



SEATTLE 1919 - LESSONS FOR TODAY

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This is a talk that I am developing as part of the Labor Center's educational efforts around the Fuse 1919 concert and Labor Studies Week at Seattle Central Community College, which was April 24 through 28, 1989.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STRIKE

I think it's important to examine the Seattle 1919 strike for several reasons. First, on a personal basis, I was born and raised in Seattle and yet I know very little about this piece of our history.

Secondly, as Rob Rosenthal points out, there were 15 general strikes in U.S. history, but the Seattle strike was the only one that went to stage 2. Stage 1 is a mass withdrawal of economic activity; stage 2 is self-management of the functions of government by workers.

Third, the strike is important because I don't think you can explain the shape of organized labor in Washington state without reference to the Seattle 1919 strike. I don't think you can explain, for instance, the rise of Dave Beck who used the militancy of Seattle labor to build the Teamsters. Nor do I think you can explain the rise of our industrial unions in the mid 1930's, such as the old line Machinists union, turning to an industrial model to organize Boeing in 1935. Nor do I think you can explain our state being characterized as the Soviet of Washington without reference to the Seattle 1919 general strike.

Fourth, I think it's important because it did reach stage 2, in which effective control of government was held by working people. And, for those people who believe this to be an important goal for the contemporary labor movement, the strike becomes important as a learning ground for the future.

Finally, I think the strike is important as a source for alternative visions of what to push for and how to act. And I think the contemporary labor movement is in need of alternative visions to reassert itself and remobilize its natural allies. The strike can give us hope, because hope, after all, is the possibility of power, and we did achieve it.

MY TALK'S OUTLINE

What I'd like to do is to first describe the strike itself, talk about some of the environmental components of that strike, talk about the effect the strike had on labor afterwards, how the strike affected the current structure of today's labor movement, and then analyze the contemporary labor movement in terms of the eight environmental components that existed at the time of the Seattle 1919 general strike.

THE SEATTLE STRIKE ITSELF

The Seattle General Strike grew out of a strike in the shipyards. There had been a tremendous expansion of manufacturing activity in the Seattle shipyards during the war years. At the beginning of World War I there was only one shipyard in the Seattle area. But by the time World War I was in full gear, Seattle was producing one-fourth of all the ships used in the war. This had meant a tremendous increase in the number of workers in the shipyards.

During the war years, the federal government had set up a regulatory board, known as the Macy Board to set wage rates in the shipyards. This standardization of the wage rates meant a deterioration in the position of the Seattle workers, because in Seattle the workers had better hours and higher wages than the national average.

The metal trades council leadership had negotiated with Charles Pie in Washington, D.C. and had come to an understanding that the Seattle unions could negotiate directly, i.e. locally with the shipyard owners in Seattle.

During the time that the Seattle Metal Trades Council was negotiating locally, a letter was sent by Pie to the Metal Trades Association. However, the letter was mistakenly delivered to the Metal Trades Council. The letter told the shipyard owners not to negotiate with the Metal Trades Council, and if they did their steel supply would be cut off.

The Metal Trades Council felt that they had been double-crossed, and called a strike on January 21, 1919. The strike was 30,000 strong and workers were out in Seattle, Tacoma and Aberdeen. The Metal Trades Councils asked for general strike support and the Seattle Central Labor Council voted to have a referendum of locals. Much to everyone's surprise, the majority of the 110 locals voted in favor of the General Strike.

There are comments about how the leadership of the Seattle labor movement was out of town at the time of the call for the referendum. This was, in fact, the case. They had been attending a national conference on the Tom Mooney fight in Chicago when they heard of the referendum vote. They came back to Seattle and postponed the strike deadline to February 6. Both Jim Duncan, secretary of the Seattle Labor Council, and Anna Louise Strong, a writer for the Union Record, were in Chicago at that time.

On February 2 a general strike committee was formed, of 300 rank and file delegates, 3 delegates from each union. This general strike committee set up a 15-person executive committee.

On Tuesday, February 4 Anna Louise Strong wrote her famous editorial in the Union Record, which said that labor would "not only shut down the industries, but labor will reopen under the management of the appropriate trades."

On February 6, a Thursday morning, at 10:00 a.m. the general strike began. As observers said, it began in an extremely quiet manner. There were no industries, there was no newspaper hawking, there were no trolley cars, in fact "nothing moved but the tide."

There were 100,000 workers out in a city whose total population was 300,000. Effective government moved into the hands of the general strike committee. They served 30,000 meals per day, operated 21 kitchens, and held the strike solid until the following Tuesday.

