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The General Strike

Past, Present & Future

Jon Bekken

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2023, Spring

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original 850 workers then formed six cooperatives in a variety of fields, some of which exist to this day. Watches are still sold under the Lip brand, which the workers lost control of many years ago.]

The second one, the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago. There again the bosses threatened to shut the place down. The workers occupied the plant, would not allow any machinery to be removed, and then undertook to continue operating. Again, I don't know how that ended up. [The factory closed a second time in 2012, several workers launched New Era Windows as a worker cooperative.] But in both those situations the workers showed that they could take over the places that they worked to continue running them.

Jon Bekken: There have been many, many instances of workers taking over and running workplaces for periods of time. The problem is if you do one workplace, it's easy for the capitalists surrounding to undercut you. But if it becomes a broader movement then you can support each other. So in Argentina, there are still workers' cooperatives that survive from the collapse of the financial system that have formed a somewhat integrated economic system, supporting each other. It's not the revolution, but it keeps some people alive on the one hand, builds institutions on the other, and it shows possibilities of a different way of running industry.

tual capacity to make decisions and carry them out. But they also build our sense that we can do things. And you see somebody else who does something, you should spread that. Because if they did it, we could do it too. And build that up into a general strike. I realize we're a long way from that. But I don't think you get there without some steps.

Participant: That's really awesome. One thing that's been sitting in the back of my head is how we tend to pay attention to the flashy things like we've been talking about strikes. And I know I'm not the first person to say this. Its kind of a common refrain in the labor movement that workers have the most power in the moments before they go on strike. Actually its the threat of the strike even more than the strike itself. Once you enter the strike, you're in a different situation. You've exposed your strongest card, but the threat of a strike is actually where a lot of demands can be won. And we don't necessarily remember and celebrate those victories in the same way.

We see these waves of strikes or mass protests. And they seem to come like natural phenomenon, like they're totally disconnected from whatever we're doing. But really there are all those little conversations like what Sean's talking about that change people's perceptions of reality. So maybe one takeaway is that maybe the strike is kind of a distraction, almost, to the work that needs to be done beforehand. We need to really be deep into this organizing and, and just changing little things that change people's perception of what are relationships are like, what changes culture.

Another audience member: This discussion brought to my mind two incidents that occurred. One, the Lip Watch Factory, in France. The bosses were in the process of shutting the plant down and the workers took over the plant and continued producing watches. And those watches were distributed to labor supporters all around the world. I don't know how that ended up, if Lip is still a worker collective. (Lip survived as a worker collective for a few years, until the government forced it into liquidation; 250 of the

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duke it out with the army and the police. They were killing people. And the leaders said, You want guns, go talk to the army, but go talk to the soldiers. And so workers began to talk to the soldiers and began to receive arms. After a few days, soldiers began firing on the police and the whole government collapsed. So that's just an example from history of how these conflicts can evolve. Because as Jon pointed out, the army is generally working class people in uniform. Whereas the ranks of the fascists—many, many of them are in the ranks of the police.

Another audience member: I'm a positive person. Wherever I go, I am a union salesperson. The person who delivers the mail, I talked to him about their local meetings and their pensions. The Whole Foods and Trader Joe's workers, every time I get groceries, 30-second pitches. When I'm in the mood I try that 30-second elevator pitch...The other day I was out with a British friend of mine, at a cafe, and I mentioned the union that was organized last year. And all the baristas flew up to the front. We heard about that. We've heard about the Starbucks Union in Buffalo. I was like, holy crap. They ran up and they really get baristas unite. And I was like, Hell Yes, Thank you. Awesome.

So keep, keep doing elevator pitches. Keep fanning little tiny sparks. There's a lot of rejection. I get a lot of shut up dude, I'm only here for six more months and going to this other job. But keep positive, positive sales pitches, solidarity sales pitches, wherever you go. And let's do this. Let's make New England a syndicate.

Jon Bekken: Talking to people changes the conditions of our existence. A while ago I spoke in Boston and I talked about ship workers who had these fights over the menus—what was going to be fed to them as they went from port to port. And some people said, Oh, that's just menus. But they were at sea for two, three weeks between ports. Once you've established that, you're deciding what food's going to be served on that ship. And having won that, you can move on to all sorts of other decisions. And so, you know, little things build our sense of capacity. They build our ac-

could be won away from that position through struggle...This is hard work and it's not necessarily work that I have the patience to undertake. But to the extent that there are people in those institutions or who know people in those institutions, perhaps it's work worth doing. Important work, because if we can reduce the bloodshed, clearly any measures that reduce bloodshed are desirable.

I agree with Eric that force is not our strong point. We're never going to be on an equal playing field in terms of weaponry, training and such. There might be measures that can be taken beyond persuasion, although persuasion and outreach is important. But, for example, police departments rely upon electricity and other utilities, and workers supply that. Armaments need resupply. To the extent that we make and transport the stuff, we could make decisions about who we are going to make this for and where we are going to transport it to. Can they move troops across the country? It's possible to blockade freeways, it's possible to not allow troop transports to move in airports, railroads and such. I feel more confident of our ability to pull that off than I do in our ability to match the army munitions for munitions. If it's necessary to defend oneself I'm not saying one doesn't defend oneself. But I am saying that we should try everything possible to create a situation where there are fewer people coming at us with weapons, and where we can mitigate the damage that they can do.

