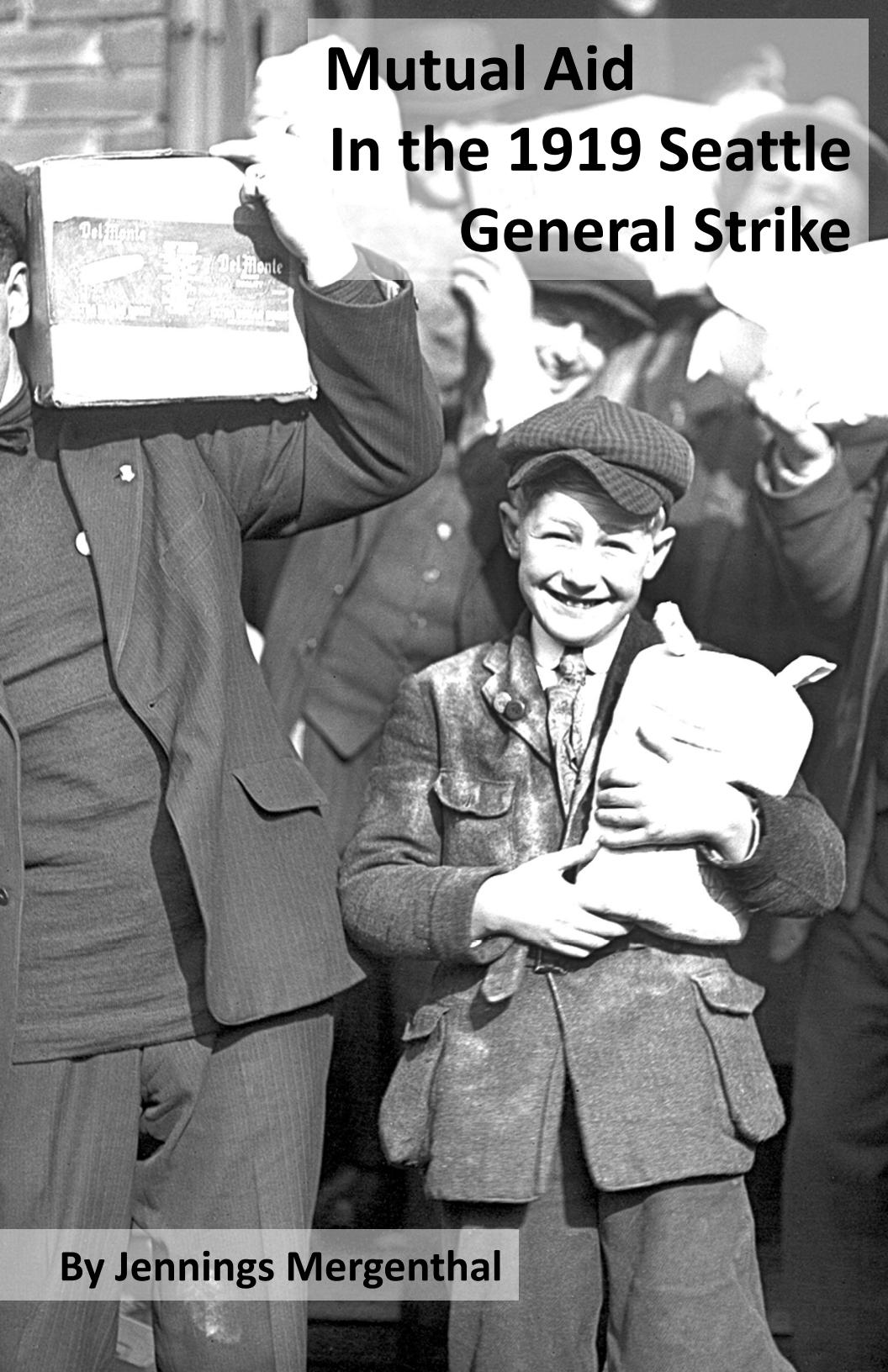


# Mutual Aid In the 1919 Seattle General Strike



By Jennings Mergenthal

## The Context

In 1919, Seattle was a very different place. It had been officially incorporated for only fifty years. Pre-colonization was still in living memory for the seventeen Duwamish villages displaced by the settlement. Seattle has grown rapidly into a population of 310,000, a bit smaller than Minneapolis.

