Once in office, Hanson took the stances that would align him with the majority population of Seattle. While some later called this a conniving strategy, in a school paper, his granddaughter attempted to redeem his idealism and termed him an "impractical dreamer."²⁶ But regardless of his proclivity to flip-flop on issues of importance to most native Seattleites, he was the mayor, and to his credit, he did try and negotiate with labor, when it looked like he could. As will be discussed throughout this paper, Hanson's interactions with labor right before the strike were portrayed in the Seattle newspapers as confrontational, blustering, and furiously anti-communist, a perception he would later ride to a book deal and a failed run for the presidency.

James Duncan is described throughout Friedheim's work as a staunch Calvinist, a Scottish immigrant, and both the Executive Secretary of the Seattle Labor Council and the perineal delegate to the AFL conference.²⁷ Friedheim was able to interview him in the late 1940s as preparation for his book and noted throughout that the only reason they went on strike was in support of the "long-suffering shipbuilders."²⁸ He also emphasized throughout that none of these men involved, and he did specify men, were revolutionaries. Duncan held a lot of respect in the

²⁵ Ibid, 17.

²⁶ Dolores Huteson Hughes, "The Impractical Dreamer," Term Paper.

²⁷ Robert Friedheim. "General Strike" Interview with James Duncan, December 12, 1946.

²⁸ Ibid

Seattle community, and was consulted throughout the strike about how long it should last, the rhetoric, and other aspects. For example, he strongly felt that the strike should only continue for 48 hours, a fact he promoted prior to the start of the strike, and that was often ignored by more exuberant members of the Central Labor Council. After the start of the strike, Duncan again argued the strike should end in forty-eight hours, which was voted down by a narrow margin. When it was time for the strike to end, on the fifth day, the General Strike committee called Duncan back into the Labor Temple and asked him to use his connections in the Metalwork's trade and other trades, to call them back to work.²⁹

Duncan was obviously a well-respected member of the labor community and the Seattle community at-large. The Executive Secretary for the Central Labor Council, his signature is all over the budget books and minutes from this year. He served as the secretary for ten years. At the point Friedheim interviewed him, he was a member of the school board, and had collected his own mass of ephemera on the strike. His opinion likely carried a lot of weight within Seattle at the time, and he maintained throughout that the men leading the strike were as far from revolutionaries as they could be, and that the strike truly was in sympathy with the shipbuilders. He also served as the delegate to the national AFL conference, and actually was the single vote against the confirmation of Samuel Gompers as the leader of the AFL, possibly confirming a theme present through the historiography—Seattle laborers were more socialist than the mainstream American labor movement.³⁰ This hints at the fact that the Seattle Labor Movement was not attempting a revolution or an overthrow of their working class; they just thought this union tactic would bring about a better standard of living for all laborers in the city.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*, 71.

Moving on to the last character, Anna Louise Strong was, without a doubt, one of the most interesting forces present through this narrative. A young woman from a prominent wealthy family, she became radicalized through teaching and becoming active in the Seattle Labor Movement in the later parts of the 1910s.³¹ Strong wrote poetry for the *Seattle Union Record* under the pen name “Anise,” and often expressed anger at the situation of the working poor and working class in Seattle. She would also later be chosen as the Historian of the committee devoted to preserving the memory of the strike, which is seen in the pamphlet *An Account of What Happened in Seattle*. Shortly after the strike, she relocated to the Soviet Union, from which she eventually fled under Stalin’s purges. Following this, she fled to China, and became active in Mao Zedong’s regime, later publishing *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American*.

Anna Louise Strong’s gender should not be ignored when evaluating her contribution to the Seattle labor movement. Seattle unions were segregated by gender, as in waiters and waitresses were confined to two separate unions. Women were for the most part not explicitly mentioned in the minutes of the general strike; in fact, the only strong mention of gender analyzed in the historiography is when Johnson noted that women’s unions tended to want to stay out on strike later than the male unions.³² However, this can be explained through other factors like the smaller size of women’s unions, meaning there was likely more consensus. It is notable that on the history committee listed on the cover of the pamphlet Strong wrote, that a woman named May Thurman was listed as the chair of this committee. Certainly, more study needs to be done on this issue, but this paper will now move into a chronological discussion of the strike events.

³¹ Ibid, 25.

³² Johnson, *How Many Machine Guns?*, 21.

Contextualizing the Strike

As mentioned in the introduction, 1919 and the Seattle General Strike existed at a profoundly important period in American History. First, 1919 was closing a decade of the Progressive Era, a time when democratic, populist, rights were expanded to enfranchise more people across the entire country. This was also a decade in backlash to the excess of the Gilded Age, and the second Industrial Revolution. Second, Marxist theories that before were confined to isolated facets of European industry and the 1871 Paris Commune, were put into practice in a bloody and shocking fashion in Russia. Specifically, the Russian Civil War was escalating—communism and bolshevism had not completely prevailed yet in the Soviet Union and there was a large amount of uncertainty about the geopolitical climate. In addition, the world has just started recovering from the Great War, the most widespread period of global conflict since the Napoleonic Wars a century before. Lastly, Seattle politics itself were uniquely positioned to set up and permit this strike. As mentioned before, cost of living in Seattle doubled from 1914 to 1918, and economic pressures combined with a unique political and cultural situation.³³

The Progressive Era started around 1900, and resulted in consumer protection laws, business regulation, and other reforms aimed to increase the wellbeing of common Americans. The Progressive Era also added two amendments to the constitution—a progressive income tax and direct election of senators. Other initiatives pushed by reformers like Robert La Follette included the addition of initiative, referendum, and recall into state politics. Within this group of progressives that advocated for corrective efforts to make the United States and capitalism at-large more equitable, were the fringe left progressives that were attracted to the ideas of the

³³ Brecher, *Strike!*, 144.

Socialist Party of America, the Industrial Workers of the World, and other organizations inspired by Marx and other critics of unequal distribution of wealth. Within this framework of expanding rights to the people and reforms aimed at regulating the power of business, an increase in union membership and strikes for better wages and working conditions seem logical. When viewing the strike purely as an extension of the Progressive movement, it makes sense. However, the Seattle labor movement, which was to the left of the US labor movement, failed because of external characteristics.

One of these issues was the Russian Revolution. By November 1917, the Bolshevik seizure of power had left the Provisional Government loosely in control of Russia. Soon members of the old monarchy would be executed, power struggles would ensue, and a civil war would start. The Russian Revolution demonstrated what could happen when workers got too interested in the ideals of Marx and took the radical redistribution of wealth into their own hands. The stress of war, depression, and a changing political climate led to riots, creation of radical forms of government, and the murder of previous members of the Russian elite. This instability catapulted into the Russian Civil War, which resulted in conflict between the Red Army under Lenin and Trotsky and the White Army under Kolchak, which was backed by the United States and Western Europe.³⁴

Under the revolution, the global public finally had an idea of the chaos and uncertainty that could result from a labor uprising that intended on overturning systemic structures that left the means of production to the bourgeoisie and maintained massive wealth inequity. It did not look great. The oldest monarchy in the world was put to death by common laborers and troops that

³⁴ Murray, *The First Red Scare*, 51.

had turned against their hegemony. The appearance of Bolshevism gave non-leftists a tangible fear of what would happen if labor was allowed to continue unchecked and gave some leftists a blue print of where to go next. When factoring in the uncertainty of the Russian Revolution with the domestic gains of the Progressive Era, it becomes easy to see how a labor movement in the spirit of the Progressive Era could become misconstrued as an attempted revolution or an example of Russian interference in the American political process.

While the Progressive Era was focused on expanding worker's rights, the Russian Revolution showed what could happen if workers let that power go to the extreme. While other forces played into the circumstances surrounding the Seattle General Strike, these forces were most prominent. The seemingly opposing but inherently related aspects of the US Progressive Era and the Russian Revolution acted to create a world that was predisposed towards redistribution of wealth and means of production but scared of this power. While laborers and political theorists were most concerned with the advancements gained through progressive organizing and the labor movement, ordinary Americans were occupied with the end of World War I, and the unrest in Russia. This dissonance is what created different perceptions of the strike based on what identity groups the people involved. A holistic view of the Strike, one that contains all these facets is needed, and these strands of thought and theory are present through the media perceptions of the strike.

The January 1919 Shipyard Strike

A short discussion of the shipyard strike is imperative to frame the political climate in which the General Strike began and is also necessary to understand why this earlier strike would

be credited as the reason for the General Strike by many in the Seattle Labor movement and ignored by many anti-union writers. When printing reasons for the General Strike in the days before the General Strike commenced, Anna Louise Strong and the *Seattle Union Record*, heavily pushed the narrative that the General strike was a solidarity strike with the 35,000 laborers in the Seattle shipbuilding yards that had been on strike since January 21st.³⁵ Why was there a shipyard strike? During World War I, the shipyards grew to three times the size of their 1914 levels—going from one wooden-frame construction company, Skinner-Eddy, to three other metal ship construction yards.³⁶ Labor falling in line and working without complaint was crucial to the war effort, so AFL president Samuel Gompers made a deal with President Woodrow Wilson that their workers would not strike or engage in any activities that could be seen as an attempt to sabotage the war effort. Because of this, the unions in the Puget Sound shipyards could not renegotiate their wages, even though the cost of living in Seattle more than doubled from 1914 levels.³⁷ Unfortunately, many non-working-class Seattleites tended to assume the shipbuilding would cease naturally after the war ended, so the strike continued largely unnoticed by the general populace. The striking shipbuilders needed attention, and they needed allies.