Participant: The police obviously aren't trustworthy, but at the end of the day many are still trying to reform them, cutting down on certain aspects as far as the training. Over the course of the years, I've seen a lot of aggression-police brutality. It leaves a big mark on the Black community. They bring violence many, many times. We need to think about cutting back on the funding, and on the militarization of the police.

Another audience member: There was a revolution in Russia in February 1917, that was a general strike all right, and the far leftists, they asked their leaders, supply us with arms. We have to

General strikes have toppled governments, put down military coups, won shorter hours, and forced employers to recognize unions. They have shut down entire industries, and brought entire cities under workers' control—at least for a time. General strikes demonstrate our enormous power, our ability to make a new world should we organize to win it. They cause bosses the whole world over to tremble. This article briefly explores the history of general strikes, and the possibilities for rebuilding a labor movement capable of wielding so powerful a force.

General Strikes have a long history in the United States, and around the world—a history that I can touch on only briefly if we are to have time to consider the relevance of general strikes in the modern era, and on why the general strike has always been seen as the labor movement's most powerful weapon.

Over the years, general strikes have been called for a wide range of purposes: to halt wars, to topple dictatorships, to demand shorter working hours, to win union recognition, to defend labor and political rights, and to build a new society. General strikes have been held on every continent except Antarctica.

While there have been withdrawals of workers' labor for as long as there have been exploiters, the first recorded advocacy for a general strike seems to have been in January 1832, when William Benbow published his pamphlet, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*. The very title speaks to the emancipatory vision and power implicit in the general strike—a grand holiday from exploitation, coupled with the constructive work of deciding how society might better be organized. Benbow proposed an extended general strike by the working classes, during which local committees would keep the peace and elect delegates to a convention to decide upon the future direction of the nation. The Chartists endorsed the idea in 1839, and launched

a general strike in 1842 after their demands for political reform and better working conditions were rejected.

This was the first of several European general strikes demanding democracy, the right to organize, and improved working conditions. Many had at least some success; in 1893, for example, Belgian workers waged a general strike that won the right for all men to vote—though the exploiters got multiple votes, while workers only got one.

Early workers' organizations also recognized the general strike as a potential means of restraining governments from declaring war upon one another. This idea was not uncontroversial, with Karl Marx writing to Friedrich Engels on September 16, 1868, denouncing "the Belgian nonsense that it was necessary to strike against war." Despite this, the International Workingmen's Association declared at its 1869 conference that if war broke out a general strike should take place.

When war did break out between France and Germany in 1870, the Paris section of the IWMA immediately denounced the war. However, most German socialists declared the war to be a defensive one. Only Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel refused to vote for war credits and spoke against the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in the Reichstag.

Behind the scenes, Marx worked to undermine workers' efforts to stop the war. "The French need a drubbing," Marx wrote to Engels. "If the Prussians are victorious then the centralization of the State power will give help to the centralization of the working class..." In public, however, he took a very different view, issuing a statement on behalf of the IWMA:

"The alliance of the working classes of all countries will ultimately kill war. The very fact that while official France and Germany are rushing into a fratricidal feud, the workmen of France and Germany send each other messages of peace and goodwill; this great fact, unparalleled in the history of the past, opens the vista of a brighter future."

viously not going to listen But at the end of the day. we will try to send that message, that positive message.

Another audience member: So spot on comments about the cops. I remember during the January 6 coup attempt, somebody kept going, ACAF ACAS guessing that at all cops are friends, but it really stands for all cops are fascists. So I think that worked out well. The cops are given a job that is so brutal and they're so good at crushing revolutionary potential and just being generally awful to people. We're doubly unlucky that they're constantly for propaganda that turns them basically into fascist monsters. My question is, how can we counter and even control that narrative? Because when I think about the Russian Revolution, for example, where the czar's imperial guards, after shooting tons of them, actually felt kind of bad for them. The goal is to get police to feel that sentiment. And the right. And like all the bourgeois propaganda that they swallow, they're basically succeeding where the White Army propaganda failed. So how do we build a narrative that can change their minds, at least that much, and thereby make them less of a threat.

Jon Bekken: These aren't easy questions, obviously. In Philadelphia, when the Fraternal Order of Police and the fire-fighters union both endorsed Donald Trump, there were movements—primarily of black police officers and firefighters, but also some other groups—that protested that this did not represent their views on the one hand, but also in the case of the firefighters noted that there hadn't been a union vote or anything like that. So perhaps it's not a complete monolith. There have been demonstrations where I have seen African-American police officers call for changing training, call for measures to reduce the violence. And to the extent that those movements exist, should one try to engage with them and support them, amplify their voice? Because they might be able to change the narrative within police departments. Surely not all the police were born fascists—it took a culture, an effort, and training to make them that way. Perhaps some of them

resignation. People realized they can survive without working under these bad conditions, and are reluctant to come back to all this bullshit.

