Labour/Le Travailleur

Prairie Fire Fizzles

James Naylor and Tom Mitchell

Volume 45, 2000

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt45cri03

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)
1911-4842 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Naylor, J. & Mitchell, T. (2000). Prairie Fire Fizzles. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, *45*, 267–270.

Prairie Fire Fizzles

James Naylor and Tom Mitchell

WHAT COULD REASONABLY be asked of a film produced in 1999 on the Winnipeg General Strike? It should reflect the current state of the historiography; it should be sensitive to the discourse deployed by the participants in the strike and those who commented in 1919 and later — including historians; it should invite the viewer to approach the strike with an open yet analytical perspective; and finally it should avoid simple-minded narratives, gratuitous assessments, or dubious conclusions. Measured by such criteria, *Prairie Fire* fizzles.

Producers Audrey Mehler and David Paperny ask remarkably few questions of the events they portray, presenting the strike as a unique, localized and ephemeral explosion — "a time of excitement" in the words of "creative consultant" David Bercuson. The focus is, indeed, on "excitement" as the film is preoccupied with the violent denouement of the strike — Bloody Saturday — to the detriment of creative or analytical thinking about its popularity, meaning and outcome. Never exploring the character or scope of the challenge to the social order, the film trivializes the strike.

Why did tens of thousands of working-class Winnipeggers join the walkout? *Prairie Fire* gives no response to this question. Narrator Ann Medina explains that "it began as a fight for workers' rights," but such fights were and are commonplace. Few explode into the generalized confrontation of 1919. The filmmakers appear unaware of the geographical extent of the post-World War I national and international labour revolt and so assume that the source of the conflict has to be found in Winnipeg itself. But even here, they do not look very hard. The film examines some specific confrontations earlier in the century such as the 1906 street railway strike, but such contests, along with the neighbourhood mobilizations that they provoked, were ubiquitous across the continent. The poverty of north-end Winnipeg is portrayed, but there is no explanation of why poverty may provoke resistance rather than resignation. The important ethnic mixture of the city is described, but the significance of ethnicity in the strike itself is all but ignored. The existence of

James Naylor and Tom Mitchell, "Prairie Fire Fizzles," *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), 267-70.

thousands of non-unionized workers on strike is acknowledged but not assessed or historicized.

The "prairie fire" — sudden, uncontrolled, elemental — directs attention away from a longer perspective, from the historical struggle of workers. The past, in this film, is simply prologue, adding little to the explanation of 1919. Even explanations about the disparities of skill and ethnicity are presented in a schematic manner (that underestimates the insecurities and difficulties of skilled work) and fails to account for the growing perception of common interest across the working class in the closing years of World War I. And, in the end, even this potential nuance is lost, as references to skill and ethnicity are absent from the narrative of the strike itself.

Pointers to the importance of women workers in the strike are laudable but not very informative, as there is no reference to their existence before the general strike: they are not part of the explanation. Nor, it must be added, is there any real consideration of the gender order and the reasons for women's participation either within the strike or in the broader context of the successful suffrage movement.

Prairie Fire closes its ears to the fascinating discourses of the strike, resulting in a remarkable insensitivity to the voices of either the strikers or the bosses. Running counter to (or in ignorance of) working-class studies of the last quarter century, workers are seen without agency. They lack any identifiable oppositional culture or identity and only react to the conditions that confront them. From the *Western Labour News*, and Norman Penner's edition of *1919: Strikers' Own History*, to testimony of the Mather's Royal Commission on Labour and Capital, authentic voices are readily accessible. The drama of the mass meetings in the Walker Theatre or Victoria Park could have been tapped to help understand and explain the strike, as could the fascinating debates among the returned soldiers about their class and national loyalties. Across the West (and beyond) the ideas and aspirations evident in the One Big Union were at stake. Where are they in this film? In their place are voices whose connections to all of this are strained: an individual who was a child at the time (this was, after all, 80 years ago), the son of Mayor Gray, and a leader of the current civic employees' union. All, no doubt, have interesting stories, but they add nothing to our understanding of 1919.