MOUNT RAINIER AS IT LOOKS ON A CLEAR DAY FROM SEATTLE, FIFTY MILES AWAY.



Wikimedia Commons

The Great War (the last war that will ever happen) has just ended a few months ago. The recent Russian Revolution is serving as a source of hope and inspiration for leftists internationally, including in America.

Unionization is on the rise, but faces harsh resistance. A few years before, union supporters were violently attacked and killed in nearby Everett. During the War, the government mediated a truce between labor and management to prevent strikes or lockouts from disrupting the war effort, but this fragile managed peace has fallen apart following Armistice.

The city has also just emerged from two waves of the devastating influenza pandemic. Globally a third of the world's population was sickened, and between 50 and 100 million died as a result of the disease. In Seattle, more than than 1,400 died and the city repeatedly shut down and employed a mask mandate.

The War also caused massive economic inflation due to shortages, but wages have not kept pace. Housing shortages similarly meant that the cost of living in Seattle is exorbitant. Working conditions, particularly in industrial fields, were unregulated and dangerous and many of Seattle's unions are full of disgruntled leftists.

So perhaps Seattle was not quite so different then as now.



Elevator operator with an influenza mask. Seattle, 1918.

Museum of History and Industry



Seattle Union Record,  
November 1, 1913

## About Strikes

A strike is a work stoppage. A union goes on strike generally because of a disagreement with their employer, and in the process, they forfeit their pay.

In a sympathy strike, another union stops its own work in support of strikers, even though the strike is not with their own employer.

When a strike spreads to a large enough proportion of an area, it becomes a general strike. General strikes are powerful and difficult to organize. They are usually governed by a **strike committee**, elected representative from unions who can vote on decisions and actions on behalf of all striking workers, including when to end the strike.

General strikes are also controversial. The Seattle strike was opposed by the more conservative national federation of unions the American Federation of Labor. But still, successful general strikes inspired by this one were organized in Winnipeg in 1919 and in San Francisco and Minneapolis in 1934.

Sympathy strikes (and therefore also general strikes) have been illegal for the vast majority of unions in the United states since the passage of the 1949 Taft-Hartley Act.



“Solidarity,” by I. Swenson, Seattle Union Record, February 11, 1911

## The Strike

Following the end of the War, shipyard workers in Seattle began to negotiate higher wages. Negotiations broke down after shipyard owners offered only raises for some workers. On January 21, 1919, the 35,000 shipyard workers went on strike. The majority of those workers were employed at the Skinner and Eddy Corporation.

Workers engaged the Seattle Central Labor Council, who polled support for a sympathy strike. Receiving near unanimous support from 110 local unions, a general strike was set for February 6, 1919 at 10 am.

At this time many unions were racially segregated, but the strike was even supported by Japanese American unions, who were not permitted to vote in the strike decision.



Workers leaving the shipyard, University of Washington Special Collections.

Corporate owned newspapers tried to fearmonger about the impending strike and encourage dissent.

Tuesday February 4 1919, two days before the strike.

## GENERAL STRIKE PLANS GOING AHEAD

FULL Leased Wire of the United Press Association.  
COMPLETE Service of the News-Paper Enterprise Association.

# The Seattle Star

SEE PAGE 2

VOLUME 21. NO. 290

THE GREATEST DAILY CIRCULATION OF ANY PAPER IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST  
Subject to Second Class Mail Tax, \$1.00, at the Postoffice at Seattle, Wash., under the Act of Congress, October 3, 1917.

SEATTLE, WASH., TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1919.

NIGHT EDITION  
TWO CENTS IN SEATTLE

Per Year by Mail, \$1.00 to \$2.00

Weather Forecast: Windy and drizzling, probably cold, with rain today, decreasing tonight and Wednesday

# STOP BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

This is plain talk to the common-sense union men of Seattle.

