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Everything You Need to Know About General Strikes

Kim Kelly

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The word *strike* seems to be on everyone's lips these days. Workers across the world have been striking to protest poor working conditions, to speak out against sexual harassment, and to jumpstart stalled union negotiations. And as we just saw with the Los Angeles teachers' successful large-scale strike, which spanned six school days, strikers have been winning. Despite the shot of energy that organized strikes have injected into the labor movement, many people aren't content with run-of-the-mill work stoppages, or even with more militant wildcat strikes.

As President Donald Trump's scandal-plagued government shutdown stretches into its fourth week and more than 800,000 federal workers struggle to survive sans paychecks, the words *general strike* have begun appearing with increasing frequency on social media and in a spate of articles. On January 20, Association of Flight Attendants-CWA President Sara Nelson suggested that a general strike could potentially end the government shutdown. The fact that a labor union official is speaking about such drastic action now is very significant, for one thing because there has not been

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a major U.S. general strike since the government cracked down on labor following 1946's Oakland general strike. Also, a general strike is an incredibly massive undertaking; while many organized industry-specific strikes can comprise hundreds or even thousands of workers, a general strike could potentially involve millions.

So what does it all mean? How is a general strike different from a planned, industry-specific work stoppage; why are people interested in the idea now; and what would one look like in 2019?

A general strike is a labor action in which a significant amount of workers from a number of different industries who comprise a majority of the total labor force within a particular city, region, or country come together to take collective action. Organized strikes are generally called by labor union leadership, but they impact more than just those in the union. For example, imagine the scenario if thousands in your town or city — no matter what their job was or whether or not they were in a union — got together and decided to go on strike to protest police brutality, as happened in Oakland, California, in 2011, after Iraq veteran Scott Olsen was critically wounded by local police when they stormed the Occupy Oakland encampment. The community declared a daylong general strike that ultimately saw thousands of people shut down the Port of Oakland (which was more of a symbolic protest, but still it got the job done).

Though the concept has its roots in ancient Rome's *secessio plebis*, one of the first modern general strikes took place during the Industrial Revolution in Northern England in 1842, a time of great civil and social unrest, as modern capitalism began to take hold and hierarchical class lines began to be drawn between employers and employees. General strikes played pivotal roles in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Spanish Civil War. And in the U.S., general strikes became almost common during the 19th and early 20th centuries, with examples taking hold in Philadelphia (1835), St. Louis (1877), Chicago (1886), New Orleans (1892), and Seattle (1919), and during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. These large-scale actions

were instrumental in securing crucial workers' rights that many of us take for granted today, from basic safety regulations to the eight-hour workday and the end of child labor. But those wins did not come easily.

“Historically speaking, the general strike is incredibly successful since it completely shuts down the functions of the economy,” author and union organizer Shane Burley tells *Teen Vogue*. “This is really the foundation of the power workers have under capitalism, to withhold their labor and undermine capital. Because a general strike affects the economy so broadly, it gives workers a huge bargaining chip to make massive societal demands — not just in one workplace, but of capital across all sectors.”

As noted by Black liberation and socialist author W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the country's most successful general strikes happened during the Civil War, when roughly half a million enslaved Africans escaped Southern plantations and found the Union Army, and mass numbers of poor white Confederates deserted their posts — two independent collective actions that, together, helped kneecap the Confederacy.

More recently, a general strike in India saw 150 million workers across various industries demanding higher wages and union protections in what may well be history's largest general strike. In 2006, janitors in Houston made waves with a nine-week strike that piggybacked on a wave of wildcat strikes and school walkouts in response to H.R. 4437, a bill that sought to criminalize both undocumented people and anyone who offered them aid (the legislation ultimately failed).

“To this day, the idea of a mass or general strike remains both an ideal and a tactic that can be picked up by everyday people if and when they discover the power to do so,” Andrew O’Conner, an editor at *It’s Going Down*, an anarchist news and podcast platform, tells *Teen Vogue*. “And as American history has shown, this tactic is one that has been used by the working class as a whole, across lines of color, gender, trade, and geography.”

Organizers stress the importance of first building mutual aid networks and strong community systems to care for people in the event of a mass labor action like a general strike, before asking people to hit the streets. It's hard enough to go out on a planned strike during union contract negotiations (and the Trump-controlled National Labor Relations Board is trying to make it harder). In those cases, workers at least have the support of their union, and, hopefully, a strike fund to help cover bills.

The resources and infrastructure needed to adequately care for those participating in a general strike are impossible to calculate. In addition, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act (which was passed in the wake of the women-led 1946 Oakland general strike) outlawed actions taken by unionized workers in support of workers at other companies, effectively rendering both solidarity actions and the general strike itself illegal.

Elana Levin, a former union organizer who teaches digital strategy as program director for New Media Mentors and is a co-founder of Organizing 2.0, tells *Teen Vogue* that "striking means not asking permission" in the first place. She's excited about the interest she's seen in the idea of a general strike, but warns that hastily planned action could end up harming more than it helps.

"If you are asking someone to strike, you have to be able to help them answer the question of how will you help them survive if they do. It's a question that has been asked and answered before, but it is a serious thing," she says. "In reality, general strikes are generally led by the most marginalized groups, because it is a way to wield power."

O'Conner says self-organization is one of the most useful building blocks of any major worker action, and adds that it's important to break down barriers between striker and supporter to craft a more cohesive, purpose-driven community based on class solidarity.

"As we saw with the current mass teachers strikes, which can be seen as literal general strikes across trade lines, collective and

communal mutual aid and support from both picketers and community members, like schoolchildren, is key," O'Conner says. "In some instances, workers also choose to strike by offering services for free: For instance, during many transit strikes and job actions, bus drivers and transit operators will refuse to collect money. We see many of these experiments playing out now with the shutdown, from mass sickout strikes to services being offered for out-of-work employees."

An organizer with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who chose to remain anonymous for this story, tells *Teen Vogue* that one of the keys to unlocking those levels of support also lies in good old-fashioned community organizing and remembering how difficult it can be for people to take that step toward the picket line, because of familial obligations or existing financial hardship.

"The way to actually figure this out is to do the work of labor and community organizing — that is, actually asking your coworkers and your neighbors about the material issues that affect them, how you can address those issues collectively, and, if they think a general strike could work, what they would need to take that step," they said. "Maybe it's child care? Maybe it's a hardship fund to cover lost wages? Maybe it's just the support of the community? With the current government shutdown threatening to starve the poor through lack of SNAP funding and various bodies of federal workers already furloughed, we could be entering the kind of crisis that makes a general strike possible."

So, is it time for a general strike? We clearly have a whole lot to do before anyone goes calling for mass action, but activists around the U.S. are already hard at work on these kinds of mutual aid projects and community outreach efforts. We may not be ready yet, but the groundwork is already being laid. As bad as things are now, oppressed workers in the past have fought against even more daunting odds to take their power back ... and if things get gnarly enough, it may happen again.