I agree that a general strike will mean a revolution. But I think it's also inevitable that you're going to have a civil war. Many of the police are fascists in a uniform. And then you've got fascists who aren't members of the police. I see them as the advanced guard of the billionaire class. And they're not going to take it just sitting there; in my opinion, they're going to come out. Some of us here in the May Day Coalition, we faced off against the fascists, at a safe distance of course. I advocate that we don't get close to them or else you have to organize something like the program we're doing tonight where we have several individuals who face various charges that are in the courts.

But there are people like the ones we faced off against, many of them are fearless or ideologically driven. And they're violent. And it's not just a few people. Millions of people supported the putsch—and I don't call it an insurrection, I call it a putsch—on the capital on January 6th. Okay, millions supported that. They still do. Some of them are armed. So the point I'm making is that you're talking civil war when you're talking the kind of transformation that Jon's talking about.

Another audience member: We have faced a number of crises over the decade, and there are some heavy lessons to learn from those situations. We have to keep engaging the fascists because at the end of the day these are the guys who will get you into some serious, serious trouble, and at the same time we've got to go out there and shut the whole thing down. Otherwise, these guys end up continuously looting our society. Right now, we as a democracy, we're trying to get back on our feet making sure that there are jobs available to the public. We've got families at home that really need comfort, love and support. This is very, very important. Basically we just gotta teach once more. We need to go out and address our society. And address the government. I know the government's ob-

Messages of peace and goodwill are all very well, but the promised general strike never materialized, even after Paris rose up, establishing the Paris Commune. Instead German troops helped the Thiers regime re-establish control, massacring the Communards in the process.

The official declarations of the First International aside, German socialists supported every war their masters embarked upon through the 1920s, even as growing numbers came to recognize the need for mass strikes. In 1907, when French socialists called on the International to commit to all means—including general strikes and insurrections—to resist wars, German “socialists” strongly objected; instead the congress called for protests against war in general, but not for active resistance. French unions continued to call for general strikes against war up until 1914, when the CGT pledged its “sacred union” with the French government in waging World War I (though a significant minority rejected this change of course).

Many unions and radicals continued looking to general strikes as part of a broader anti-militarist strategy throughout the war. As Helen Keller put it in a 1916 speech at Carnegie Hall,

“Strike against all ordinances and laws and institutions that continue the slaughter of peace and the butcheries of war. Strike against war, for without you no battles can be fought. Strike against manufacturing shrapnel and gas bombs and all other tools of murder. Strike against preparedness that means death and misery to millions of human beings. Be not dumb, obedient slaves in an army of destruction. Be heroes in an army of construction.”

This is sound advice, and many workers have tried to put it into practice. In 1905, Swedish workers threatened a general strike should the government attempt military force to maintain its rule over Norway, forcing the King to back down. The Australian General Strike of 1917 was in part a reaction to government efforts to impose conscription (efforts the government was forced to abandon in the face of strikes, protests and the loss of two referenda). Much of Ireland was shut down in April 1918 by a general

strike against the proposed extension of military conscription from Britain to Ireland. Another general strike was called four years later as tensions between over the partition grew and pro- and anti-treaty forces prepared for, not in support of one faction or other of the Treaty split, but against the militarism of both sides. Dutch workers held an unsuccessful general strike on Feb. 25, 1941, to protest persecution of Jews under the Nazi occupation.

General Strikes: A Natural Result of Wage Slavery

The idea of a general strike arises naturally from the condition of exploitation. In 1835 Boston carpenters resumed a series of strikes for a ten-hour workday and were soon joined by masons and stone-cutters. Their circular read in part:

“We have been too long subjected to the odious, cruel, unjust and tyrannical system which compels the operative mechanic to exhaust his physical and mental powers. We have rights and duties to perform as American citizens and members of society, which forbid us to dispose of more than ten hours for a day’s work.”

The Boston strikers organized a travelling committee to request the assistance of workers in other cities. The Boston strike was eventually defeated, but their circular inspired workers in Philadelphia to organize their own more successful strike for a ten-hour workday. Workers on the Schuylkill River coal wharves began the strike, marching on the wharves behind a worker with a sword who threatened death to anyone who crossed the picket line. The coal heavers were soon joined by workers from many other trades, including leather dressers, printers, carpenters, bricklayers, masons, house painters, bakers, and city employees. After city public works employees joined the strike, Philadelphia authorities quickly conceded the 10-hour day and increased wages for piece-workers.

One final point, I’m very skeptical about violence as part of the process. It’s just a matter of fact, the clashes between police and strikers in Minneapolis in ’34 led to the National Guard and martial law for a month. Not so good. And I think one point Jon made that I agree with is that the working class movement needs discipline, and part of that discipline is to avoid violence if at all possible. Because that’s what they have. They have the guns. Guns; they’ve got bombs, they’ve got all kinds of stuff That’s not where we’re strong. Where we’re strong is in organization and that’s what we should be doing. When you start romanticizing violence, you’re not heading in a good direction. The Wobblies avoided violence wherever possible. And they were in fact quite disciplined in the Bisbee strike and the timber strike that Jon talked about; those were highly disciplined, non-violent strikes and they were quite consciously done by the Wobs.