On Friday February 7, Ole Hanson, the mayor, and president of the University of Washington Henry Suzzolo called in the National Guard, and on February 11 at 10:00 a.m. the strike was called off by the motion of the general strike committee.

THE EIGHT ENVIRONMENTAL COMPONENTS

I want to talk about some of the components of the strike, which I saw in reading about it. I want to emphasize that I'm not a scholar of the Seattle 1919 strike, and these components are based upon reading chapters on the general strike in the following books: Jonathan Dembo's A History of the Washington State Labor Movement 1885-1935, Ann Louise Strong's I Change Worlds, John Williamson's Dangerous Scot, Jeremy Brecher's Strike!, Tracy Strong's Right in Her Soul, Robert Tyler's Rebels of the Woods, and Rob Rosenthal's master's thesis, After the Deluge: The Seattle General Strike of 1919 and its Aftermath.

1. Rapid Shift in the Political Economy

As I mentioned, there was a rapid shift in the political economy during the World War I years. Between 1914 and 1919, there was 190% increase in manufacturing concentrated primarily in the shipyards, so that now one-quarter of the war production came from Seattle. There were 40,000 workers out of a population of 300,000 people, concentrated in the shipyards, and they were organized by the Metal Trades Council.

2. Employer Attack

During the war years, the employers were openly planning to attack the strength of labor unions. There were open shop editorials in the Seattle papers during the war. They were preparing for their "American plan" offensive.

The American plan meant that the employers would have no contact with unions, and that they would set up their own employment agencies to recruit workers, ensuring that no union members were hired. These employment agencies, of course, were the exact things that the Wobblies had led free speech movements against from the time of the Spokane free speech fight in 1909, through Aberdeen in 1911 and Everett in 1916.

3. Government Repression

The informal repression was an increase in vigilante actions against the efforts of working people to organize. This new form of vigilante-ism was in response to the Wobblies' tactic of packing the jails, as they did in Spokane in 1909.

However, in Aberdeen in 1911 the citizens' police rounded up the Wobblies, beat them, and sent them from Aberdeen to Montesano. This was the same tactic that was used in Everett prior to the Verrona Massacre. In October of 1916, 50 Wobblies went up to Everett in support of the Shingle Weavers strike, and they were taken off the boats and forced to run through a gauntlet of clubs. Beaten, they straggled back to Seattle. This led to the November 1916 massacre in which 250 Wobblies went back up to Everett by boat, and were fired upon by Sheriff McRae of Everett.

In addition to tolerance of vigilante action, the police were becoming more intolerant of protests, marches and rallies in the Seattle area in 1919. This led to police beatings and the breaking up of otherwise peaceful rallies.

There were also formal laws passed that set up an atmosphere for legal repression. In January of 1919, the State Legislature passed three laws aimed at working people. The anti-syndicalist law, the red flag law, and the state sabotage law. Finally, in terms of governmental repression, there was the federal Macy Board, which, in its efforts to regulate and standardize wage rates, was attacking the hard-won gains in wages and hours by the Seattle unions.

4. Expectation

There was an expectation on the part of working people that their position was going to improve. This expectation had at least three sources.

The first source was labor's effort over the previous 40 years, beginning with the rise of the Knights of Labor, to gain some share of the industrial expansion occurring in America. The Knights of Labor had tried it, the AF of L had tried it beginning in 1886, the Socialist Labor Party had tried it, the Western Federation of Miners and the Wobblies in 1905 had tried it, so there was this social memory and expectation that eventually working people would get a share of the wealth being created by the industrial expansion of America.

The second source of expectation came from the sacrifices being made by working people during the World War I years. They fully expected, as American working people have done after almost all of our wars, that they would benefit when the war ended.

The third source was the expectation created by Charles Pie when he supposedly told the Metal Trades Council that they could negotiate locally with the shipyard employers. As we have seen, this expectation was contradicted with the Metal Trades Council found out that Charles Pie was threatening to stop the steel supply to the shipyards if the employers did, in fact, negotiate locally with the Metal Trades Council.

5. World Consciousness

During the period of time just before the Seattle general strike, I have the impression that Seattle working shifted from being an isolated, colonial workforce into a world conscious workforce.

For example, there was a worldwide reaction after World War I. There were strikes in Argentina, Peru, and Chile, there were revolutions in Hungary and Western Europe, and most important of all there was the Russian Revolution of 1917 in which a general strike went from stage 2 to stage 3. Rosenthal characterizes stage 3 as the permanent substitution of leadership.

Russian ships were coming into Seattle ports, and Lenin's speeches were being published in the Union Record. The Longshore were boycotting munitions shipments to the counter-revolutionary forces in the Soviet Union.

