افغانستان آزاد ــ آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مبـــــــاد   بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مــــباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم   از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com   afgazad@gmail.com

| European Languages | زبانهای اروپائی |

11 February 2019

By Kayla Costa
12.02.2019

One hundred years since the Seattle General Strike

From February 6 to 11, 1919, more than 60,000 workers in Seattle, Washington joined one of the most significant general strikes in United States history. Sparked by the appeals of local shipyard workers, for six days the working class united across industries took control of the economic life of the leading city of the Pacific Northwest.

Seattle's financial and political elite was deeply shaken by the strike, seeing in it the heartbeat of the recent October Russian Revolution and the tocsin of revolution in America. Headlines in the capitalist newspapers screamed of the dangers posed by the workers' "un-American" and "Bolshevik" actions. Thousands of federal troops, police and even upper-class university students were mobilized to suppress the struggle.

A pro-business Seattle newspaper during the strike headlined "Under which flag"?

Seattle's workers were indeed inspired by the Russian events. In the months preceding the strike, longshoremen had refused to load ships bound for Russia's counterrevolutionary White Army. Afterwards, they refused to load cargo on ships supplying imperialism's undeclared war on Soviet Russia. And in the years leading up to 1919, many thousands of workers in Seattle and the surrounding regions gravitated to socialism and the revolutionary syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), in spite of intense repression by the Wilson administration.

Yet, while the strike erupted as an epic expression of class conflict driven by the rank-and-file, it remained largely under the control of Seattle's trade union leaders, who ensured that it did not move beyond its spontaneous form. This proved decisive. The strike ended without any demands being met and was followed by arrests, raids and censorship of radical and communist groups.

In less than one week, Seattle's rank-and-file workers had offered a glimpse of the immense power of the working class in unified struggle—and in only one American city. But they had also demonstrated that even the most militant action, absent a politically conscious socialist leadership, will be defused and defeated.

International and Historical Context

The start of the First World War in August 1914 marked a turning point in the history of mankind, bringing the crisis of world capitalism to an unprecedented level. In the epoch of imperialism, the underlying contradictions of capitalism compelled the ruling class to plunge the world into a war in which millions of workers were sent to slaughter.

Gaining reelection in 1916 under the slogan "he kept us out of war," Wilson nonetheless thrust the US into the global maelstrom in 1917. Dependent upon labor peace to keep wartime production constant, big business and the US government agreed to let the American Federation of Labor (AFL) freely unionize, but only if the union bureaucrats joined in the effort to suppress strikes during the war. The government also enacted the Espionage Act of 1917, a law that gave the state power to detain and prosecute anyone who engaged in anti-war activity. The law was used to raid the office of the IWW and round up its leadership. Anti-war leaders of the Socialist Party (SP), including Eugene Debs, were also arrested.

Eugene Debs

Nonetheless, workers flocked to the Socialist Party and the IWW, which openly opposed the war and the patriotic "business unionism" of the AFL and its president, Samuel Gompers. Membership in the IWW peaked in 1917 with around 150,000, with Seattle serving as the center for activity in much of the West Coast. The Socialist Party of Washington also had a concentrated presence in Seattle, with close to 4,000 dues-paying members in the state party, which stood on the left-wing of the national organization.

In spite of AFL efforts to block strikes, between 1916 and 1918 the average number of workers on strike per year was 2.4 times higher than in 1915. More than 1 million American workers walked off the job in 1917 and again in 1918, followed by more than 4 million in 1919, the largest strike wave in US history to that point. Deep antiwar sentiment in the working class increasingly intersected with economic changes caused by war, especially inflation, to push forward the strike wave. In Seattle, the cost of living had more than doubled between 1913 and 1919.

Many of these strikes exhibited growing solidarity and coordination among different sections of the working class. On the West Coast, shipyard workers slowed the distribution process by refusing to process "10-hour lumber" for several months, providing material sympathy to the lumberers who were striking for an eight-hour day. Later in 1919, workers in Winnipeg, Canada, launched another general strike, and, in the US,

500,000 steelworkers and coal miners carried out overlapping strikes. The spirit of socialism and the Russian Revolution infused all of these struggles.

The conditions that led to the Seattle General Strike were by no means local. All over the world World War I and its immediate aftermath galvanized workers in imperialist centers and the oppressed masses of the colonies. Strikes, protests, revolts, and revolutionary struggles spread across the globe, especially after the working class took power in Russia in October 1917.

John Reed

News of the October Revolution was read widely by workers across the US, especially after reports were shared by Oregon native John Reed in his *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Russian ships often came to San Francisco and Seattle ports. On January 3, 1918, the Central Labor Council of Seattle wrote a letter to Russian workers after exchanges with the *Shilka* ship crew:

"We extend to all factions of workers alike our hearty good will, firm belief that in the end the rule of the workers will be absolute and the affairs of your great country, the first of any in modern history, placed to remain in the hands of the only necessary and responsible class in society—the working class. Again expressing to you our profound sympathy with you in your efforts to establish true democracy and pledging you our hearty support in hastening that end, we are, yours fraternally."

Many more were deeply inspired by the triumph of the Russian working class, and directly opposed the American capitalists' efforts to defeat it. By the fall of 1919, Seattle port

workers refused to load and send a US ship carrying munitions for the counterrevolutionary White Army.

Lead-up to the Strike

The working class in Seattle was organized in 110 craft-based unions affiliated with the AFL, representing over 65,000 members. In addition, there were a handful of IWW locals with 3,500 members, mostly in timber, agricultural and maritime work, along with a few segregated craft unions of black and Japanese workers. Unions run by the AFL intentionally separated the working class by trade and occupation, nationality, race, and gender. Since the 1880s, many AFL unions banned white workers from organizing alongside black, Hispanic, and Asian workers.