You are being rushed pell-mell into a general strike. You are being urged to use a dangerous weapon--the general strike, which you have never used before--which, in fact, has never been used anywhere in the United States.

It isn't too late to avert the tragic results that are sure to come from its use.

You men know better than any one else that public sentiment in Seattle--that is, the sentiment of the ninety per cent of the people who are not directly involved in the wage dispute of the shipworkers--is *against a general strike*. You know that the general public doesn't think the situation demands the use of that drastic, disaster-breeding move. *You know, too, that you cannot club public sentiment into line, and you know, too, that no strike has ever been won without the moral support of the public.*

The people know that there is a decent solution of the issue at stake. And the issue at stake is merely a better wage to the average unskilled worker in the shipyards. To a large extent public opinion is with these unskilled workers now, but public opinion will turn against them if their wage issue brings chaos and disaster upon the whole community unnecessarily. Seattle today is awake to the fact that she is on the brink of a disaster, *and Seattle is getting fighting mad*. The people are beginning to visualize the horrors that a general tie-up will bring. They see the suffering that is bound to come and *they don't propose to be silent sufferers*.

Today Seattle resents this whole miserable mess. Seattle resents the insolent attitude of the shipyard owners; Seattle resents the verbosity of Director General Piez, whose explanation does not explain; and just as emphatically resents the high-handed "rule or ruin" tactics of the labor leaders who propose to lay the whole city prostrate in a vain attempt to show their power. Let us not mince words. A general strike cannot win unless one of two things happens. Either the ship owners and Piez must yield or else the workers must be able to control the situation by *force*. The latter method no doubt would be welcomed by the agitators and the babbler Bolsheviks. But the latter method is bound to be squelched without much ado, and you decent union men of Seattle will be the sufferers then. *A revolt--and some of your leaders are talking of a revolution--to successful must have a country-wide application.* There isn't a chance to spread it east of the mountains. There isn't a chance to spread it south of Tacoma and *today fifty per cent of the unions of Tacoma have turned down the proposition for a general strike*.

Confined to Seattle or even confined to the whole Pacific coast, the use of force by Bolsheviks would be, and should be, quickly dealt with by the army of the United States. These false Bolshevik leaders haven't a chance on earth to win anything for you in this country, *because this country is America--not Russia*.

While theirs were prominent among the local newspapers, the labor-owned Seattle Union Record took a strong pro-strike stance.

Also Tuesday February 4 1919, two days before the strike.

On Thursday at 10 am, 65,000 Seattle workers walked off the job. Despite the apprehensions of the corporate class the city did not plunge into chaos, mobs did not fill the streets.

In fact, strike organizers encouraged people to stay home.

In this editorial, titled "No One Knows Where" Anna Louise Strong made three pledges to mutual aid that we will evaluate over the coming pages:

# ON THURSDAY AT 10 A.M.

There will be many cheering, and there will be some who fear.

Both these emotions are useful, but not too much of either.

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.

\* \* \*

## LABOR WILL FEED THE PEOPLE.

Twelve great kitchens have been offered, and from them food will be distributed by the provision trades at low cost to all.

## LABOR WILL CARE FOR THE BABIES AND THE SICK.

The milk-wagon drivers and the laundry drivers are arranging plans for supplying milk to babies, invalids and hospitals, and taking care of the cleaning of linen for hospitals.

## LABOR WILL PRESERVE ORDER.

The strike committee is arranging for guards, and it is expected that the stopping of the cars will keep people at home.

\* \* \*

A few hot-headed enthusiasts have complained that strikers only should be fed, and the general public left to endure severe discomfort. Aside from the inhumanitarian character of such suggestions, let them get this straight—

## NOT THE WITHDRAWAL OF LABOR POWER, BUT THE POWER OF THE WORKERS TO MANAGE WILL WIN THIS STRIKE.

What does Mr. Piez of the Shipping Board care about the closing down of Seattle's shipyards, or even of all the industries of the northwest. Will it not merely strengthen the yards at Hog Island, in which he is more interested?