6. Central Body Organization

There were several characteristics of the Seattle Central Labor Council which were quite advanced for the times. First of all, labor's primary loyalty was to the Seattle Central Labor Council. Despite the fact that they were organized into craft unions, the loyalty was to the central body. People were "Seattle labor."

Second, the Central Labor Council was organized on a principle that Rosenthal describes as "Duncanism," named after the secretary of the Central Labor Council, Jim Duncan. This was a form of industrial unionism. First of all, all the allied crafts were organized into councils such as the Metal Trades Council. Secondly, all the craft union contracts had the same expiration date. Third, the Central Labor Council was continuously called upon the AFL to organize on an industrial basis. And four, there was the tradition of referendum vote before the central body could take action in the name of its 110 unions.

Third, there was a very high membership in the Seattle area. There were 60,000 union members out of a total population of 300,000. I don't know what the total workforce would have been, but at 60,000, you can assume that practically every working person was union.

Fourth, there was the Union Record. This was the only daily union-owned newspaper in the nation. It was 50% owned by the Central Labor Council, and other percentages were owned by local labor unions. Between 1917 and 1920, its circulation grew from 40,000 to 112,000. Its editor was Harry Ault, and its most famous writer was Anna Louise Strong, the person who wrote the February 4 editorial.

7. Political Allies

The Seattle labor movement had a tradition and experience with working together with other non-labor organizations in political alliances. There had been, for instance, a joint legislative committee made up of the grange and the railroad unions, which had focused on legislative achievements. There had been the involvement with the People's Party and the election in 1896 of Populist governor John Rogers and Knights of Labor leader Robert Bridges, who was elected to be the first public lands commissioner.

Bridges is, of course, known also as one of the advocates of our directly-elected public ports, which were a Knights of Labor and small business answer to the potential domination of our coastline by the railroad owners. So there was this tradition of working with reform groups, farmer union groups, and grange groups.

It's important to remember that the Washington State Grange, under the leadership of Charles Kegley and his successor William Bouck. was an organization that fought for industrial democracy and public ownership of the state's infrastructure resources.

8. Radical Visions

Prior to 1919, the state was a fertile ground for radical visions, i.e. visions that were alternatives to capital's domination of the economy.

For example, after the defeat of William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 election, Eugene Debs and other commonwealth leaders decided to choose a state in which they could build a living example of the type of cooperative society they hoped for. This state was Washington state, and Washington state in the two decades prior to the 1919 strike was the site of nationally-funded utopian communities, many of which served as the base for itinerant working class organizers.

There was the presence of a militant organization, the Industrial Workers of the World, which was formed in 1905 in Chicago under the leadership of Big Bill Hayward from the Western Federation of Miners, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Eugene Debs, Daniel DeLeon, Lucy Parsons, and Thomas Hagerty. This organization was ideologically militant, in the sense that it saw no common ground between the employer class and the employees.

In addition to their vision of industrial democracy, which contradicted capital's vision, they also had organizational position within war related industries. Their 1917 50,000 strong timber strike in the Northwest was a direct threat to airplane production for World War I. So they were strong both in terms of ideology and in terms of organizational position.

It's also important to remember that when the Wobblies returned from Everett after the Verrona Massacre and were thrown in jail, the Seattle labor movement, despite its objection to the dual unionism of the IWW, provided full support to the jailed IWW members. And, in fact, the first Wobbly tried for the Veronna massacre was acquitted, which was a great victory for the Seattle labor movement.

There was also considerable public debate about different visions of American democracy. As John Williamson describes in his book Dangerous Scot, the Metal Trades Council had allowed the formation of a "workers, soldiers and sailors council" which organized Sunday picnics at 4th and Virginia in Seattle. These picnics would attract 10,000 people, and here speakers such as John Reed, Louise Bryant, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and others.

Another source of radical visions were the policy statements (resolutions) of the Central Labor Council. The Central Labor Council was calling for equal pay for men and women. They called for municipal ownership of electrical utilities, and for recognition of the Russian Revolution.

I think one of the results of the availability of all these different sources of radical visions was that working people in the Seattle area, and in Washington state, had a different self-conception of themselves. This allowed people to see themselves as creators of social visions, and as people capable of not only solidarity across craft lines, but as managers of their own resources.

One of the reasons that Seattle working people could go to stage 2, i.e. open it back up, is because they were already doing that on a smaller scale in their cooperatives and Utopian communities.

THE SUCCESS OF THE STRIKE

There is a great deal of discussion about whether or not the strike was successful and/or beneficial to the Seattle labor movement. Some say the strike provoked the "American plan" and destroyed the labor movement in the Seattle area. However, Rob Rosenthal argues just the opposite. He looks at three indicators of the movement's success: first, class identification; second, militancy; and third, radicalism.