Jon Bekken: Yes, some workplaces are part of integrated supply chains. But in the Seattle general strike, for example, they looked at the food supply and thought about how are they going to get food distributed to people. In some workplaces you can in fact meaningfully engage in production. There are other workplaces where you can’t actually continue it or where you don’t want to continue. If you’re mining for war, maybe the most important work you can do is to keep people alive by not producing copper. But you can’t make those decisions if you’re not in possession. It’s going to be a process, it’s not one moment when everything suddenly is great.

We have to build power. We have to exercise power. I think that’s a general strike where workers take over industry and our communities. Isn’t that a revolution?

Participant: The huge work stoppage was essentially a result of the virus. But very much connected to the great resignation, people started thinking that they don’t have to be working under such arduous conditions. They realized they could live without putting up with all this shit. I think that’s in part why there was a great

That's a very unsatisfactory answer, because that's not the condition that we're in. But on some level, we have to try to recreate that as best we can. There have been a number of successful union organizing campaigns during these isolated times. It's not that nothing can be done. So we need to do what we can in the current conditions. And either fight for measures that will address this crisis or, probably both at the same time, develop new ways of sociability—of solidarity—among ourselves.

Participant: I want to raise some points about occupying factories because I think that its a little more complicated. Take the sit-down strike in Flint in the '30s, a critical moment in the history of the working-class movement in the United States. But they occupied the factory because they thought it would make it harder to bring in scabs—they didn't occupy it to operate it. I'm not even sure what that would mean, because one auto factory doesn't really do much. Its all interlinked. That's a complicated production process. So to actually make a car, you'd have to occupy not only one factory, but a whole series of factories and you'd have to have them interconnected. So I think it really doesn't get you very far to say that you're going to take over the means of production and start producing goods and services.

The other thing I was thinking about is the copper miners strike in Bisbee that the IWW did. Now the copper mines were running 24 hours a day. And what were they doing? They were producing copper for the British army. That's what they were producing. It was part of the arms industry. Everybody knew that. So the Wobs shut down that production for a while. They were hurting the war, if they had gone in and started producing copper the British would have been cool. They didn't really care, they wanted the copper. So occupying the means of production sounds great, but in fact it's more complicated than that. What are you producing? How are you producing all those kinds of things? You need a revolution before those kind of questions really have a lot of meaning.

Over the years there have been many other general strikes in this country, including the St. Louis Commune of 1877, and the 1886 general strike for the 8-hour day, called by (among others) the American Federation of Labor's forerunner, the Federation of Organized Trades & Labor Unions. But the AF of L's embrace of general strikes was short-lived. After a wave of general strikes swept across the U.S. and Canada, the June 1919 AFL convention overwhelmingly passed resolutions condemning the general strike and the idea of building One Big Union, and prohibiting local labor councils from considering strike votes without first obtaining permission from national union officials. The resolutions noted the need to "check the spread of general strike sentiment and prevent recurrences of what happened at Seattle and is now going on at Winnipeg."

The business unionists have remained implacably opposed to general strikes ever since. When the Vermont State Labor Council passed a resolution in November 2020 authorizing a general strike in the event that Donald Trump attempted a coup and refused to leave office—as it happens, not a far-fetched proposition—the AFL-CIO launched an investigation. On June 29, 2021, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka sent a "final warning" to the Vermont Council, threatening to remove its officers and impose a trusteeship if they dared consider a general strike again. Trumka's reprimand noted that AFL-CIO staffers had "offered several creative alternatives" to a general strike, including phone banking—a measure that surely would have caused the exploiters great consternation.

So what is a general strike?

A general strike (or mass strike) is a strike action with participation by a substantial proportion of the total labor force in an industry, city, region, or country. General strikes are characterized by the participation of workers in several workplaces and tend to involve entire communities.

Examples of industrial strikes include the 1909 Uprising of the 20,000 women garment workers in New York City, which while

ending in a compromise laid the foundation for the unionization of New York's needle trades, and decades of living wages before the employers skipped town. The 1912 strike of Atlantic Coast maritime workers, involving at least 30,000 longshoremen, marine firemen, and other ship workers, closing ports from Boston to Galveston. That strike won significant gains for dockworkers, but union scabbing by other crafts undercut the firemen and their supporters. Defeated, they withdrew from the AFL-affiliated International Seamen's Union and joined the IWW, forming (with the Philadelphia dockworkers) the backbone of its Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union for the next two decades. And in 1917 the IWW organized strikes of 100,000 lumberjacks and 40,000 copper miners. The miners were defeated by state terrorism, and hundreds of IWW organizers and activists were illegally arrested and detained to break the timber strike. Nonetheless, the lumberjacks' determination won improved living conditions in the timber camps, and continued struggles in the timber fields won the 8-hour day within a few years. These struggles so enraged the plutocrats that they barred IWW publications from the mail, raided IWW halls across the country seizing membership and other records, and imprisoned (and later deported) hundreds of IWW officials and activists.