When the shipyard owners of Seattle were on the point of agreeing with the workers, it was Mr. Piez who wired them that, if they so agreed—

## HE WOULD NOT LET THEM HAVE STEEL.

Whether this is camouflage we have no means of knowing. But we do know that the great eastern combinations of capitalists COULD AFFORD to offer privately to Mr. Skinner, Mr. Ames and Mr. Duthie a few millions apiece in eastern shipyard stock,

## RATHER THAN LET THE WORKERS WIN.

The closing down of Seattle's industries, as a MERE SHUTDOWN, will not affect these eastern gentlemen much. They could let the whole northwest go to pieces, as far as money alone is concerned.

BUT, the closing down of the capitalistically controlled industries of Seattle, while the WORKERS ORGANIZE to feed the people, to care for the babies and the sick, to preserve order—THIS will move them, for this looks too much like the taking over of POWER by the workers.

\* \* \*

Labor will not only SHUT DOWN the industries, but Labor will REOPEN, under the management of the appropriate trades, such activities as are needed to preserve public health and public peace. If the strike continues, Labor may feel led to avoid public suffering by reopening more and more activities,

## UNDER ITS OWN MANAGEMENT.

And that is why we say that we are starting on a road that leads—NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!

## Labor Will Feed The People

*“Twelve great kitchens have been offered and from them food will be distributed by the provisions trades at a low cost to all.”*

This was actually an understatement, there would be twenty-one kitchens offered by restaurants across the city. The food was donated or purchased by the unions, prepared in the kitchens, and transported to dining halls where it was served cafeteria style.

On the first day, there were logistical delays such that the first meal was not offered until nearly five pm and there was a shortage of dishes. By the next day, this had been resolved and disposable dishes (paper plates and pasteboard cups) were provided.

Striking workers were fed for 25¢ per meal (\$4.50 today) and members of the public could eat for 35¢ (\$6.40), but reportedly none were turned away for lack of funds.

The halls fed more than 30,000 meals a day with service organized by volunteers belonging to the the Waitresses and Waiters union Local 240.

Above: Drake and Ray restaurant, used as one of the kitchens.  
Bettman Archive.

Below: Alice Lord, (center) the president of Local 240, and other local members serve meals at one of the dining halls.  
Museum of History and Industry.

DRAKE & RAY  
THIS PLACE WILL BE USED AS  
KITCHEN NO 1  
FOR THE UNIONS DURING THE STRIKE.  
DRAKE & RAY  
WE MAKE OUR OWN PASTRY



## Labor Will Care For The Babies And The Sick

*“The milk-wagon drivers and the laundry drivers are arranging plans for supplying milk to babies, invalids, and hospitals, and taking care of the cleaning of linen for hospitals.”*

The milk-wagon drivers' union established 35 stations across the city for milk distribution. The milk was purchased by the union from farmers and each dairy station was open from 9am to 2pm. Similar to the dining halls, there were no reports of those without funds being turned away.

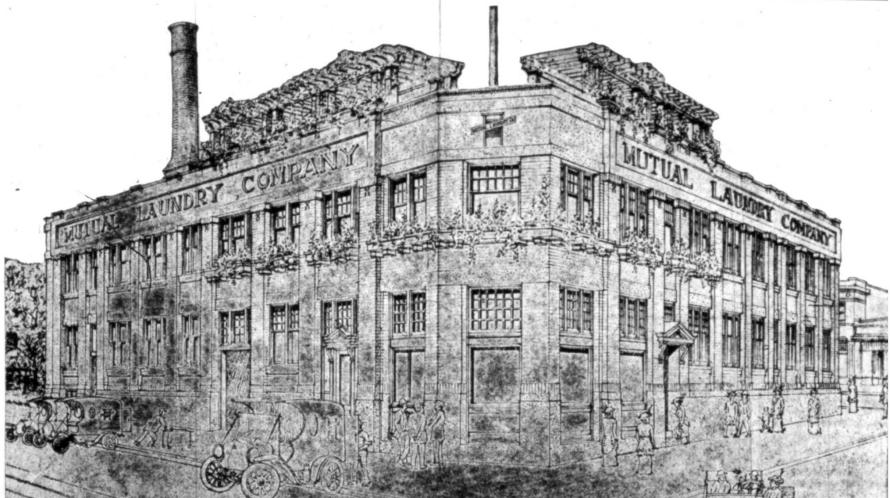
The Seattle Mutual Laundry Company, established in 1915 was a worker owned cooperative. They were exempted from the walkout in order to continue to provide laundry service to hospitals to maintain sanitary conditions. The laundry was collected in wagons labeled “Hospital Laundry Only, By Order of the General Strike Committee.”