In terms of class identification, in other words knowing which side you are on, Rosenthal argues that the strike was successful, and he measures that by saying that the Union Record's circulation skyrocketed after the strike, that membership in unions remained strong despite a doubly deep depression in the Seattle area caused by the closure of the Seattle shipyards after the war.

Two, in terms of militancy, again the Seattle labor movement remained more militant than the nation as a whole, militant meaning the willingness to act to protect your interests. The Seattle unions held their wages better than on a national level, and the unions also continued to try to act in new ways such as formation of the triple alliance, the creation of the Farm Labor Party of 1920, and the establishment of a strategy committee by the Central Labor Council.

In terms of the radical vision, Rosenthal argues that it stayed strong for at least three years after the strike, that the resolutions of the Central Labor Council indicate this, that the continual call for the industrial model of organizing indicated this, and that the creation of the Seattle Labor College indicated this.

SHAPING OF THE WASHINGTON LABOR MOVEMENT

I think the strike is also important for its long-term effects on the shape of the labor movement in Washington state.

For instance, as the manufacturing sector declined, there was a rise in the building trades and service sector, and this rise is associated with the career of Dave Beck, who began to organize his statewide Joint Council of Teamsters in 1923. From the statewide council, Beck organized the Western Conference of Teamsters, which again became the model for the organization of the Teamsters nationwide.

Secondly, I don't think you can explain the strength of our industrial union organizing in the mid-1930's without reference to the Duncanism tradition that was part of the strike as described by Rosenthal.

The victory of the Longshore in 1934, the organizing of Boeing on an industrial union model by an old-line craft union, i.e. the IAM, the victory of the Newspaper Guild against Hearst in 1936, and the formation of the International Woodworkers of America in 1937 all are legacies of the organizational model which facilitated the general strike in 1919.

THE EIGHT COMPONENTS IN TODAY'S WORLD

1. Rapid shift in the political economy

There is definitely a strong analogy here. There has been a massive wrenching of this state's political economy during the past 15 years. This time there has been a strong decline in the manufacturing sector (the shipyards being a perfect example) despite the strength of Boeing, and a burst in service sector activities composed of low-wage, non-union, part-time, female-dominated jobs.

2. Employer attack

There is again a strong analogy here. After the Vietnam war, the Business Roundtable organized in 1973 to restructure American society, and a key component of their long-term strategy was to smash the unions, beginning with the construction trades. A hallmark of their success has been the fact that 20 years ago 980 percent of construction activity was union, and today only 22 percent of construction activity is done by union labor.

Another indicator of their success has been the stopping of labor law reform in June of 1978, the breaking of the post-World War II labor/capital accord, and the mounting of their concessionary bargaining campaigns.

Here at home the employer attack has been organizationally mounted by the formation of the Washington Roundtable in 1983 by George Weyerhaeuser and 23 other Chief Executive Officers of the most profitable publicly-held corporations in Washington state. This group has, since 1983, mounted its attack by strategically approaching the basis on which our expectations of ourselves and our society is created, i.e. the public school system. Their intent is not simply to reduce public education to job training. Their intent is to reduce working people's expectations of what type of society they can have, in other words, they are no longer offering the consumer-product defined American dream.

3. Government repression

Here I'm not familiar enough with legislation to draw any analogies. Sometimes I think that the drug laws being imposed, for instance at Boeing, are a way government is going to be used to arbitrarily discipline the work force. But if you were to draw an analogy between the Macy Board and the NLRB, there would be strong comparisons. The NLRB as a mechanism to solve marginal conflicts between labor and capital has basically been gutted. In the absence of the power compromise between labor and capital, there is simply no reason for this administrative process to function in a way beneficial to unions.

4. Expectations

I think one of the things that's not present currently is the expectation that American working people should get more from our society and the economy. For the past 20 years corporations have been hammering the point home that working people and their wages and benefits has been the problem, the source of America's decline in the world. So generally the corporations have been successful in lowering our expectations.

However, I think that the argument that justified concessions by unions based on the theory of "market recovery" is wearing quite thin, and that union leaders are no longer buying this argument, especially those that have received a series of wage cuts.

One of our key tasks today is to redefine our expectations, and to define "more" in a new way. If more is no longer the availability of consumer products, then what is the shape of the new American dream that the American labor movement can promote?

In terms of local negotiations, if they can no longer follow national standards of wage increases, benefits and COLA adjustments, then unions are exploring different conceptions of "more." In other words, if they're not asking for wages and benefits, they're saying "give us a seat on your board of directors, give us shares of your common stock, give us access to corporate information, give us decision-making in the plants and in technological investment.