Other industrial general strikes include several national strikes of coal miners, dockworkers and rail workers, and more recently several statewide strikes (often illegal) by teachers. Public sector workers have often turned to general strikes. In 2011, for example, Portuguese public sector workers held a general strike to block austerity measures. On September 2, 2016, 150 million Indian public sector workers organized in ten unions held a 24-hour nationwide general strike against government plans for increasing privatization and other austerity policies. A great many of these strikes have been successful; those that failed were typically suppressed by military force.

General strikes have been called in solidarity with other labor struggles (both the Seattle and Winnipeg general strikes began

ing the ecology of the forests. And that was one of his complaints about it...

I think everybody has realized that the polarization of the working class is even deeper now, with this particular COVID situation, because there were the workers who actually can work from home versus the ones who had to show up to work every day and experienced all kinds of situations. But my question really is about how we can recreate the culture of unionization from home to school to work. And now, in a situation that you have a more ostracized working class working from home, which doesn't have either the activity or the association that normally gives people the opportunity to talk and develop this kind of camaraderie to the next level.

Jon Bekken: That is really the challenge of this pandemic. On the one hand, it makes it clear that many of the existing ways that we work aren't necessary, that a lot of our time is being wasted. But on another level, many of us are in isolation. How do we break out of that isolation? And within the confines of the pandemic? I could say that we should set of worker centers in every neighborhood. But the pandemic on some level militates against that. And Zoom and such is all very well. But I don't think it actually replaces sitting down at a table with somebody and breaking bread and talking and engaging in projects together. I hope that the pandemic is not always with us, or at least that we can build a healthcare system that enables us to manage it more effectively. But that is a real challenge because we do need to rebuild that culture, not just the organizational structures of unions, but the culture of solidarity. And this was always a multi-faceted culture. It was partly based in ethnic societies and working class mutual aid organizations and culture and so forth. It was built even in things like bowling leagues and softball leagues and such. It was also halls where people sat down and talked about issues and performed music for each other. And unions, and all of that. I'm old-fashioned. I believe we need to be in rooms together or parks or physical spaces together.

groups will decide to proceed differently. So, for example, I don't personally see a need for yachts, but I believe some people will want to have them. They'll probably set up cooperatives of some sort to maintain them because really it's a whole lot of hassle to have a yacht. But if there were 50 of you who shared a yacht, maybe it might be pleasant. For those who like it, it could be done.

The Swedish SAC was at one time very strong in the timber industry. And in the 1940s and 1950s they tried to advocate for a policy of sustainable forestry. Instead of going in and clear cutting, they would advocate for practices that would preserve the forest, and even expand the forest, while maintaining their livelihood. The Swedish timber industry, no longer exists because it wasn't done. In 1928, I think it was, the Industrial Worker ran an article by members of the lumber workers union that talked about bosses who are cutting down the entire forest and destroying the planet. And on the one hand, this was their livelihood that was being cut down. In the short-term it was a job. But they could see that once you've cut down the whole forest there's no job.

So we need to have discussions about this sort of thing. Some of these industries should and must continue to exist, just organized in more sustainable ways. Coal mining; there are some chemical compounds and such that are derived from coal. There might be some specialty mining, but we can't be burning coal. I think that's pretty clear. And the mine workers union has actually called for a transition that's organized, that's just, where their members are trained in new technology. Some miners may be very bound up with their identity with coal mining, but most of them are bound up in living where they live, having a certain quality of life.

Participant: If you read Walker Smith's pamphlet on the Everett Massacre in 1915—remember one man wrote this over 100 years ago—he has a very nice introduction on the origins of the lumber industry in the Pacific Northwest. And he brings out the ecological problems. It's his view that the lumber trust were ruin-

this way), or to protest government policies or repression. In 1927 the IWW called for a three-day nationwide walkout—in essence, a demonstration general strike—to protest the impending execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. No other union seems to have supported the strike call, and so it could not succeed in saving their lives. However, 1,132 coal miners struck in Walsenburg, Colorado, with only 35 crossing the picket line—leading directly to the IWW's statewide strike of coal miners later that year that led the coal operators to invite the UMW in to head off the Wobbly threat.

Senegalese workers won substantial wage hikes and union recognition in a three-week general strike in 1946. Two decades later, in 1968, another general strike won the release of hundreds of imprisoned activists, political reforms, and 15% wage hikes.

In 1968, 11 million French workers joined a wildcat general strike in solidarity with student protesters whose militant protests were met with fierce repression. The communist- and socialist-affiliated union federations had supported a one-day general protest strike, but instead of returning to work after marching through the streets of Paris (and securing the release of many prisoners) the strike spread, with demands including the resignation of the government and self-management in their workplaces. The government teetered under the combined pressure from students and workers, and President Charles de Gaulle briefly fled to Germany, returning after the military assured him of its support. However, the major unions were as terrified as the bosses, and worked to channel the rebellion into narrower economic demands—ultimately negotiating a 35% increase in the minimum wage, a 10% wage increase for other workers, and reduced working hours. Without support from their unions or an organizational structure to carry on, the rebellion petered out.