Drug stores remained closed, except for prescriptions services. Garbage collection also continued with restrictions under the advisement that they “may carry such garbage as tends to create an epidemic, but no ashes or papers.”

Top: Ole Lowell and son Herbie circa 1916.  
(not actually part of the strike, but a comparable era)  
Wedgewood in Seattle History

Center: Mutual Laundry Company Building  
University of Washington Libraries

Bottom: Garbage collection in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle,  
circa. 1915. (Similarly not part of the strike itself.)  
Seattle Mutual Archives



## Labor Will Preserve Order

*“The strike committee is arranging for guards and it is expected that the stopping of the [street]cars will keep people at home.”*

The Strike Committee organized the Labor War Veteran Guard. Guards were unarmed and wore white armbands, serving eight-hour shifts both day and night. One guard member described his intentions:

“Instead of a police force with clubs, we need a department of public safety, whose officers will understand human nature and use brains and not brawn in keeping order. The people want to obey the law if you explain it to them reasonably.”

During the strike, arrests fell from more than a hundred per day to less than thirty, with no strike related arrests.

The guard members were unpaid, and were passing up the \$6 per day that they would have received if they had joined the 2,400 armed citizens deputized by the mayor as an auxiliary police force.



Left: Armed citizen brigade. Evening Herald, 1919. Wikimedia Commons.

Right: Strike bulletin published daily with information about the strike, this one from day two. University of Washington Libraries.



## Evaluation and Analysis

By Sunday, (day 4) of the strike. Mayor Ole Hanson. threatened to impose martial law. Some unions, including the more conservative element of the Street Car Men's Union returned to work.

By Monday morning, even more workers had begun to return. The Strike Committee called an official end to the general strike effective Tuesday at noon. The shipyard workers remained on strike for another month, but failed to win significant concessions. The strike became national news because of the disruption to business. A number of the organizers were prosecuted for sedition becoming part of the first Red Scare, leading to increased persecution of leftists and immigrants nationally (and in Seattle specifically) though the sedition charges failed to stick. In Seattle employer policies turned sharply against unions and the Seattle Central Labor Council spend the next generation under reactionary conservative leadership.

Conservative contemporaries of the strike regarded it as a failure because it did not lead to the rise of an American Bolshevik revolution. This is true, but also wasn't the point of the strike for most striking workers

A key part of the strike's effectiveness was the organizational structure that allowed the facilitation of mutual aid, which kept the strike popular among impacted residents. The tangible reality of day-to-day life is just as important to most

people (if not more important) than the abstract concept of solidarity and we need to figure out how to engage with both so that they may feed each other. The strike was a disruption to industry, but mutual aid met the material needs of the impacted strikers and their families.

The strike was able to effectively organize because of the groundwork of the preceding decades. The workers in Seattle belonged to active, organized local unions and a central labor council had been in existence for 30 years. People had a vocabulary for and engagement with labor and labor activism that largely does not exist now (in large part of the past century of retrenching conservative interests and the inability of establishment liberals to present a contrasting vision).

In short, the general strike could be organized because people were already organized, which was a long, slow process of building investment in solidarity and shared identity as workers. They could strike because they trusted that their material needs would be met.

This is why, however well intentioned, social media calls for a general strike are ineffective. In order to work, a strike needs to be accompanied by infrastructure to support the needs of the strikers. While a general strike is a good eventual goal, more important in the short term is working to build a sense of community engagement and investment such that people can come to rely on their communities and build a mutual network of support.

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Cover image: strikers gather groceries, Museum of History and Industry.



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