Listening to the authentic voices of the strike, through their written or reported words, would have forced the filmmakers to deal with the character of the social crisis that swept the country in 1919 and found its most dramatic moment in Winnipeg. What they would have heard was a discourse not just of industrial relations, but of a broader social and industrial citizenship. Issues of citizenship, of course, were explosive in the context of war. While making the claim that World War I "left an indelible mark on Canadians," *Prairie Fire* offers no elaboration. It fails to explore the possibility that the struggle to determine the ideological legacy of World War I might have loomed at the heart of the 1919 labour revolt. Instead, it roots the solidarity of the workers in essentialism: workers play their assigned role as workers, fighting for narrowly defined economic rights. As well, in a narrow

determinism, the film builds pathos as the workers come face to face with their inevitable defeat. In the eyes of the producers, this presumably makes for a more dramatic film than carefully probing the moral economy of war as the state's appeals for communitarian solidarity and sacrifice helped shaped the solidarity and determination of workers in 1919. It was a sensitivity that was remarkably volatile when, against the background of a war for "democracy," employers fiercely resisted even modest claims for recognition of unions and the right to collective bargaining.

Prairie Fire fails to explore how labour's opponents constructed the legacy of the war in a vocabulary of sacrifice and service to the state, while building a leviathan of repression to ensure a stable post-war order. A basic reductionism occurs here as well. Capital and the state (each a multifaceted entity in its own right) are lumped together as a reactionary mass — able, at any time, to call upon armed support to end the strike. In fact, the story is much more interesting than this. The role of Gideon Robertson, labour leader and Tory cabinet minister, should surely be worth a few feet of film. The Committee of 1000 and the federal state were united in undermining a mediated settlement to end the strike (a development ignored in the film) because defeat, as opposed to compromise, was deemed crucial to ruling class hegemony in Canada. This was because they recognized, as the film fails to do, the depth of the crisis confronting the social order that they dominated.

Prairie Fire depicts the bourgeois opponents of the strike as "shadowy," but the film could have offered at least a flashlight. Ed Rea attempts to throw the film a lifeline by adding some depiction of the character of the Citizen's campaign, including its vicious nativism and crude gerrymandering. But otherwise, important historical texture is lacking. There is only a passing reference to A.J. Andrews and no note made of his role as the nexus between bourgeois power within civil society — the Citizens' Committee — and the state. There is no depiction of his agency in shaping the narrative of the strike, his analysis as the foundation of state policy during the strike and his later pursuit of the state to prosecute the strike leaders. Like Winnipeg's working class and the strike committee, Winnipeg's political and business leaders were real people with considerable fears, desires and options. Leaving them out (in favour of an image of two juggernauts colliding) reduces the script to melodrama.

Nor does the film explore what defeat entailed. Reference is made gratuitously to how the strike left an "indelible mark on Canadians," but no reference is made to the place of the strike in state formation through the creation of the RCMP (and its overblown security apparatus), the Immigration Act (allowing the deportation of British subjects), and the Criminal Code (Section 98 came to define arbitrary power in Canada for the next decade and a half). As well, fed by both the recent international conflict as well as the labour revolt, capital sought to reassert its hegemony in the civil sphere as well, through a campaign of "Canadianization" in education and culture.

Melodrama, of course, required a moral and what the film provides is both contradictory and trite; the strike was both a failure and the harbinger of ameliorative reform. In a thoroughly whiggish depiction of Winnipeg history after 1919, the strike is portrayed as prompting the creation of the "Canadian Commonwealth Federation" (sic), speeding the economic decline of Winnipeg, and encouraging the adoption of health and safety legislation. The lineages here are, at best, far more complex (many streams flowed into — or along side of — the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the connection between the strike and electoral action is not addressed) and, at worst, remote or tenuous. The film never explains how industrial standards legislation might emerge from the kind of event the film describes. The oddity of the film's painfully long epilogue, though, is rooted in the weakness of its historical analysis all along. The strike stands as a condemned historical anomaly; such overt conflict "is not the stuff of Canada" claims Ann Medina. Cause and legacy are grasped at randomly. Even the authenticity that the documentary form can promise is abandoned, as the voices of both strikers and employers are stifled and their active agency denied. Historiographically and cinematically, *Prairie Fire* fails.