On the night of February 2, 1919, the Central Labor Council met and heard a request sponsored by the Metal Trades Council to hold a general, sympathy strike for the shipyard workers. However, instead of only wanting one craft, or industry to go on strike, the shipbuilders requested a general strike of every craft union enrolled in the Central Labor Council. Fierce debate followed, and plans began to be made for the beginning of the strike.³⁸ Although debate

³⁵ Ibid, 75.

³⁶ Ibid, 68.

³⁷ Brecher, *Strike!*, 144.

³⁸ Strong, *An Account of What Happened in Seattle*, 21.

was heated in the beginning, the minutes of the Central Labor Council reveal that once an assurance was made that crucial industries would be exempted from striking, every craft union voted to order their men on strike.³⁹

One narrative of this event is that rousing speeches by strike leaders, like James Duncan, convinced leaders of each craft union that a general strike could help their brothers at the shipyards get their wages adjusted for inflation, and provide a better life for everyone living in Seattle. Another is that the IWW members within the Central Labor Council and other radical members promoted the general strike in order to attempt to seize worker control of the industries, and even stage a revolution in Seattle, inspired by the Bolsheviks in Russia. The latter seems improbable, as the Labor Council leaders knew most of the prominent “double-cards” and would not have allowed them to agitate and steer debate towards this end. When including the politics of Seattle Labor in this decision, it is more possible the leaders of craft unions wanted to help their brothers in the shipyards earn fairer wages, as the shipyards were the only industry that had not been able to renegotiate their wages during the war.

The February 6, 1919 General Strike

When the Central Labor Council decided on a strike, they also created a “Seattle General Strike Executive Committee” and chose representatives from each of the major unions to serve on this steering committee. Later historians like Victoria Johnson would note that contrary to popular belief, these were not elite members of the labor hierarchy, but instead rank and file men

³⁹ Minutes of the Central Labor Council, 1919.

who were chosen for their honesty and eagerness.⁴⁰ In addition, Anna Louise Strong noted later in her published minutes of the strike committee that “rank and file men, were less radical than their leaders,” seeming to imply that she viewed the Seattle General Strike Executive Committee as a relatively moderate body.⁴¹ Through all the minutes and records of the strike that still existed in the University of Washington Labor Archives, the committee never stated an explicit goal besides solidarity with the shipbuilders, which lends credence to the narrative supporting the aims of the laborers. Unfortunately, Seattle newspapers publically speculated and gossiped about the *true* meaning of the strike. Strong certainly could not have assuaged fears when she published a poem in the *Seattle Union Record* under her pen name of Anise, a few days before the strike began. Anise wrote that “labor would take care of its own,” and, most famously, where this strike would take labor “No One Knows Where,” which fueled later critiques in wondering if there was more truth to the narrative of an attempted revolution than the members of the strike committee would let on.⁴²

After all the preparation, exemptions, and media fury, the strike formally began when workers walked out of their jobs at ten in the morning on Thursday, February 6. Some 60,000 AFL workers struck, and another 40,000 Seattleites stayed home in fear of violence or any type of retribution. Likewise, the IWW was not officially part of this strike, but chose to hold their own sympathy strike, adding about 3,000 workers to the number on strike. Careful planning by the Strike Committee ensured that electricity still flowed through the city, milk delivery to hospitals continued, mess halls were set up to feed strikers and their families, and a legion of World War I veterans stood ready to defend the streets through nonviolent methods. By all

⁴⁰ Johnson, *How Many Machine Guns Does It Take to Cook One Meal?*

⁴¹ Strong, *An Account of What Happened in Seattle*, 32.

⁴² Anna Louise Strong, “On Thursday at 10 A.M.” *Seattle Union Record*, February 4, 1919.

accounts, labor did “take care of its” own, even if it neglected assure the safety and emotional well-being of the other citizens of Seattle, who stocked up on guns, fled to Portland, and kept their children locked inside the home.

By day two of the strike, the kinks in the worker-controlled operation of industry had been ironed out, but elsewhere trouble brewed. Individual craft unions started facing immense pressure from their affiliated national organizations, and some were told that if they did not return to work immediately they would be barred from holding leadership positions after the strike ended. Due to the timing of the event, days three and four of the strike fell on a Saturday and Sunday, and many laborers already enjoyed time off on these days. By Monday, about half the unions were pressured into returning to work and the Executive Strike Committee announced that laborers would resume work Tuesday February 11 at 10am. The strike that began with such a large bang and expansive utopic speeches truly fizzled out by Monday afternoon, and by Tuesday, the citizens of Seattle emerged to conduct business as usual. However, this business was now conducted under a specter of fear that ordinary Seattleites had lost control of their city to perceived radicals, and the newspaper presses started churning out sensationalist stories to match this fear. Claims were made that it was only a “middling step between Petrograd and Seattle,” indicating both concern about the geographical closeness of these nations, and that Seattle could easily fall down the same path into a bolshevist uprising, something that terrified the citizens of Seattle.⁴³

⁴³ Chicago Tribune, February 7, 1919, 6.

Chapter Two: Read All About It: Mass and Local Media

“We note that Seattle is to have a new fertilizer factory. We presume that it is necessary to keep up the supply for the mayor.”⁴⁴ The *Seattle Union Record* printed these strong words in line with the type of vitriol Seattle newspapers hurled at each other and at other parts of Seattle society that were involved in the strike. These lines appeared in the *Seattle Union Record* on February 13, 1919, shortly after the conclusion of the strike.

When discussing media in 1919, newspapers held primacy. Archived newspapers create an almost complete picture of what the public read about the Seattle General Strike. At the time of the strike, there were four local newspapers in Seattle, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Seattle Star*, and *The Seattle Union Record*. Especially during the strike, reports written in these Seattle papers for an audience of Seattleites familiar with the conditions under which the strike took place were picked up by national newspapers, especially on the East Coast. Other papers covered later in this chapter include *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. This chapter is broken up into two distinct sections. First, this chapter will discuss an overview of the Seattle newspapers, a critical mistake by *The Union Record*, and what the papers reported in three distinct date ranges. Separating into these dates allows an examination of how public support for the strike ebbed and flowed, and how the *Union Record* justified the strike at different points in time. Second, this chapter will discuss which thematic pieces of the strike were picked up by national media, and which pieces were best preserved and cited by early historians of the strike.

⁴⁴ “Fertilizer Factory,” *Seattle Union Record*, February 13, 1919.

There was an ideological chasm within the papers published in Seattle. *The Union Record* was a labor-owned, labor-operated union daily, edited by lifelong journalist Harry E.B. Ault, and featuring columns and reporting by Anna Louise Strong. The other three papers in Seattle were privately owned, and as Friedheim noted in his text “*Times* boasted the biggest circulation in Seattle, *Post-Intelligencer* boasted the biggest circulation in the Pacific Northwest, and *Star* boasted the biggest circulation in the Puget Sound area.”⁴⁵ This seems to suggest that these papers competed against each other for the most newsworthy news, which likely influenced the escalation in sensationalist stories following the strike. When looking at ephemera and other archival material each newspaper published in the years between 1910 and 1920, the *Seattle Times* was the most moderate and well respected, the *Post-Intelligencer* published more conservative editorials on events, and the *Star* was the most sympathetic to labor until the strike. During and after the strike, these differences would blur as these newspapers universally condemned the acts of the strikers and focused on the confusion, fear, and perceived lawlessness, of a Seattle during the strike, and questioned what “red” or “bolshevist,” infiltration had occurred to their previously well-mannered labor movement.⁴⁶

The Union Record’s Largest Blunder

Another key difference between the three privately owned papers and the *Union Record* was that while the other three increased their editorials and publishing during the Strike, from February 6-10, the *Union Record* ceased publishing. The *Union Record* published its last paper as a “strike edition” early in the morning of February 6 and resumed publishing on the last full

⁴⁵ Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*, 45.

⁴⁶ “Labor Radicals Must Go,” *Seattle Times*, February 10, 1919.

day of the strike, Monday, February 10.⁴⁷ The *Union Record* decided as it was owned, staffed by, and funded by members of the Central Labor Council, it would also strike, and cease publication for the duration of the strike starting at 10am on the morning of February 6. As Strong would later remark, this would be a critical mistake.