How to win

A successful general strike requires solid organization, and clear goals. Few workers will strike unless they have good reason to believe that their fellow workers will strike with them. Typically this organization is built through a series of struggles in which we develop our organizational capacity, demonstrate our commitment to one another, and come to realize our potential power. We need democratic organizations and systems of accountability, so that we are not at the mercy of “leaders,” charismatic or otherwise, who might sell us short or seek power for themselves or accept “compromises” that leave the exploiters and oppressors in charge. And I would argue that we need a sense of what we are trying to accomplish.

The Seattle General Strike offers an example of the dangers of avoiding this discussion in hopes of preserving a facade of unity. The impetus for the general strike movement was a strike by 35,000 shipyard workers whose bosses refused to negotiate. The Metal Trades Council saw the General Strike as a way to force the shipyards to the bargaining table. Unions in other industries wanted to address their own grievances. Many workers hoped to overthrow the capitalist system.

As Anna Louise Strong wrote in the Seattle Union Record. “We are taking the most tremendous move ever made by Labor in this country, a move which will lead—NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!” The union strike committee acted responsibly, making arrangements to ensure that the people were fed and the sick cared for. The strike was orderly, and the provocations of soldiers and hundreds of “special deputies” sent to intimidate the strikers were ignored. Key services continued to operate based on exemptions from the strike committee, although not under the workers’ self-management that Strong promised. But the failure to agree on the strike’s objectives was fatal. Some unions settled their grievances, and returned to work. Others abandoned the general strike as it became clear that

lack of organization means that its just going to disappear down the memory hole?

Jon Bekken: Lack of organization is not necessarily a permanent condition. It is possible to go in and organize people who have not previously been organized, and in the process of that organization recover those memories and concretize those memories. But there does need to be a sustained effort and going out, talking to people, addressing some of the issues that have been made really clear by this, including the dismal state of our health care system.

This pandemic situation has made it really clear that a great deal of the work that’s being done actually isn’t necessary. Because a great deal of people stopped doing the work. And did society collapse? Some people suffered, to be sure, and there were major health problems. But people mostly did continue to eat even though farmers were destroying food, mountains of food, because they had no way to distribute it. That is a solvable problem. The health care system, frankly, is a solvable problem.

These are opportunities that we need to seize. To go out and talk to people, our fellow workers, members of our community, about what did we do that worked. What didn’t we do that needed to be done and to try to build some momentum. Because it does show that we don’t have to go into work for 10 or 12 hours a day just to stay alive. It’s not actually necessary.

Participant: When you have a huge general strike you’re also going to have conflicting interests. One person’s useful industry, you’re going to maybe put another group of workers out of a job. And they may not see it the same way you do. The issues get more complex as the size and the demands of the organization get more complex. Even time changes things. What is the modern view of an industry like lumber? What’s the situation there? Or how about coal miners? I think that we tend to overlook the inter-worker problems in our enthusiasm.

Jon Bekken: There will need to be a process of dialogue and discussion about what we need. And I think in some cases, different

We would need to establish organs within our workplaces to make decisions about what we were going to make over the longer term; in the immediate term, you resume production and you use the existing economic structures, relations and such, to get goods and services out to people who need them. Over the longer term, there would need to be society-wide discussions about what we want to make, what we don't want to make, how we want to do it. There are certain products that perhaps we could do without—nuclear bombs, for example, but many other products that we could do without as well. There are conditions under which we labor; why do we labor eight hours a day or increasingly 10 or 12? Or in the case of theatrical stage employees, 20 or 24 hours in a day. Why do we do this? Clearly we do this because there's a lot of parasites and withdrawal of productive capacity. So there would need to be societal wide discussion,...some mechanism where we sat down and talked: Okay, We've taken over the communities, the means of production. How do we want to reorganize this? What do we want to build towards?

Participant: It seems to me that, at least aside from the immigrants strike in 2006, perhaps the greatest work stoppage of our lives was April of 2020 when this strange new virus started spreading around the world. It was just incredible. I mean, you go out in the middle of a workday and nobody's on the road...It was kind of like the ultimate expression of the power of the work stoppage. Yet at the same time, and you've talked about this to some degree already, the lack of organization meant that there weren't any real demands put forward. And so we failed to gain make any kind of progress for working people out of that work stoppage. We're still talking about health and safety, basic things for people going back to work during this pandemic. So I wonder if you think there are lessons from that for us today? Do you think there's the potential for people to be inspired by the power of their work stoppage who'd never maybe thought of it before? Or do you think that the

authorities were intransigent and that no resolution was in sight. A general strike with the limited objective of forcing a settlement with the shipyard workers likely could have succeeded. A revolutionary general strike would have required seizing the workplaces and resuming production under workers' control. Seattle's workers could not have sustained such measures in isolation, but such a move might have inspired others around the country, and around the world, and so laid a foundation for future struggles and an inspiring vision of the new society to be built in the shell of the old. Instead, the strike collapsed, emboldening the exploiters and breaking workers' morale.