However, a general union framework also existed in Seattle. All of the AFL unions elected delegates to a larger organization, the Central Labor Council. Responding to the overwhelming political sentiments of rank-and-file workers, many of the leaders took to their Council seats radical conceptions—at least compared to the national AFL leadership. Harry Ault, Hulet Wells, and others were active in the Socialist Party of Washington. Even James "Jimmy" Duncan, elected Secretary of the Council in 1915, was a "respected progressive" and self-described socialist, oriented more to industrial unionism than the craft unionism promoted by the AFL.

In 1919, Seattle's workers were able to use the Central Labor Council to initiate the general strike. But the spark that ignited it came from the city's 35,000 shipyard workers—the largest section of the working class—who went out on strike starting Tuesday, January 21, to demand pay increases that had been promised as compensation for their sacrifices during the war. They had become aware of their industrial significance after building naval supplies and operating the Seattle-area ports, work that directly served the interests of American business and government.

Seattle shipyard workers strike

The day after the strike began, shipyard workers sent representatives from their Metal Trades Council to a meeting of the Central Labor Council to demand a citywide strike in support of their struggle.

Coincidentally or not, on the day of the appeal, the main leaders of the Council were in Chicago for a meeting of the International Workers' Defense League regarding the conviction of San Francisco AFL leader Tom Mooney. With substitutes for the missing 25 delegates, the Council approved the appeal for the general strike, and a vote was sent out in all 110 unions across the city.

Within a week, rank-and-file workers voted overwhelmingly in favor of the general strike. Even in unions thought to be conservative—the Carpenter's Union, Musician's Union, Typographical Union, and some Teamsters locals—workers demanded to join the general strike, often risking their own negotiations and fighting off the intentions of their local leaderships. Only a handful of unions did not go on strike, mostly from government sectors like the Post Office Department, where the risk of being fired was especially high.

Unable to stop the support that had grown, members of the Central Labor Council voted on January 29 to set the first meeting for the General Strike Committee for February 2. The General Strike Committee would function as the struggle's highest organizing body, comprised largely of rank-and-file delegates from all participating unions, as well as the Central Labor Council.

Simultaneously, there emerged an executive group of the top labor officials called the "Committee of Fifteen," which became the most aggressive representative of the labor aristocracy—and which constantly searched for ways to end the strike. The tension between the interests of the rank-and-file, represented by the General Strike Committee, and the interests of the labor bureaucracy—and behind it in Seattle's capitalists—represented by the "Fifteen," was a key component of the strike's conduct and defeat.

The Labor Temple, where Council meetings were held

In the four days that followed February 2, the General Strike Committee coordinated every aspect of logistical preparation. Various people—union representatives, Strike Committee members, Wobblies, city officials—cycled in and out of the Labor Temple to make requests to the three subcommittees of Construction, Transportation, and Provisions. From these discussions, the leaders organized food kitchens, child care, newspapers and press releases. They ensured that food stores did not perish, that trash did not pile up, and that basic needs of the working class were met.

Revealing the conservative character of the highest leadership, the "Committee of Fifteen" issued exemptions for certain kinds of work, mostly raised by the desperate local union executives and public officials. Certain laundrymen, utility workers, and telephone operators were required to perform their work during the strike, so that essential economic and financial operations were not hampered. But some of the approved exemptions were requested by the rank-and-file, such as hospital workers allowed to process pharmacy prescriptions and culinary workers allowed to produce food for the strikers, so long as they had the signed-off card reading "Exempt by Strike Committee."

Everywhere among workers there were intense ideological discussions about socialism and the larger meaning of the strike. The term "Bolshevism," hurled at the workers by their enemies as epithet, was doubtless embraced by many. But the trade union leadership stifled these discussions in order to keep the influence of socialism at bay. For example, the Fifteen voted against the strike slogan of "We have nothing to lose but our chains, and a whole world to gain," instead choosing, "Together We Win."

Fearful that the struggle might escape their control, trade union leadership argued that there ought to be an announced end date for the general strike. This was defeated. As Anne Louise Strong wrote for the History Committee a month later, "Many of the older members of the labor movement frankly dreaded the general strike. They saw in it even such possibilities as the complete disruption of Seattle's labor movement. They urged that a definite time limit be fixed to the sympathetic strike."

As preparations were underway by the labor committees, fear grew in the bourgeoisie and among the middle class, illustrated by a sampling of headlines: "Stop Before it's Too Late"; "Seattle Will be Destitute in Two Days"; and "Federal Forces Ready for any Crisis in City."

Ole Hanson

Middle class residents stockpiled food, lighting equipment, and other goods. Some rich families fled to Portland to stay in hotels for the duration of the strike. Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson called in thousands of state and federal troops to join local police and volunteer veterans and university students, whose threats to arrest and even shoot any unruly worker had to be taken seriously, given recent events such as the murder of IWW organizer Frank Little in Montana and the gunpoint roundup and deportation of copper miners in Bisbee, Arizona.

While the top trade union officials worked to obscure the revolutionary implications of such a massive strike, the capitalists and all their representative arms rightly saw within it the reverberations of the Russian Revolution. The Seattle *Star* paper released a front-page editorial the day before the strike, making a desperate appeal to nationalism and anti-communism:

"We call this thing that is upon us a general strike, but it is more than that. It is to be an acid test of American citizenship—an acid test of all those principles for which our soldiers have fought and died. It is to determine whether this is a country worth living in and a country worth dying for. The challenge is right up to you—men and women of Seattle. *Under which flag do you stand?*"

To be continued