To summarize the consequences of this decision, the *Union Record* not printing meant first, that laborers could not have a central communication point for news of the strike and of direction from the Central Labor Council. Second, the other three Seattle newspapers were able to completely control the public narrative of the strike.⁴⁸ While the *Union Record* may have been ideologically sound in announcing a halt in publication, it unfortunately led to a stoppage of news that confused and concerned the general public, and allowed the other newspapers to harangue against the labor movement, and spread this animosity and fear throughout the United States unopposed. This point cannot be stressed enough; because there was no communication by the labor newspaper throughout the majority of the strike, they lost their ability to control the narrative and get the public on their side. By not publishing, they lost the “hearts and minds,” and as Johnson notes throughout her work on general strikes, labor *has* to have the will of the populace on their side if they will succeed in any of their goals.⁴⁹ To connect this choice to the present, as any contemporary community organizer or political activist knows, once the public disconnects from the cause, this cause will lose, plain and simple. The ramifications of this, specifically on memory and legacy meant that labor already started at a disadvantage. They chose not to allow their newspaper to publish any news, and this meant the other three

⁴⁷ “Strike Edition,” *Seattle Union Record*, February 6th, 1919.

⁴⁸ Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), 89

⁴⁹ Johnson, *How Many Machine Guns?*

newspapers could control the narrative, influence the legacy, and most tangibly, send telegraphs and Associated Press wires of their headlines to newspapers nationwide.

Shipyard Strike and a Plea for Sympathy: Media from January 21-29, 1919

The shipyard strike was the first mass strike Seattle had seen in years, and it was also the first strike called following the Russian Revolution and the end of World War I—an old tactic in a changed world. Although the majority of the general public was not affected by the strike, and largely did not carry much of an opinion about it, the *Times* appeared to be opposed to the strike on principle even as an editorial acknowledged the shipbuilders were workers taken advantage of by the Emergency Fleet Corporation, Charles Piez, and Eastern businessmen. The *Seattle Times* reported at length about the incoming shipyard strike, which would have been the largest mass strike in Seattle’s history with “25,000 men called out by the Metal Trades Council.”⁵⁰ The *Seattle Star* actually did not report on this strike at the time, giving it a small blurb in their labor updates of the week, which is of note considering their later condemnation of all labor following the General Strike. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* was silent on issue. Of the three newspapers, the strongest voice was the *Times*, and they were wary and negative towards the strike. How much of this was due to fear of strikes in the several-year lull in strikes caused by World War I, and how much of this was due to growing concern about the Russian Civil War and the success of the Red Army and the Bolsheviks is unclear. It is also possible the *Times* just opposed the strike because of how strongly the *Union Record* supported it.

⁵⁰ “Believe Strikes May Be Averted Last Minute,” *Seattle Times*, January 20, 1919.

What is very clear is that the *Union Record* was in strong support of the striking shipbuilders, pointing out “no one will seriously dispute the assertion that the cost of living has gone up at least 75% during the past several years.”⁵¹ This article then continues by discussing how the wage paid to these men, of “\$4.16 a day is inadequate...and not a living wage.”⁵² The use of the term living wage is interesting and though it is subtle, a Marxist influence on the writer of this article. By framing their argument as every worker in Seattle deserves a living wage, they are harkening back to Marx’s *Capital*.⁵³ During this time period, the *Union Record* devoted at least one editorial or article per day towards the shipbuilders, urging them to continue the strike, and asking the public to support their action. Clearly, the *Union Record* was very concerned with the success of the shipbuilders, and the fervor behind their publishing only increased when rumors that a general sympathy strike would be called to aid the shipbuilders.

As early as January 24, the *Union Record* started printing calls for a “great strike” to take place on “February 1.”⁵⁴ According to this article, the laundresses union, and telephone operators union were the first two unions to call for a strike, and this occurred two days before the official declaration. No other newspaper, not even the *Seattle Times* printed this type of coverage, focusing solely on the shipbuilders’ strike, as it is likely they assumed the rumors about a “great” or general strike were overblown, and just the rumblings of an angry labor movement. And ten years earlier, prior to the Great War, prior to the Russian Revolution, prior to millions of deaths under the yoke of capitalism, they might have been right to ignore these rumblings. However, as this paper has shown, all these unique currents swirling around the Seattle Labor movement

⁵¹ “A Great Strike,” *Seattle Union Record*, January 21, 1919.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Karl Marx, *Capital*, 26.

⁵⁴ “Favor Having Great Strike on February 1,” *Seattle Union Record*, January 24, 1919.

coalesced into an extraordinary event, a general strike, that prior to January 26, no one took seriously. At the January 29 meeting, the heads of the Metal Works Union addressed the full Central Labor Council and requested a vote on a sympathy strike. Of media representation, only a reporter from the *Union Record* was in attendance.

Best Laid Plans: Media from January 29-February 5

January 29 is chosen as the commencement of this section as this is when the strike was declared by the Central Labor Council. As mentioned above, although the *Union Record* was the only newspaper to send a reporter to cover the Central Labor Council meeting, the other three newspapers picked the story up like wildfire. While coverage of the *Union Record* primarily focused on informing the public on the need of the strike, the plans of the striking workers, and to a lesser extent on assuaging the public's fears, the other three newspapers printed plans to counter the strike, and indictments of Seattle unions for allowing the strike to proceed to this point. This reveals media was assuming something about this general strike that is very unique to this exact instance. In the twentieth century and now, labor threatened mass and general strikes more often than it followed through on the promise. Often the threat of a strike was enough to bring bosses back to the bargaining table. However, from January 29 on, the *Seattle Union Record* gives no indication that there could be more bargaining to stop the strike—already moving on to details like canteens and milk wagon drives. In contrast the other three Seattle newspapers (again, *The Seattle Star*, *The Seattle Times*, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*) alternated between blustering editorials decrying the support of labor, and warnings of impending mob violence and rule.

The Seattle *Union Record's* lack of mentions to bargaining or any sort of resolution they and the city could reach to avoid a general strike indicates a desire to strike above a desire to negotiate a settlement. While a possible explanation for this is the need to keep a strong, unified message from their newspaper, it is still curious that this time when labor called a general strike, everyone accepted they would go on strike without any negotiations or bargaining. This lends credence to anti-labor sentiment, that the laborers wanted to enthusiastically seize the means of production and maintenance and had given up the more moderate and preferred option of reaching a settlement. In addition, a feeling was articulated several times, even by Anna Louise Strong, of excitement and wonder at the delightful uncertainty of the strike—the chance to remake the world into one more beneficial for labor. However, this may be a view only shared by academics and theorists like Strong, and not one shared by rank and file laborers. More study is needed to illuminate that aspect.

A note needs to be made here that in the *Union Record's* coverage of the event, it is possible the rhetoric of excitement, wonder, and possibility did not resonate well with the non-labor population of Seattle. What the labor movement described as awesome and exciting the general public met with fear and concern. Friedheim well notes that many members of Seattle went and bought all the guns and ammunition they could, and the wealthiest members of the city fled to Portland. The memory of the Russian elite and royalty shot and killed by the bolsheviks was likely fresh in the minds of the people that fled. Just two years later, when the workers of their city rise up, quoting Marx and referring to what “Russia Did,” it is understandable that the residents would not be as enthusiastic as the laborers.

Strike! Media from February 6-February 11

The largest two shares of media coverage in the Seattle General Strike were in this time period, and the period immediately following the strike. However, only the three privately owned newspapers in the city were publishing at the time. As mentioned above, the *Seattle Union Record* stopped publishing for the majority of the strike, as they felt it would not be true to their ideals to continue working while everyone else was out on strike. The *Union Record* returned with a Monday Morning edition on February 10. Beginning on February 6, these three newspapers ran editorials that were laden with fear, and perceptions of chaos and unrest. As the strike continued, this fear was transformed into anger at the striking laborers.

On February 6, the *Star* ran a full-page heading entitled “Under Which Flag” that refers to a “showdown” and an “acid test of American citizenship” between labor and the government.⁵⁵ This sentiment was echoed throughout the strike, and the editorials the other newspapers published. The point of this editorial was to eliminate neutrality in the residents of Seattle and assert that this labor dispute was actually an issue of being an American. Presumably, under this editorial, being an American did not involve interfering with the functioning and management of a city. But this editorial does not dive deeply into the rationale behind being a good American, the text is short and blunt, drawing a line in the sand. The next day, the *Star* published another editorial where this sentiment continued more obviously. The *Star* used half of their broadsheet to print a proclamation from Ole Hanson who said he would use “1,500 policemen [and] 1,500 soldiers...to protect life, business and property.” Hanson continues on to finish “the anarchists in this community shall not rule its affairs.”⁵⁶ Next to this editorial was an

⁵⁵ “Under Which Flag,” *The Seattle Star*, February 6, 1919.

⁵⁶ Ole Hanson, “Proclamation,” *The Seattle Star*, February 7, 1919.

illustration of the American flag captioned “The Star will continue to publish as an American Newspaper [sic].”⁵⁷ In two days, the *Seattle Star* moved from interrogating the ideological leanings of non-aligned citizens to asserting its existence as an “American Newspaper.”