Half-measures can be dangerous. General strikes have played key roles in toppling military dictatorships around the world, from Iran to Thailand. Many generals and politicians have been forced from power by a working class that refused to tolerate their brutal regimes any longer. But too often that is where it stopped—with workers returning home and a new (or sometimes merely reshuffled) set of bosses taking charge. When workers toppled the military regime in Sudan a couple of years ago, they did not follow through to dismantle the military apparatus and establish direct democracy—and today the generals are back in power, although continuing resistance has left the economy in shambles. Similarly, in Myanmar a widely supported general strike proved insufficient to topple a regime that sees even the mildest reforms as an existential threat.

Many countries, like many worksites, are under the thumb of rulers who long ago gave up on trying to establish any sense of social legitimacy, and instead rule through fear and corruption. Such rulers dare not negotiate with organized workers because they know that their control relies on terror, and fear that any whiff of resistance would quickly spread. There is a slogan, often repeated at demonstrations, that proclaims "The people united will never be defeated." It is unfortunately not true. When the rulers are willing to tolerate economic ruin and prefer piles of corpses to

losing power, it is not sufficient to walk out of the workplaces to march in the streets—rather, the workplaces must be occupied on a permanent basis and soldiers encouraged to mutiny, to refuse the orders to kill.

Tyrants cannot be compromised with; their promises of power-sharing and transitional regimes are mere ruses to lure our fellow workers into complacency. As we can see in Belarus, Egypt, Myanmar, Sudan and Syria, there is nothing more dangerous than a dictator with his back against the wall but still in control of an army.

Why general strikes fail

It must be conceded that many general strikes have failed to accomplish their declared objectives, or having won them have been unable to secure the victory. A prominent example of the latter is now playing out in Sudan, where in 2019 millions of workers joined general strikes that forced an end to the 30-year al-Bashir dictatorship, and then quickly toppled the military regime that replaced him. But instead of seizing their workplaces and communities, and reorganizing society on a democratic basis, protestors agreed to a transitional government and the military remained intact—seizing power again in October, eventually reinstating the transitional prime minister as a figurehead after mass protests erupted, but refusing to cede power. Today the military controls the government, hundreds have been killed, and the people are back in the streets. As one worker told the Associated Press January 4: “Our three current terms after the coup are: No negotiations, no power-sharing and no compromise, in addition to the main demands of the revolution, which are freedom, peace and justice. That’s it, we have no other demands.”

Similarly, a general strike has failed to topple the military dictatorship in Myanmar, even though there can be no question that the overwhelming majority of the population opposes the regime.

Participant: I’m wondering about what’s called the great resignation, if that is an actual thing, How does that relate to the transition into a general strike? What are the possibilities of us coming together?

Jon Bekken: Organization is the key question. We need to build organizations—whether that’s traditional unions, whether that’s a resurgence of rank-and-file unions or workers centers or such—working people need to come together, build bonds of solidarity, discuss action. The great resignation to the extent that it’s real, it’s lots of individuals acting at the same time. But it would be much more effective if individuals who work for a particular employer acted together. We have to organize to get more than crumbs...There are plenty of people out there who, if they were offered work under acceptable conditions, would consider it. Yes, the unemployment rate is way down, but so is labor force participation. Of course, that also speaks to the lack of childcare, social infrastructure and such that make it almost impossible for many people with children to take jobs.

Participant: Let’s pretend we live in the greatest environment for union organizing and community organizing, what would it look like in North America? The perfect general strike unfolding tomorrow, let me hear your vision.

Jon Bekken: I am assuming that this tomorrow is the end of a decade or more of organizing, of building committees, of waging struggles, of establishing better conditions through direct action in our workplaces, all of that. This does require discussion among the workers as to what we want. We cannot impose our vision, especially if our vision is democratically self-managed workplaces. It can’t be imposed. But assuming that there are these discussions and workers agree,...I think it’s Bill Haywood who said that the general strike wouldn’t need to last more than two minutes because you just pause work, invite the managers to leave, and resume production.

with workers in putting down the fascist coup in a majority of Spain. And had it not been for support from Germany and Italy, and embargoes on weapons and a range of other factors, they would have won...Most people in most armies are drawn from the ranks of the working class, and there have been many instances where they have been persuaded that they don't wish to open fire upon their fellow workers. Police are a somewhat harder task. There have been strikes of police that were actually in solidarity. [interjection: not many] The Boston police strike seems to have been a legitimate expression of working class opposition. But most of their strikes have not exactly been in solidarity with the working class...

Participant: In 1934, during the San Francisco general strike which began with a longshoreman general strike, the strikers beat the crap out of the cops at the Battle of Rincon Hill. Likewise, in Minneapolis, the striking teamsters surrounded the cops entirely in such a way that they were not able to deploy their weapons and their clubs were rendered useless. In Toledo that same year, the police, who had been stiffed on a pay raise by the city authorities, did absolutely nothing to suppress the strike, although the sheriff's department was active in opposing the strikers. But in all three of those general strikes, the strikers won.

