

**RESEARCH - ANALYSIS - SOLUTIONS**

# **CCPA REVIEW**

## **Labour Notes**

March 2006

### **CONSPIRACY IN WINNIPEG:**

#### **HOW THE 1919 GENERAL STRIKE LEADERS WERE RAILROADED INTO PRISON AND WHAT WE MUST DO NOW TO MAKE AMENDS**

Canadian working people and their families provided the cannon fodder for the bloody war in the trenches of Europe during World War I, and they bore the brunt of the pain and misery associated with the costs of the war - rapid inflation in the prices of necessities and an erosion of real wages, a marked deterioration of conditions in work places and working class communities and a curtailment of worker and citizen rights.

The latter stages of the war were characterized by an intensification of class antagonism and conflict that escalated into open class warfare in 1919.

In April 1919, Winnipeg metal trades workers demanded recognition of the Metal Trades Council as their bargaining agent and the

commencement of bargaining on wages and working conditions. The employers refused to recognize the Council and on 2 May 1919 metal trades workers joined striking building trades workers on the picket line.

The Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council responded to the conflict by calling for a vote on a general strike in support of the right to unionize and bargain with employers, a living wage and an eight-hour day. Strike action was approved by a margin of 11,000 to 500. The strike started 15 May 1919 with the young women working at the telephone system leading the way. By the end of the second day, 35,000 Winnipeg workers, a majority of them unorganized, had left their jobs in an unprecedented demonstration of solidarity in support of fair treatment, dignity and justice for

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all working people. There were, as well, sympathy strikes in Brandon and other centres in Manitoba and in cities and towns across the country. The Winnipeg crisis triggered a nation wide labour revolt.

Employers and the state portrayed the strike as an incipient revolution and refused any and all concessions to the strikers. The general strike weapon put new power in the hands of workers. The state and the Canadian business class were determined to break the strike and crush the strikers. Moreover, the general strike weapon had to be stigmatized as illegal. Employers organized the Citizens Committee of One Thousand to whip up class and ethnic hatred and challenge the strikers at every turn; the federal government lent its authority to the committee without exception.

Finally, on 17 June 1919, in an effort to bring the strike to an end, eight carefully selected strike leaders were arrested under both the Criminal Code and the recently amended Immigration Act. William Ivens, R.B. Russell, Dick Johns, John Queen, A.A. Heaps, George Armstrong, Roger Bray, and Bill Pritchard were all British-born and therefore liable to deportation under Immigration laws approved in response to demands from the Citizens Committee. Four non-British men were also arrested and detained at the same time: Michael Chartinoff, Samuel Blumenberg, Oscar Schoppelrie and Moses Alamazoff. Working-class demands for British justice resulted in prosecutions under the Criminal Code rather than deportation for the British-born leaders.

Chartinoff, Blumenberg, Schoppelrie and Alamazoff were left to the mercies of the immigration branch.

While the federal government was prepared to employ the Immigration Act in the campaign against the strike, constitutionally the federal department of justice had to rely on the provincial government to prosecute the strike leaders under the Criminal Code. The province was not prepared to do so.

In fall and winter 1919-20, in response to vigorous lobbying by Alfred J. Andrews and others on behalf of the Citizens Committee, the federal Department of Justice became the paymaster for a private prosecution of the Winnipeg general strike leadership for seditious conspiracy.

The prosecution of the strike leaders was initiated under provisions of the criminal code. These allowed for prosecutions by private citizens or organizations, subject to the consent of the Attorney General of Manitoba. Conven-

iently, the provincial Attorney General stood aside to allow the Citizens Committee a free hand in Manitoba courts.

The federal government paid Andrews and his associates in the Citizens Committee fees for services rendered during the strike, when, as leading figures in the Committee, they led the campaign against Winnipeg's working-class revolt. The Department of Justice also paid \$12,332 to the Winnipeg-based McDonald Detective Agency for work associated with the

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prosecution. This federal largesse allowed Andrews to secure two juries almost certainly tainted by pretrial investigations ordered by Andrews and carried out by the Royal Northwest Mounted Police and the MacDonald detective Agency.