The *Star* was not the only paper to quickly assert ideological lines in the face of the Seattle General Strike. When streetcar service resumed on February 9, the *Times* ran an article claiming the first street cars were “hailed with cries of joy,” and reports an unnamed citizen turning to the reporter and stating that “every little bit” of service restored “helps.”⁵⁸ The *Times* worked hard during the strike to paint the residents of Seattle as both strong and resilient, and rendered harmed and helpless by the General Strike. The *Times* devoted most of its articles in the closing days of the strike to asserting that labor needed to be “purged” of the “anarchists and radicals” that had infiltrated the labor movement.⁵⁹ In the later days of the strike February 10 and 11, most people in the city knew the strike would be coming to a close soon. Given that the *Times* knew this, they probably took such a conciliatory tone to blaming a “few radicals” instead of the entirety of the Central Labor Council. This feeling would change after the strike, as news of labor unrest led the First Red Scare to settle over Seattle.

Striking a balance between the vitriol of the *Star* and the breadth of reporting in the *Times*, the *Post-Intelligencer* published information about the end of the strike as well as editorials directly blaming perceived Bolshevism in the Seattle Labor Movement. On February 10, the *Post-Intelligencer* published an editorial thanking Ole Hanson and the chief of police for

⁵⁷ “Troops in Seattle,” *The Seattle Star*, February 7, 1919.

⁵⁸ “First Street Cars in Downtown District to Operate,” *The Seattle Sunday Times*, February 9, 1919.

⁵⁹ “Labor Radicals Must Go,” *Seattle Times*, February 10, 1919.

their “coolness and sound judgement [which] prevented disorder in a time of stress.”⁶⁰ The Strike was not even fully completed before the *Post-Intelligencer* began thanking city authorities for ending the strike, putting the responsibility on the establishment for ending a strike that had run its course. Also that day, an editorial called “Bolshevism and Labor” was published to discuss the perceived linkages between the General Strike, the Seattle labor movement, the IWW and bolshevism. This article makes it clear that the Seattle populace considered this strike “sabotage upon society, it is a civil war,” indicating that before the strike was even called off, the Seattle populace was using inflammatory language comparing the General Strike to the Civil War.⁶¹ The General Strike was only 54 years after the end of the Civil War—a generation and a-half removed from a time when the country was both ideologically and physically divided in half. This seems like an incredibly provocative claim, but the *Post-Intelligencer* published this anyway. While differences between the three mainstream papers blurred during the Strike, but as the days continued, their editorials turned from rumors to condemnation of the labor movement—a trend that would continue.

The *Union Record* resumed publishing on February 10 and immediately jumped into action of both defending the striking laborers and publishing concrete information about the end of the strike. In an editorial called “Keep Smiling” the *Union Record* used this space to address the incredulity of some of the rumors heard around town about the General Strike:

That the strikers have planted a long-range gun on top of Mount Rainer and expect to shell the city. That President Wilson has asked Lloyd George to send Canadian troops to siege Seattle. That the strikers have exploded giant bombs in Seattle harbor and all the water had run out of the holes in the bottom. That the

⁶⁰ “Men Whose Coolness and Sound Judgement Prevent Disorder in Time of Stress,” *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, February 10, 1919.

⁶¹ Andrew E. Griffiths, “Bolshevism and Labor,” *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, February 10, 1919.

Bolshevik airships are on their way across the Pacific. That the weather man has joined the strikers, and tomorrow morning's fog will be made of poison gas.⁶²

The publication and public debunking of the rumors that swirled around the General Strike enabled workers at the *Union Record* to attempt to regain control of the strike narrative.

However, this publishing was too little too late. If the *Union Record* had continued to publish throughout the strike, there would not have been a need to renounce multiple rumors at once, rather misinformation could have been combated on a day to day basis before it snowballed into a full-page editorial. Of course, the *Union Record* attempting to correct the record and promote facts was not a story that national newspapers would pick up.

The newspapers published a mix of actual events, banal misinformation, and attacks on the Seattle Labor Movement. As time passed in the 5 days of the general strike, these papers became more directly hostile to the Seattle Labor Movement, likely because of anger at a loss of control, which would influence the Associated Press wires that came out of Seattle and fed into public perception of a type of attempted revolution. The *Union Record* attempted damage control—but it was too little, too late to save their image in the eyes of both the Seattle populace and the national perception of the labor movement.

Revolution in Seattle! National Media Coverage and Influence

Coverage of the Seattle General Strike spread from Seattle to almost every major newspaper in the United States. In the periods listed above, the *New York Times* wrote almost daily pieces on the events in Seattle—and in the aftermath of the strike, published many opinion

⁶² “Keep Smiling,” *Seattle Union Record*, February 10, 1919.

and editorial columns on bolshevism and “Red Seattle.”⁶³ The *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune* also published with increasing frequency. Interestingly enough, the *Chicago Tribune* seemed to pick up the most neutral stories—only informing their readership on what was occurring in Seattle and with other strikes and labor disputes around the country. Later, when Ole Hanson began his speaking tour in support of *Americanism*, the *Chicago Tribune* published editorials and interviews with him.⁶⁴ Interestingly enough, *Los Angeles Times* took the most sensational account of the strike, often referencing the amount of military and police standing by as well as personal accounts of the people that fled because of the unrest. Whether this is because of the *Los Angeles Times*’s geographic proximity to Seattle or the personal ideologies of the newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times* published a more detailed account of the strike. The *New York Times* also published accounts that heavily relied on reports of military, police, and blustering on the part of Ole Hanson, but in a more removed way than the *Los Angeles Times*.

Another stark difference from the Seattle newspapers is that coverage on this event started after the strike started on February 6, 1919, not before. National coverage of the Seattle General Strike was independent of the history and unique structure of the Seattle labor movement and as a result picked up more sensationalized stories—which would spread the idea that the strike was an attempt at revolution, and further solidify this labor dispute within the First Red Scare.

The *New York Times* began their coverage of the Seattle General Strike on February 7, 1919 with a headline that read “Troops on Guard in Seattle Strike” and described “the contingent of 800 soldiers” surrounding Seattle. In addition, the article ran several quotes from Mayor Ole

⁶³ “Seattle To Face Army Rule Unless Strike Ends Today,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1919.

⁶⁴ Ole Hanson, “Ole Hanson On the Job!” (Chicago, Illinois: *McClure’s*, April 1919.)

Hanson including “any man who attempts to take over control of municipal government functions here will be shot on sight.”⁶⁵ This article was the first that would introduce readers of the *New York Times* to the strike within the newspaper, and lends a feeling of unrest, and chaos to the strike. Instead of focusing on the fact that no violence had yet been reported in the city, and that laborers were continuing to provide essential services, this article focuses on the potential for unrest, thereby framing it more clearly as an attempted revolution, or at the very least, an attempted disruption of law and order in the city.

The article published the next day, on February 8 1919, reads “Seattle to Face Army Rule Unless Strike Ends Today,” and discusses Ole Hanson’s assertion that he would put the city under martial law unless the strike ended by 8 the next morning.⁶⁶ The article reports on Hanson’s proclamation that “anarchists in the city shall not rule its affairs,” and in an interesting note, mentions he was told the *Seattle Star* claimed the strikers wanted to cease their publication through violence.⁶⁷ This is an interesting factor because nowhere in a published edition of the *Star* is it mentioned that they felt directly threatened by the strikers. It is possible this is an example of how rumor or gossip magnified can result in something appearing in a national newspaper that was not reported in Seattle. In other words, this claim exemplifies the game of telephone played with news about the strike.

Seen above is how some national newspapers reported on claims that were not even mentioned in the Seattle presses. Further evidence for this phenomenon is evident in an examination of the *Los Angeles Times*. As mentioned above, the *Los Angeles Times* seemed to

⁶⁵ “Troops on Guard in Seattle Strike,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1919.

⁶⁶ “Seattle To Face Army Rule Unless Strike Ends Today,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1919.

⁶⁷ Ibid

sensationalize claims more than either of the other national newspapers studied here. One of the most interesting articles published by the *Los Angeles Times* during the strike was one that claimed to have been informed by the opinions of Seattle citizens. In “Citizens of Seattle Oppose Revolution,” a pastor and businessmen say that the mayor told them to try and gauge the opinions of community members on the topic of the general strike. This inquiry concluded with saying the strike is not representative of the citizens of Seattle and is seen by the general public as a “revolutionary action.”⁶⁸ However, the men made it clear that “Seattle is not treating with the revolutionists and is not in the hands of the revolutionists,” seeming to indicate a desire of independence and not submission to the perceived revolutionary demands of the citizens.⁶⁹ One has to wonder, given conflicting reports of Seattle being at the hands of Bolsheviks, and then Seattle resisting the revolutionaries if these differences stem more from overactive paper presses than the true feelings of the Seattle populace.