Jon Bekken: Police cannot be ignored. If you can get them not to attack you, I think that is the favored option...But yes, the question of military force, I believe a well-organized movement is less likely to face these issues. Police, many of them, also were drawn from the ranks of the working class. On the one hand, there is a certain ideology that leads people into that direction. But they do live in the community, and if they know that people are determined they're less likely to feel inclined to risk themselves in making such an attack. But it is a very real issue, I don't mean to downplay it. And frankly, you look at Myanmar, at Sudan, at Egypt, at Iran—it's clear that you cannot leave military and police forces in the hands of your enemies and hope to be alive much longer.

But the military seems unconcerned by the resulting economic crisis and the collapse of any measure of social legitimacy, instead determined to prevail through brute force. In this, it is aided by its ownership of many key industries and its control of smuggling and other criminal operations. The opposition's failure to confront military control, and its embrace of the poison of nationalism, have crippled the resistance.

Sometimes, unions have called general strikes to quell rebellion within the ranks, but without taking the steps necessary to make the general strike effective. Such was the case with the 1909 Swedish general strike, the collapse of which led to the foundation of the SAC syndicalist union there. Other general strikes have been symbolic, called as demonstrations of strength meant both to give workers the opportunity to vent their anger and perhaps to strengthen union leaders' position at the bargaining table. There have been many such general strikes, some quite massive, and they have often been quite effective on their own limited terms.

In the past few years we have seen major protest general strikes in Argentina, Belarus, Catalonia, Chile, France, French Polynesia, Hong Kong, India, Italy, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Poland, South Korea, Sudan, Thailand, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and no doubt a great many other countries. Some successfully pressured governments to scale back economic austerity measures or attacks on political rights; one led to a popular convention that is rewriting Chile's constitution; a few forced out long-entrenched dictators. But many raised demands that, no matter how justified, those in power were unwilling to consider. In such situations a short protest strike—even a massive one—is not enough. Direct action is needed.

Perhaps the largest general strikes in history were held January 8 and November 26, 2020, with 200 million or more workers and small farmers striking and protesting across India. The strikers demanded the withdrawal of changes to agricultural and labor laws, economic support and jobs for impoverished Indians, an end to privatization of government enterprises and services, a universal

pension scheme, and withdrawal of the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act. These massive demonstrations shut down major Indian cities for a day, and did ultimately force the government to withdraw agricultural “reforms” that would have hit India’s impoverished small farmers hard. But broadly speaking, the BJP’s economic “reform” agenda has proceeded, to the delight of the rich and the corporations and the impoverishment of the great majority. I can only hope that the tens of millions of workers involved in these actions reflect upon their experience and the sense of power they surely felt as they gathered in their masses, and decide to direct that power, that energy, not into symbolic protests against a government not at all concerned with the needs and interests of the people but rather at taking charge of the workplaces that rely upon their labor for their very existence, and beginning the difficult but vital work of building an economy, a society, that abolishes hunger and want, democratizes industry, and makes the good things of life available to all.

Ralph Chaplin, in his pamphlet *The General Strike*, differentiates between general strikes that shut down an industry to win better working conditions; local, regional and national general strikes that protest injustices or demand reforms; and THE general strike, “designed to abolish private ownership of the means of life and to supplant it with social ownership.” In such a strike, workers would not vacate their workplaces to protest in the streets, but would instead take possession of the workplaces and send the employers and their minions into the streets.

There are many practical advantages to such an approach. It is far easier to hold the means of production than to seize them. If our goal (or at least one of our goals) is to achieve democratic control of the economy, what better way to accomplish that than to lock out the employing class, remain in possession of the means of production, and democratically administer them through our unions? With the means of meeting our needs at hand, the transition from the profit system to production (and distribution) to meet human

needs and from boss rule to democracy will be in the hands of those already accustomed to operating the vast, complex array of industries. It will of course require organization, but a working class sufficiently organized to lock out the employing class and its host of parasites will also be sufficiently organized to have thought about how we wish to structure the new society, and how to go about the constructive work of building it.

Discussion

A lively discussion ensued, with comments from those listening in person and via online streaming. The following excerpts have been edited for clarity and space.

Participant: I was wondering if you talked about May 1st, 2006, before I got here; there were about 2 and a half million who struck that day. That was a general strike of immigrants, both documented and undocumented, and their supporters. It was all over. The biggest mobilization was in LA, where about a million people came out in the streets...You did go over the San Francisco general strike. In that same year, 1934, there was a general strike in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as well as Toledo, Ohio. There was a general strike movement in 1934 that led to the organization of the CIO. And the police, the army, they come in quite often when there’s a general strike. I think we have to talk about how the working class are ready to confront the state power when they move in on general strikes and the organized working class...

Jon Bekken: The armed force of the state is certainly a very real issue. The French CGT, back when it proclaimed general strikes, before it got into sacred union with the bosses, had a policy of anti-militarist agitation where they would go out into the army and try to incite rebellion, or at least rebellious thought. And there have been situations, for example in Spain when the fascist rose, many elements of the military—not all by any means—sided