R. B. Russell was tried in late 1919, and found guilty on all seven counts. He was sentenced on 26 December 1919 to two years in the penitentiary. The trials of Ivens, Pritchard, Johns, Heaps, Queen, Bray and Armstrong started in January, 1920, and the jury returned verdicts 27 March 1920. Ivens, Pritchard, Queen, Armstrong and Johns were found guilty on all counts. Bray was convicted only of the charge of common nuisance. And Heaps was acquitted and freed. On April 4th all defendants except Bray were sentenced to a year in Headingly; Bray got six months.

Right from the very day the strike leaders were arrested there were suspicions that the heavy-handed intervention of the state in the strike was intended to bring the working classes of Winnipeg and Canada to heel, to remind them that in the grand scheme of things labour was subordinate to capital.

When the strike leaders were committed to trial, it was evident that they were taking the fall for the general strike. Questions about the trials and their outcomes continued to fester long after the strike leaders had done their time and obtained redemption as leaders of working class politics in Winnipeg, in Manitoba and across the country.

Why was the prosecution a private rather than a public prosecution? Why were the leaders of the Citizens Committee conducting the prosecution? What was the role of the provincial government in these proceedings?

Here are the answers:

- The provincial government, constitutionally responsible for prosecutions relating to seditious conspiracy, declined to prosecute.
- The Citizens Committee, led by A. J. Andrews and other members of the Committee of One Thousand's "legal committee," undertook the prosecution as a private prosecution permitted under the Criminal Code.
  - The federal Department of Justice had no authority to intervene in the cases, but after extended pressure from members of the Citizens Committee, Charles Doherty, Minister of Justice, agreed to finance the legal action.
  - While the Workers Defense Committee raised money across Canada from Canadian workers, the federal cabinet dipped into funds appropriated under the Soldiers Resettlement Act to provide nearly a quarter of a million dollars (in today's terms well over several million dollars) to finance the Citizens Committee's private legal campaign.
- The provincial Attorney General, T.H. Johnson, who was responsible to protect Manitobans from malicious prosecutions stood aside lending the Citizens Committee the use

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of the authority and prestige of the Crown in its campaign against Canadian workers in the courts.

- The federal Department of Justice paid Citizens Committee lawyers A.J. Andrews, Issac Pitblado, Travers Sweatman, and J.C. Coyne for efforts against the strike and for their work in the subsequent prosecution.
- The federal government also paid the bill of the MacDonald Detective Agency of Winnipeg for work undertaken at the request of the Citizens Committee. The Agency was also paid for investigating the jury panel for the trials of the strike leaders. Evidence suggests that this activity may have been contrary to the Criminal Code and amounting to jury tampering.
- The federal government had no appropriation from parliament for these expenses. The money was made available through Orders in Council from the Soldiers Resettlement Fund appropriated by parliament to deal with the costs of demobilization after the Great War.

These matters, specifically the conspiracy of state - both the province and the federal government - with Winnipeg's business elite to prosecute, convict and jail the strike leaders, the misappropriation of public funds to fund a private prosecution, and the subversion of British justice (fair trials) by the federal government and leading members of the Manitoba bar must, we would suggest, be made a matter of public record.

Should organized labour in Manitoba and the rest of Canada launch a campaign to get the federal

government to admit to and apologize for its complicity in this travesty of justice and take action to exonerate the strike leaders who were wrongfully convicted and imprisoned for their involvement in the Winnipeg General Strike? We think not. An open festering wound on the body politic is far more instructive about the nature of class relations in capitalist society than some iteration of sanctimonious cant that might be extracted from the state. Closure on 1919 is not and should not be on the agenda of Canadians. 1919 provides a fundamental terrain of instruction for students of the ongoing relations between capital, labour and the state in Canadian society.

For a documentary record supporting the charges made above see the article in *Labour/Le Travail*, Canada's leading journal of labour and working class history, at:

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lt/53/mitchell.html>

- Jan Chaboyer and Errol Black

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