The *Chicago Tribune* had the least to say on the topic of the Seattle General Strike, picking up the same overview from AP wires as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* summarizing the events of the strike and mentioning the possibility of martial law and nearby military presence in Seattle and Tacoma. It is notable that later during Ole Hanson’s book tour, the *Chicago Tribune* and other Chicago papers allowed him plenty of space to present editorials and write about his ideas of Americanism, leading to headlines like “Ole Hanson On the Job!” and other focuses on Hanson’s perceived ability to quell the Seattle strikers.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ “Citizens of Seattle Oppose Revolution: So-Called General Strike Fails to Find Support Among Business Men,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1919.

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ “Ole Hanson On the Job!”

National newspapers and the three Seattle newspapers focused on and promoted a narrative of the Seattle General Strike that would both sell copies and serve the interests of their individual papers. Unfortunately, this narrative was not reflective of actual events occurring in Seattle and was based more on rumor and blustering than factual accounts of the conditions in Seattle. Blaming bolshevists and foreign influence for the Seattle General Strike absolved the striking laborers of any credibility by threatening their own “Americanism,” and promoting a black and white reading of the event. As day by day passed before and during the General Strike, media coverage became more heated, likely in a competition to sell papers via which paper had the most complete story or the more sensationalist headlines. National newspapers were already publishing contaminated sources—by working almost exclusively with articles written by the three Seattle newspapers, and telegraphs from Ole Hanson, they reported a more distorted and disjointed picture of the event than what actually occurred. Whether this was of malicious intent, or just a desire to report the best news as quickly as possible, the nation as a whole was told a story intensely magnified and altered from its original intent. As will be seen in the next chapter, this will both intensify into the hysteria of the First Red Scare, and then reverberate back into Washington State. The *Union Record* and the laborers were facing off against the mainstream Seattle and national media on a fight of what narrative and what experience got remembered. However, while Seattle labor lost the battle of memory, the entire country lost the chance to learn a balanced account of this unique point in American history.

Chapter Three: “Pulling the Trigger Without Knowing What Ammunition Was Loaded”⁷¹

In 1935, sixteen years after the General Strike, Anna Louise Strong walked through the streets of Moscow, taking notes for a project that would become her autobiography. Opening the 4, after living in the Soviet Union since 1921, Anna Louise Strong reflected on how she felt when the general strike started: “We were frankly frightened, a general strike was an unleashed power. It might easily smash something—us perhaps, our well-organized labor movement.”⁷² In the weeks, months and years following the strike, the Seattle labor movement was indeed smashed and altered forever. Prior to the strike, labor had a relationship and open channels of communication with their bosses, and they generally held the trust of the Seattle populace. After the strike, this was no longer the case. Instead of smashing the state, the General Strike smashed the lines of communication and their own reputation as hardworking laborers, not foreign agitators. Most crucially, the General Strike also eroded the bonds that held together the Central Labor Council and united labor throughout the city and the rest of the nation.

Throughout this paper, the motivations of the striking laborers have been evaluated from solidarity with striking ship workers to an attempted revolution. Whatever the strikers intended, their show of solidarity did not bring the shipyard owners back to the bargaining table within a five-day general strike, and the striking shipyard workers remained out until late March 1919. The labor-elected politicians of Seattle turned against them, and the non-union newspapers were frantically calling for labor to “clean house.”⁷³ Within the Central Labor Council, rifts were beginning to form over the duration of the strike, perceived slights, and political lines. The kitchens that fed striking Seattle workers cost the Central Labor Council thousands of dollars,

⁷¹ Strong. *I Change Worlds*, 72.

⁷² Ibid, 74.

⁷³ “Let’s Clean House!” *Seattle Times*, February 13, 1919.

and never even broke even.⁷⁴ Workers too felt the effects of the lack of pay in their pockets. If the striking workers had been asked if they were better off than when the strike started, the answer would almost certainly have been a resounding “no.” So why did the strike not fade into obscurity? What happened to imprint this five-day adventure onto the zeitgeist of the early twentieth century?

First, the citizens of Seattle were not willing to let the labor insurrection go easily. They were confined in their homes almost the entire time the strike was occurring, keeping their children inside, often with doors barricaded and guns at the windows.⁷⁵ Armed laborers and veterans were patrolling the streets, most shops and stores were closed, and all the street cars were down. As the *Union Record* reported, Seattle’s wealthiest citizens had fled to hotels as far away as Portland, Oregon, fearing violence against them.⁷⁶ Public opinion had definitely turned against Seattle labor, and the public was ready for blood. In the subsequent months, Seattle labor would be held to the fire by a Seattle public tired of being “held hostage” by the labor movement.⁷⁷

This chapter explores the immediate after effects of the strike in Seattle and then on the national stage throughout the remainder of 1919 and 1920. As referenced throughout this work, the inception of mass general strikes took place within the complicated legacy of the Russian Revolution, the Armistice, the end of the Progressive era, and the formation of the League of Nations. Nineteen-nineteen was a watershed year. Though the reverberations of the strike are innumerable, the following sections are paired to show the impact of these events in both

⁷⁴ Strong, *An Account of What Happened in Seattle*, 91.

⁷⁵ Harvey O’Conner, *Revolution in Seattle*, (New York, NY: MR Press, 1964,) 32.

⁷⁶ “Running Away,” *Seattle Union Record*. February 10th, 1919. 4.

⁷⁷ “Let’s Clean House!”

Washington State, and across the country. One cannot divorce the strike from the unique nature of politics in Seattle and the Pacific Northwest, but without national effect this strike would not have increased hostilities and national tension surrounding the labor movement and lived on only in the identities and local history of Seattleites.

Ole Hanson: The “Hero” of Seattle

In the aftermath of the strike, Mayor Hanson remained curiously aloof while the *Seattle Times* called for labor to “clean house,” and took his time waiting until March 30, 1919 (after the end of the shipyard strike, as well,) to publish an editorial in a local newspaper. That day, the headline of *The Seattle Sunday Times* read “Bolshevism Must Be Stamped Out,” and featured an editorial from Ole Hanson alerting Seattle labor that he would be taking every measure to rid the town of “bolshevists” and other radicals.⁷⁸ An anonymous editorial in this issue also blamed *The Seattle Union Record* for harboring anarchist thought and encouraging other members of the Central Labor Council to ignore the commands of the AFL and their president Samuel Gompers.⁷⁹ However, the Central Labor Council had a long history of selective hearing when it came to Samuel Gompers and the moderate national labor movement. In 1918, E.B. Ault, the owner of *The Seattle Union Record* and prominent labor organizer claimed

I believe that 95% of us agree that the workers should control the industries. Nearly all of us agree on that but very strenuously disagree on the method. Some of us think we can get control through the Cooperative movement, some of us think through political action, and others think through industrial action.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ “Bolshevism Must Be Stamped Out,” *The Seattle Sunday Times*, March 30, 1919.

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Brecher, *Strike!* 180.

This quote speaks to the nearly universally accepted radical nature of Seattle labor politics—something that only became contentious after the Russian Revolution and after the failed General Strike. This nature was certainly something Hanson accepted when he took office, as it was reported throughout that prior to the General Strike Hanson was incredibly friendly to Seattle labor, and appeared to favor them when he could, as he was the labor-backed candidate in the Seattle mayoral election in 1918.⁸¹

Following the Seattle General Strike Hanson turned against radicalism. He took steps towards making Seattle an open-shop town—meaning that industries could hire people outside of the AFL unions, which crushed some the bargaining power of craft unions and ensured another General Strike could not easily come to fruition. He sent out letters and wrote his own editorials that he sent to *The Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and specialized magazines like *McClure's*.⁸² Throughout all this, Hanson maintained the General Strike was an action of anti-Americanism, likely by foreign agitators, and would have surely been a communist revolution if not for his quick actions. Hanson was trying to capitalize on his newfound fame as the “hero” of the Seattle General Strike to rise beyond his station as mayor of Seattle, which was reflected through articles in local Seattle media.⁸³ Months later, in the summer of 1919, he was one of a number of high-profile targets of the anarchist mail bombings. Surviving this assassination attempt, he joined the ranks of notorious public figures including J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Bureau of Investigation and A. Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney General, who also had bombs left

⁸¹ For more on this see *I Change Worlds, Revolution in Seattle*, and *The Seattle General Strike* as Hanson’s proclivity towards flip-flopping on issue positions is present throughout these works.

⁸² Ole Hanson, “Ole Hanson On the Job!” *McClure's*, April 1919.