For instance, the Machinists union at Eastern, prior to the takeover of Lorenzo, had negotiated four seats on Eastern's board of directors, 25% share of Eastern's common stock, computer access to corporate financial information, the diminution of management presence at the shop-floor level, an increase in worker participation in overall planning, and the right to regain wage cuts through increases in labor productivity.

5. World Consciousness

There certainly is an increase in corporate-defined terms such as "Pacific Rim" and "Global Competition." On the other hand, there is also an environmentally-oriented language that says "Act locally and think globally." But I still think that the labor movement is not as world-conscious as our counterparts in 1919. This is something that we certainly need to work toward, especially in light of the ability of capital to move electronically to other nations. We are no longer organizing as we did in the late 1930's against a corporation's fixed assets, such as the G.M. plant in Flint. We are organizing against corporations that can move their capital on a global basis, and the labor movement needs to become world conscious in order to think about how to deal with this situation.

6. Central Body Organization

I'm not familiar enough with the labor movement in Washington state to know whether there is loyalty to a central body analogous to the Seattle 1919 situation. My feeling is that most labor people are loyal to their own international union, more than to any central labor body in the state.

Organizationally, on a statewide level we are not organized, we are not even structurally one unit. The two largest unions in this state, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, with its 65,000 members, and the Washington Education Association with its 46,000 members, are not members of the Washington State Labor Council. Numerous other unions in Washington do not affiliate with the Washington State Labor Council.

So while I think our loyalty factor to a central body is currently weak, I do see some Duncanism analogies in this state. And by Duncanism I mean innovative organizational work.

In the building trades, for instance, I think the Bricklayers "Craft is Back" campaign is quite innovative in the sense that a building trades union is regaining its strength by showing its community relevance through demonstration projects.

Also, the organizing department that has been established by the IBEW 46 is doing some of the most innovative research and organizing in the state.

Another Duncanism analogy is the work of Jim Tusler of the State Labor Council, and the Seattle Workers Center and their efforts to facilitate the creation of worker-beneficial ESOP's. There is a union-created shipyard corporation called Unimar, and there is a successful example of an ESOP at the Goldendale Aluminum plant which is organized by an USWA local.

In terms of membership, however, while we still rank stronger than the nation as a whole, we definitely are declining in terms of percentage of the workforce. The latest estimation is that something like 25% of the workforce in Washington state is union.

Finally, in terms of the Union Record analogy, I don't know that we have a voice that is as unifying nor as broad in its audience as the Union Record. One of our New School proposals last year was to purchase the Daily Olympian from Gannet and run it as a daily labor paper. There is, of course, an increased use of videos as a way of communicating our own message and voice, and I think that there's great potential in computer-based communication.

7. Political Allies

I'm not aware of any structural alliances analogous to the Joint Legislative Committee or the Triple Alliance. There are periodic alliances formed around initiative campaigns like the recent ones for raising the minimum wage and for Initiative 97, the toxics clean-up bill.

There are examples, however, that we can draw from. The Labor-Community Strategy Center in Van Nuys, California is a brand new example of labor building community allies. Also, the State Labor Council has asked the Labor Center to research the relevance of the Washington Commonwealth Federation.

Nevertheless, this is an area that needs to be worked on.

8. Radical Visions

Our Washington state history still an extremely fertile ground for radical visions, but it needs to be intellectually mined by labor.

We have to mine it for the values that the labor movement held prior to its marriage to capital in the post-World War II era. We have to mine it for long-term strategies and tactics that have helped us regain our momentum in the past.

Our first task is to look at our own self-conception, especially how that self-conception relates to visions for a new society. If labor is only about work and the role of worker, we will continue to flounder and our organizations will continue on their current death spiral. We have to conceive ourselves as people concerned with the total environment and the direction of society in order to plan long-term strategies of action that will be successful.

There are beginning signs of this. The fact that the Labor Center exists at all as a place for people to come and stop and think about themselves and their relationship to the world, the fact that we have summer schools, that our program has successfully stressed our history, our political economy, and organizing, and the fact that Helen Lee can mobilize 300 people to attend a Fuse Seattle 1919 concert, a cultural event that is much more than just about work. All these things indicate that people are prepared to take time and think about a radical vision if given the opportunity to do so.

Unions need to restructure themselves so that a portion of their resources are dedicated to time to think, because as the objective conditions continue to deteriorate, there will be a time when both the class identification and the militancy of Washington state labor will act in response and at that point the radical visions will be necessary to make those actions successful.