⁸³ “Further You Travel Eastward Greater Becomes Hanson’s Fame,” *The Post Intelligencer*, 1919.

on their doorstep.⁸⁴ This seems to indicate that the leading anarchists viewed him as just as dangerous to their cause as the federal officials that were initiating deportation of radicals—indicating the media lauding him as the hero of Seattle had created quite a reputation for him. He resigned the office of the Mayor in August 1919 saying that he was “tired out, and [was] going fishing.”⁸⁵

His pronouncements notwithstanding, Hanson’s retirement was short lived. Following his resignation, he instead undertook a nationwide speaking tour, preaching about how to root out Bolshevism in other towns, how to strip the labor union of most of their power, and on a concept he termed “Americanism,” which can be best summed up as fervent nationalism, support of capitalist American ideals, and xenophobia. “A government which will not defend itself cannot stand. We have had enough of weakness, conciliation, and pandering. We must run the United States of America primarily *for* the United States of America. America First!”⁸⁶ This assertion ended the preface of Ole Hanson’s book, *Americanism Versus Bolshevism*—published in January 1920. These words also perfectly exemplify the concept of “Americanism,” a sort of hyper-nationalism that was used to both justify and promote the rooting out of anti-American sentiments, bolshevism, and people aligned with the labor movement.⁸⁷ Throughout all of this, Hanson was hailed as the “hero of Seattle” who singlehandedly defeated the Bolsheviks and the

⁸⁴ Discussing the Anarchist Bombings of the Summer of 1919 is beyond the scope of this paper but for further reading I suggest Robert K. Murray’s *The Red Scare* which is cited throughout this paper.

⁸⁵ “Ole Hanson Quits as Seattle Mayor” (*New York Times* August 29, 1919)

⁸⁶ Ole Hanson, *Americanism versus Bolshevism*. (New York: Doubleday, 1920) preface.

⁸⁷ I have to put a footnote here and mention that this quote is basically something our current president has likely said during a speech. The American culture of hyper-nationalism, capitalism, and American primacy has truly not gone anywhere, and mass appeals to populism under the equivalency of “foreigners” that are a threat to both American values and the American way of life is something that the right loves to use.

labor unions in one fell swoop.⁸⁸ To a country worried about Russian influence, and home grown-anarchism, a simple narrative of one man besting an anarchist and bolshevist infested labor union played well, and propelled Hanson to a fleeting, but high, stardom.

Hanson intended on turning his popularity from the speaking tour and his notoriety for being seen as a cure for Bolshevism during the First Red Scare into a run for the presidency. The First Red Scare ended by the summer of 1920, and without that mass fear, politicians like Hanson who were single issue candidates, did not have any other noteworthy strengths over other candidates. At the Republican National Convention in the summer 1920, he was eliminated in one of the first rounds of voting. He was not the only politician to reach the conclusion that capitalizing on the First Red Scare could be a ticket to higher political office. A. Mitchell Palmer sought the Democratic Party nomination in 1920, his support collapsing on the 36th ballot. Politicians like Palmer and Hanson capitalized on the fear and hysteria of the era in order to make a name for themselves. To Hanson, the truth or the actual events in Seattle did not matter to him—just how high he could rise off the backs of both the Seattle laborers and the Seattle General Strike. Hanson’s fifteen minutes of fame were a flash in the pan, but sadly the ideals he promulgated did not fade as easily.⁸⁹

First Red Scare

As discussed in the introduction to this text, the First Red Scare both fed into and was a result of the Seattle General Strike. In his seminal work on the First Red Scare, historian Robert

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Murray, *Red Scare*, 42.

K. Murray lists the Seattle General Strike as the first domino to fall down the chronological path of the First Red Scare.⁹⁰ Uncertainty and a brief economic recession as the United States adjusted to a peacetime economy started this era in the closing months of 1918. As the economy began slowing down to account for less production of war munitions, and was then strained by veterans returning home, hungry for work, labor entered a precarious position. Unfortunately, this strike presented a concrete action by labor radicals that could be construed as an act of communist or bolshevist interference in the United States. Suddenly, there was a physical manifestation of the fears that were swirling around the country—indeed, around the world—feeding off the uncertainty and instability of a post-Great War world. This General Strike demonstrated to other labor unions around the country that they could receive attention for their cause by striking, and that other laborers around the country felt similarly to them about the fairness of the American economic system. As Murray discusses, later strikes in 1919 may have lasted longer, created more unrest, or caused more direct violence—but Seattle was the first Strike down this path—the one that precluded all the others.

The First Red Scare roughly lasted from 1919-1920. Originally known as simply “The Red Scare,” it is known now as the “first” due to the arguably more well-known Second Red Scare and McCarthyism following World War II at the start of the Cold War. The First Red Scare was marked by hyper-nationalism that developed under World War I and was compounded by the fear of communism and the Russian Revolution. However, what elevated this phenomenon from concern to hysteria were tangible events that could be construed as attempted revolution such as strikes, labor unrest, and anarchist bombings. During 1919, the main year of the First Red Scare, one in three American workers were out on strike. But it was not just the

⁹⁰ Murray, 91.

strikes and labor unrest. As mentioned while discussing Ole Hanson, anarchists sent mail bombs over the summer to many prominent politicians and government employees that had expressed anti-labor and anti-Bolshevist sentiments.⁹¹ As retribution for this, and as fear over labor unrest mounted, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer began rounding up anarchists and suspected anarchists who were charged under the Espionage Act of 1917. These raids, which would eventually be remembered by the name of the man who authorized them, ended in the arrest and subsequent deportation of over 500 people in a mass anti-radical campaign.⁹² Public sentiment was overwhelmingly for this measure and referred to the boats carrying mass deportees as a sort of reverse “Noah’s Ark.”⁹³ These deportees were by and large American citizens, and they were sent to Russia, a place ravaged by civil war. The Palmer Raids, and the widespread support they received indicated that public sentiment had clearly shifted away from the laborers and towards anti-radical and anti-union ideology.

The First Red Scare was not confined to raids, deportations, censorship and arrest of the mass public however. The hysteria turned inward as the government becoming worried that they had “soviet sympathizers” in their ranks. In the New York General Assembly, members that identified as socialists were purged from their legislative body, sending a clear message that anti-American and anti-capitalist tendencies were not tolerated in the bodies that supposedly represented the American public. Here, is where the First Red Scare took a turn. In drawing such a broad line in the sand, in mandating that people either be pro-capitalist, pro-American, and anti-radical, any room for nuance, any room for ethical critiques of capitalism were drowned out by the charge of guilty by association. This is the same rhetoric of if you aren’t with us, you’re

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Murray, *The First Red Scare*, 71.

⁹³ Ibid 62.

against us that marks American political decisions to this day. To this point, the First Red Scare was also termed as a “War against Bolshevism.”⁹⁴ This line of “Americanism,” as eloquently summed up by Ole Hanson helped labor unions fall out of fashion and facilitated the decline of the influence of labor throughout the 1920s. More importantly, this rhetoric, this divide that started here, because of the Seattle General Strike would continue into the Second Red Scare, the Cold War, and cause a permanent polarization of pro-capitalist and anti-capitalist forces, where any critique of the dominant economic system became evidence of anti-Americanism.

Centralia Massacre

The last two events focused on in this chapter are events that occurred in Washington State, the Centralia Massacre, and the arrest and trial of Seattle Union Record journalists under the Espionage Act of 1917. These two events are tied together, physically as the Union Record was questioned for their reporting of radical events, including the Centralia Massacre, and as examples of the consequences that befell people inclined towards the labor movement. As will be seen, the IWW became a scapegoat for all the issues of the American labor movement, including the Seattle General Strike. Not even the preferred status gained by being a Great War veteran could save members of the IWW from brutal murder, as this event shows.

On Armistice Day, or November 11, 1919, the American Legion, a contingent of World War I veterans paraded through downtown Centralia, Washington, a town 80 miles south of Seattle. It is unclear what happened next, or really who fired first, but one of two things happened. Either the Wobblies thought the American Legion was advancing on their

⁹⁴ Ibid, 134.

headquarters in downtown Centralia and opened fire, or the American Legion chose to start shooting at their headquarters and the Wobblies were simply returning fire. Later reports have indicated that the parade was too large, unwieldy, and members of the American Legion and prominent members of the town like the mayor and postmaster were seen carrying nooses and pipes.⁹⁵ In the ensuing massacre, six men died, four American Legion, the town sheriff, and an IWW member. The member died, and several others were injured while they barricaded the door of their IWW Hall to keep out the rioting townspeople. For poor men and daily laborers who did not have families, the IWW hall was all they had—where they could find food, friends, and discussion, and they did not want to lose their home to townspeople hell-bent on eradicating them from the city. Seven members of the IWW were prosecuted for the murders and eventually sentenced to the federal Leavenworth penitentiary, but no members of the American Legion were charged with any crime.⁹⁶

But why did the Seattle General Strike serve as a catalyst for the Centralia Massacre? While IWW members has been blamed for years for their pacifism during World War I, their radicalism, and really all of the areas' issues—serving as the ultimate scapegoat and representation of the ills of the American labor movement. The IWW chapters in the Pacific Northwest had also been blamed for the negative outcome of the strike in Seattle. What appeared to be an armed contingent of soldiers marching on the IWW hall, was likely not that—however reported accounts of townspeople holding weapons and nooses were likely equally inflammatory. The townspeople had likely been encouraged and incited by Ole Hanson and other

⁹⁵ Ralph Chaplin, *The Centralia Conspiracy*, (Seattle, Washington, 1920), 18.

⁹⁶ *Ibid* 61.

prominent politicians of the time calling for the eradication of IWW members, and the IWW members were acting in fear of their lives.

What about the IWW man who was killed, Wesley Everest? He was not killed in the shooting. Fleeing town, he was hunted down outside of town by a posse of Centralia men. When they caught him, these townspeople castrated him, hung him from a tree until he was dead, and then deposited him on the floor of the county jail two days later with the noose still around his neck. There was no investigation into his death, even though what happened to Everest that night became well known. In fact, there was a widely believed rumor that the county coroner, Dr. David Livingstone, who refused to perform an autopsy on the body, was the one who castrated him with a straight razor.⁹⁷ Either way, his body was left on the floor of the jail for two days before a police officer examined it to confirm its identity, and then was buried in an unmarked grave.

The main source for the Centralia Massacre and the murder of the Wobbly Wesley Everest is a pamphlet called *The Centralia Conspiracy*, written by IWW member Ralph Chaplin. Though Chaplin's source contains a clear bias present in the material, it is important to note that this pamphlet was spread to IWW chapters around the country, often accompanied by a series of photographic postcards of Everest's castrated and lynched body. When Wobblies across the nation encountered these mailings, they likely recognized Everest's fate as something that could happen to them if they continued on with the path of labor agitation, or as a concrete reason to keep fighting against the bosses. Throughout this pamphlet Chaplin calls the townspeople involved with the lynching "terrorists," an interesting subversion of the terms that were applied

⁹⁷ Ibid 23.

to Wobblies and labor after the Seattle General Strike.⁹⁸ Chaplin even goes so far as to title one of his chapters “Lynching—an American Institution,” almost as if a direct challenge to the ideas of Americanism, and what it means to be an American and support the American way of life.⁹⁹ Throughout this work, Chaplin makes it clear he and the other IWW members consider Everest a martyr and a hero, but there were other martyrs present in this story—the IWW men sentenced to Leavenworth Penitentiary for the murders of the American Legion members.

The trial of the IWW members began in March 1920, where 11 men were charged for the death of American Legion member Warren Grimm. By the end of the trial three men were acquitted, and one found “innocent by reason of insanity,” and the seven remaining men were each sentenced to between “35 and 45 years in a federal penitentiary.”¹⁰⁰ The penitentiary chosen was the infamous Leavenworth prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. This penitentiary would have been well known to members of the Pacific Northwest IWW, as a Central Labor Council member Hulet M. Wells was sentenced there in 1918 for draft dodging and wrote extensively about the torture and violence he experienced there.¹⁰¹ These men did not receive commuted sentences until 1933, even though at no point could the prosecution prove any of these men had killed Grimm. As likely does not to be explicitly stated, no trial was called on the murder of Wesley Everett. Wobblies and other labor radicals continued to view his death as evidence that the broader public did not care about their lives—and that the punishment for enticing labor unrest could be worse than torture in Leavenworth, it could be a brutal death.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 4.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 74.

¹⁰⁰ “Eight Men Buried Alive,” (Chicago, IL: The General Defense Committee, 1924.)

¹⁰¹ See *Travelogue of Hell: Prison as Seen by a Leavenworth Inmate*.

Most public uproar present about the case was about the death of American Legion soldiers and World War I veterans; however, Wesley Everest was a veteran too. In early 20th century society, veteran status was something that could confer citizenship, in the social sense, on people who were not members of the most privileged groups in American society. However, for someone who was an IWW member and could be read as an anti-American, no amount of preferred status could prevent his death. The IWW widely circulated photos of Everest's body, throughout Seattle, and throughout the national labor movement. The photo will not be published here. Instead, in the photo below are seven of the original eleven defendants of the IWW in Aberdeen, Washington in 1921.¹⁰² Photos of these men were also circulated nationwide, but through the mainstream press, and they were written as the great villains of this narrative, not the dead, politically active veteran who would never get justice.



1: Centralia Defendants, 1920

¹⁰² “Centralia Defendants, Members of the I.W.W. on Trial for the Murder of American Legion Member Warren Grimm, Aberdeen, 1921: Society and Culture Photographs.” University of Washington Digital Archives.

As will be explored in the next section, labor around the country reacted in horror to the Everest murder. It was spread throughout labor-friendly media, but Seattle's own *Union Record* was the only Seattle newspaper to report on it, and it did so extensively. It even made a mention in a later published history of Washington State. However, it is possible the Centralia Massacre and Everest murder just served to push labor further underground as laborers and American radicals realized the punishment for their ideology could easily be a gruesome and violent death. Or, like the men who languished in the Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, they could be imprisoned unjustly, and under horrifying conditions, including torture. The stakes became too high, and these actions together ended the influence of labor in American society¹⁰³. This was one consequence of continued involvement in the labor movement—death by mob, or torture sanctioned by the government.

Seattle Union Record Trial

On January 13, 1920, Anna Louise Strong, E.B Ault, F. A. Rust, George P. Listman, and the Seattle Union Record Publishing Company were brought before Justice Jeremiah Neterer, a Justice of the United States District Court for the Western District of Washington.¹⁰⁴ Their cases were decided under *United States v. Ault et al.*, *United States v. Strong*, and *United States v. Listman*. This group of individuals was charged under Section 3 of the Espionage Act of 1917, which refers to interfering with military readiness and the recruitment of soldiers while the

¹⁰³ Hulet M. Wells, "Travelogue of Hell: Prison as Seen by a Leavenworth Inmate," (The World Tomorrow, August 1931.)

¹⁰⁴ To explain these people's roles in the *Seattle Union Record*, Anna Louise Strong was a writer and columnist, E.B. Ault was the editor in chief, and Rust and Listman owned a majority share in the paper.

country is at war.¹⁰⁵ The maximum penalty for this charge was twenty years in prison and a fine not to exceed \$10,000. Ault, Rust, and Listman were charged for various editorials published by the *Seattle Union Record*, on multiple counts. To sum these up they were charged with using “scurrilous and abusive language,” language towards the United States Government that showed “contempt, scorn, contumely, and disrepute,” and use of language to entice “resistance during wartime.”¹⁰⁶ In addition, in *US v. Ault et al*, this group of people and the *Seattle Union Record* are charged with conspiracy. Another pertinent difference is Anna Louise Strong’s charges were more detailed and specific, as she was the writer of many of these editorials

Strong was indicted under 10 counts based on two of her editorials. The first, has been discussed repeatedly throughout this case; the February 4, 1919 editorial that read “We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by labor in this country, a move which will lead—NO ONE KNOWS WHERE! We do not need hysteria. We need the iron march of labor.”¹⁰⁷ The second editorial was a poem written on June 28, 1919, to mark the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the formal end of hostilities of the Great War. In it, Strong writes under her pen name Anise, and writes about the end of the Great War coming at the hands of the elites, not the suffering of the working class and soldiers.¹⁰⁸ On each editorial she is charged with counts of her editorial being “scurrilous and abusive” having “contempt, scorn, [and],

¹⁰⁵ H.R. 291 “Espionage Act of 1917.” Joint Resolution by the United States Congress, June 15, 1917

¹⁰⁶ *United States of America v. Ault et al*, Robert R. Brott 263 (District Court, Western District State of Washington, Northern Division 1920).

¹⁰⁷ Strong, “On Thursday at 10 A.M.”

¹⁰⁸ Anna Louise Strong. “Signed” *Seattle Union Record*, June 28, 1919.

contumely” for the United States government, “provoke[ing] and encourag[ing] resistance to the United States Government” and supporting Germany through her obstruction of the war effort.¹⁰⁹

Since these cases were decided together, they will be mentioned in the body of this text as *US v Ault et al* and differentiated in the footnotes as necessary. In each of these cases, the defense requested a demurrer, a legal plea that asks the court to dismiss the case on the grounds of a flawed premise.¹¹⁰ The defense maintained there were several flaws in the prosecutions claims, which they listed in their demurrer: The Espionage Act was a violation of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, the US was not at war at the time of the alleged criminal activity, and that the amount of counts Strong received was redundant. Judge Neterer sustained their demurrer on different grounds for each case. On conspiracy, he noted that there was no “overt action” that bound this group together.¹¹¹ In the *Strong* case he noted “advocacy of anarchy is not a crime” and held that her actions were protected under the First Amendment.¹¹² This led Judge Neterer to dismiss these cases.

The dismissal of charges was certainly a victory for this group, and the *Union Record* ran headlines asserting “The Union Record Not Suppressed” indicating the author of this editorial and the men that backed the publishing viewed their case as a free speech issue, and not as an issue of treason.¹¹³ As listed in the introduction to this section, what was at stake as enumerated

¹⁰⁹ *United States of America v. Strong*, Robert R. Brott (United States District Court Western District of Washington Northern Division 1920).

¹¹⁰ A demurrer is not a plea in the sense of guilty or not guilty but in the sense of “pleading.” This technique was banned at the federal level in 1936 and replaced by a “motion to dismiss.” A friend consulted for the explanation of this archaic term asserted that a demurrer was the defense saying, “yes we did this, so what?”

¹¹¹ *United States of America v. Ault et al.*

¹¹² *United States of America v. Strong*

¹¹³ “Union Record Not Suppressed.” *Seattle Union Record*, November 13, 1919.

in the Espionage Act was jail time and a fine, and possibly a sentence to Leavenworth. This decision granted them freedom, but it did not grant them prosperity. The *Union Record* folded for good in 1924, its pages towards the end becoming increasingly filled with advertisement and pleas for worker donations. E. B. Ault, the original founder of the *Union Record* took this loss hard, financially and emotionally, and slowly disappeared from the public life. As for Anna Louise Strong, writer, provocateur, and socialist, she emigrated to Moscow in 1921, where she worked as a journalist. She was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1949 on charges of conspiracy and lived in China until her death in 1970.¹¹⁴

Both the Centralia Massacre/Everest Murder and the *Seattle Union Record* trial are direct consequences of the Seattle General Strike. These examples illustrate the consequences the strike had on its participants and affiliates—death, trial, bankruptcy, and loss of union power. As referenced in the introduction to this chapter, Anna Louise Strong wrote in her autobiography she was concerned of the power of a general strike to “smash something—us perhaps, our well-organized labor movement.”¹¹⁵ This quote illustrates what happened in Seattle in the aftermath of the General Strike. Whether or not the strike was a revolutionary action, and this paper leans towards it not being, the labor union in Seattle was crushed under the weight of their own general strike.

The general strike crushed more than just the Seattle labor movement. The fear and hysteria of the First Red Scare, and the turmoil capitalized on by Ole Hanson both enticed other unions towards strikes, and distanced the public from the cause of labor, leading to unions

¹¹⁴ This woman’s accomplishments truly cannot be understated, and though her life after leaving the United States is beyond the scope of this paper, her letters reside at the University of Washington Labor Archives, and are truly awe-inspiring.

¹¹⁵ Strong. *I Change Worlds*, 74.

nationwide losing power, membership, and identity. These national and local effects also do not exist on a binary. Local events like the Centralia Massacre had ripple effects onto the national stage as further evidence of the depravity and chaos of the Seattle labor movement and national events like the First Red Scare fed into the demise of the Central Labor Council and the *Seattle Union Record*. It is important to note that this proves that these entities were not destroyed by crusaders like Ole Hanson and A. Mitchell Palmer who were rightfully rooting out communism in the US, but by their own rapid expansion and contraction. The collapse and decline of labor in the United States is not a result of a fight against communism. Instead, it is the consequences of a first-of-its-kind strike that was fully experimental and in the spirit of solidarity and the highest ideals of workplace democracy.

Conclusion

The Seattle General Strike existed at the crux of several ideological movements at the beginning of the twentieth century. From the close of the Progressive Era to the unrest in Russia, 1919 was a year of confusion, mixed signals, and contradicting forces. As proven by examining the events of the strike, media coverage of the strike, and its immediate repercussions, the Seattle General Strike was perceived as a communist action far more severe than the actual strike. This dissonance furthered anti-bolshevist hysteria and further distanced the American labor movement and political radicals from the mainstream American culture, something that would have effects that still impact the labor movement and leftists in the United States.

Roughly a century has passed since the Seattle General Strike. In that century, the influence of labor unions on the broader American political scene has ebbed and flowed. Today, in 2018, unions arguably have only as much if not less power than the years following the First Red Scare and the Seattle General Strike. In this century of labor, labor unions have experienced consolidation, political power, and deregulation. Also in the past century, the tsarist monarchy of the largest country in the world evolved into the Provisional Government throughout the Russian Civil War, to the Soviet Union, and now into a Russia that is supposedly both democratic and capitalist. In this century, the US was involved in hostilities with Russia, and the geopolitical climate between these two countries is still relatively tense. The hostility between the US and Russia has meant that internal critiques of capitalism in the United States could be read as communist and traitorous. Since the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union fell, academic researchers and historians have been able to reevaluate capitalist-critical theories and

movements: one of these is the American labor movement, the use of general strikes, and the Seattle General Strike of 1919, especially in how they fed into anti-red hysteria.

So what was the impact of the Seattle General Strike on anti-red sentiments in the United States? As demonstrated in chapter three, the Seattle General Strike escalated tensions in the First Red Scare. The First Red Scare served as a political rallying point as “Americanism” and hyper-nationalism were seen as valuable and antithetical to bolshevist sentiment. This would be repeated in a similar way after World War II during the Second Red Scare and fear of McCarthyism. This fear of communists, of radicals, was solidified during the First Red Scare and would continue throughout the twentieth century, fully othering people who were critical of capitalism, and enlarging the divide between what was considered American and not—and labor unions have fallen on the losing side. People may not know about the intricacies of left-leaning ideologies in the United States, but the average American knows he hates communists and does not trust Russia—something that has impacted the progressive movement and squashed any chance of true democratic-socialism happening in the United States.

The American labor movement reached its zenith following World War II, but since the 1980s, the powers of unions have been on decline. As industrial jobs left the US, labor did not adapt into the technology and service sectors. The power of collective bargaining eroded, unions are experiencing low enrollment and decreased. However, the recent economic and political unrest has led to a resurgence of focus on unions, democratic-socialist politics, and American radicalism. For any of these reformist or revolutionary movements to succeed in affecting actual change in the capitalist system, they have to know their history and learn from the mistakes of their forefathers. Organizers need to be plugged into what has historically worked and failed so that they can improve on past tactics and adapt them to make real change.

Strikes still continue today, in the past few months teachers in both West Virginia and Oklahoma have gone on strike to protest overcrowding classrooms, slashed funding, and wages that have not risen in ten years.¹¹⁶ These strikes have led to widespread school closings in the affected areas. When the general public became concerned that the strike and the closing of schools meant kids on free or reduced lunch programs would not be able to eat, districts of teachers in West Virginia got together and fed the hungry kids themselves—oddly reminiscent of the canteens set up during the Seattle General Strike. Other states like Arizona and Kentucky are preemptively passing pay raises for teachers—worried the strikes will spread to their states. The power labor has in industries where a high percentage of laborers are enrolled in a union gives a hopeful outlook to labor. Labor in the United States has a long way to go when it comes to being influential in American politics, but through critical analysis of past strikes, academics can aid activists in knowing their history, and implementing better direct-action tactics.

The historiography around labor and strikes in the United States seems to support this thought. Victoria Johnson, the author of *How Many Machine Guns?* is working on a project to study why general strikes occur more frequently in Europe, and how labor unions in the United States can regain some of their prominence. Also, academics are publishing on the topic of labor history again, ending an almost twenty-year drought. Work that published about strikes now includes elements of the post-modern turn: recognizing class and socioeconomic status as identities and examining how these identities became silenced and how to uplift these perspectives. This is where this thesis fits in the historical narrative. Academics have begun

¹¹⁶ Julie Bogen, “Teachers in Oklahoma Aren’t Gonna Take It Anymore,” Vox, April 6, 2018.

reexamining American labor history with a critical eye towards forces like capitalism and hyper nationalism, which this thesis has done.

Without the solidifying external force of working for the protection of the American people against a concrete ideology like communism, people are turning inward, into the structures of the United States that appear timeless. One of these is capitalism. This is what has fueled the reexamination of many aspects of labor history, and the history of labor organizing and unions. A second look at the Seattle General Strike involves examining the words, works, and will of the striking laborers, and assessing the background of the strike as independently as possible. This means accepting secondary sources that are critical of the fear and hysteria that was publicized in Seattle throughout the aftermath of the General Strike and taking a critical lens to reevaluate these for the narrative of the strikers. This also means accepting this fear and hysteria as a critical load-bearing foundation block to the structure of US society, a block formed through extraordinary circumstance, a confluence of bad timing, polarizing ideologies; all at the start of the 20th century, the start of the century of global American hegemony.

For the past twenty years, global capitalism led by the United States has been the hegemonic economic system in the world. However, the Great Recession of 2008 and other economic crises of the past decades have shown that a revaluation of both Marx and the historical power of labor unions and labor unrest is necessary to create a wider picture about US History, and the presumed superiority of capitalism. However, rarely has the true perspective of the strikers been centered and held to the forefront of these histories. To present a more just and nuanced picture of the Seattle General Strike, the alternative, pro-worker, and socialist tendencies of the strikers need to be centered, and certainly not buried by the histories truly written about the *perception* of the General Strike. Doing this will allow for a more complete

picture of US history, as well as aiding activists and labor organizers today in reclaiming their history.

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