

Winnipeg 1919: A City in Crisis. A Review

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MUSEUM REPORT / NOTE DE MUSÉE

Winnipeg 1919: A City in Crisis A Review

Ken Osborne

MORE THAN MOST SCHOLARS and researchers, historians tend to worry about whether their work is read and understood by the general public. For the most part, sociologists, economists, physicists, psychologists, and others are too busy trying to be scientists to worry about how, or even whether, their research is received by people at large. They write for each other and concentrate their energies on research reports, monographs, and specialized journals. In some cases, to be perceived as obscure and difficult is almost a badge of honour. Literary theory, in particular, has become conspicuous for its self-referencing and impenetrable method of presentation.

To a certain extent, this kind of scientism can be found in historical writing, but for the most part historians still worry about who is reading their work and still pay some attention to questions of style and readability. Somewhere in their thinking, it seems, lies a residual belief that historical research should, at some point, reach beyond the researchers themselves. Perhaps it is a survival from the days of Prescott, Macaulay, Parkman, Motley, Trevelyan, Wrong, and others, when historians saw themselves as public intellectuals with a mission to instruct and inform the societies in which they lived, and when history was seen as a branch of literature. Perhaps it is tied to the prevalence of narrative as a way of organizing

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and presenting historical arguments. Or perhaps it reflects the still influential and largely valid truism that if citizens are to understand the present they need to know something about the past. In their heart of hearts, historians still see themselves as contributing, no matter how indirectly, to the formation of the public intelligence.

Whatever the reason, historians, except for the most austere scientific among them, feel that somehow their work should be accessible to that ideal and idealized reader — the intelligent, inquisitive, but uninformed, general reader. Except perhaps for the cliometricians, they worry about matters of style and expression, by and large shrinking from the technical language so common in the social sciences. Thus, they aim at some point in their careers to write a work of integration and synthesis that will enlighten and even entertain the general public.

It is true that there is a certain ambivalence in this desire to communicate with the world at large. A line is still maintained between so-called scholarly and so-called popular history. And too many appearances on the op-ed page, or on television, can lead to suspicions that Professor X or Doctor Y is in danger of becoming a journalist. Thus, for example, A.J.P. Taylor frequently had to face the sniping of his less energetic colleagues that he was a mere telly-don who could no longer be regarded as a serious scholar. Nonetheless, despite all the ambivalences, contradictions, and disagreements, historians do by and large feel that their discipline should have a distinctively public role.

This is perhaps more applicable to some types of history than to others. Economic and diplomatic historians, for example, tend not to write for a general audience, but writers of women's history, ethnic history, and native history do, and this for two reasons. One, they are understandably and legitimately concerned to see that their work enters the public domain. They are motivated in part by a wish to correct the omissions and biases of more traditional history and, by extension, of popular thinking generally. They believe, with some justification, that their work can produce a more informed public opinion. Two, they tend to be politically engaged with their research in ways that more traditional historians were not. They chose their research topics in large part because they identified with them personally and politically. Their interest in the past is part of a political commitment in the present.

This is equally true of labour and working-class historians. They are also concerned to correct the omissions of the past and, more fundamentally, to show the past in a new light. At the very least they wish to reveal the past from the bottom up. Better yet, they aim to show how history from the bottom up interlaces with history from the top down, so that the history of the working class is seen in its full context of class relationships and class power. In the process old assumptions are often challenged, whether of periodization, causation, categorization, or any other historical convention.

It needs no demonstration that labour and working-class history has become one of the most active and fruitful fields of historical research in the last 30 years or so. It has produced its own journals, its own conferences and symposia, and it has

had considerable influence on conventional mainstream history, some time to the distress of those historians who regret the erosion of the old magisterial interpretations. In the process, however, labour and working-class history has also become more technical and specialized. Its growth has come at a price, and that price is seen in its tendency to become remote from the concerns and interests of its natural constituency — working people themselves. It is true that there are deliberate attempts to counter this tendency, through history workshop approaches, through oral history, through lecture and video series, and so on. More than most, labour and working-class historians are aware of questions of audience and readership and hope that their work will not only affect the direction of historical research as a whole, but will also be politically relevant in contemporary society.

It is in this context that the exhibition organized at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike becomes important. Exhibitions like this are, after all, one way of bringing specialized research in working-class history into the public arena. They are also a way of affecting public perceptions of what history is, of drawing attention away from traditional elites, and redirecting it to the affairs of working people. The emphasis on the visual, the concrete, the tangible, on the artifact rather than the scholarly article (or the unscholarly article for that matter) is one way to reach those who have neither the time, the opportunity, nor the inclination to devote their spare time to the printed word. Moreover, it might even lead them to the printed word in due course. In this spirit, for example, one of the displays in the Exhibition featured many of the books and articles written about the Strike in recent years, with some of them being further featured in the nearby Museum bookshop. In this and other ways, the Exhibition served an educational purpose in the best sense of the term.

In addition, the very nature of an exhibition — the combination of models, photographs, artifacts, documents, posters, and so on — all combining to provide an impression of colour, activity and excitement, while at the same time telling a story serves to enhance the interest of the subject matter. It is one thing to read a book on the Strike, no matter how well written, but quite another to see the photographs (even the old familiar ones) blown up to a size where one can actually see the detail in them. And it is yet another thing to see clubs used by the special police, the arrest warrant for the Strike leaders, the fire department log containing the record of the fire crews sent out to deal with the burning street car in the demonstration of 21 June. At their best, as in this Exhibition, such objects lend an air of immediacy to the events of the past that is difficult to get in any other way.

To put this another way, an Exhibition can serve to appeal to and interest people who know nothing about the events it commemorates and who are not inclined to read anything about them. This Exhibition certainly achieved this for the Winnipeg General Strike. If it is true that we live in an increasingly visual age, then this Exhibition certainly met the challenge of the times. At the same time, it was more than a purely visual collage. Like any good text, it could be read at several levels of meaning. Beyond its immediate sensory appeal, it told a story and

presented an analysis. It contained an enormous amount of information about the Strike and about the social conditions in Winnipeg that provided its context. In fact, the more time one spent in it, the more the Exhibition revealed.

In physical terms, visitors were greeted, on entry to the Exhibition, by a diorama representing a labour parade, set against the backdrop of Winnipeg's old city hall, with the marchers carrying placards bearing such slogans as "Strike or Starve," "One Big Union." It was a simple device but one that was extremely effective in orienting the visitor to the theme of the Exhibition.

Around the outer walls was placed a series of photographs, with appropriate captions, which, as one followed them around, presented an overall history of the Strike, from its origins to its conclusion. Within this encircling narrative were placed a large number of free-standing displays and three-dimensional tableaux representing various facets of the Strike. One showed two women manning a gas pump, thus serving to illustrate one aspect of the part that women played in (or in this case against) the Strike, as well as providing a glimpse of the anti-Strike activities of the Committee of 1,000. It was matched across the Exhibition hall by a life-like reconstruction of the Labour Café, depicting one of the activities of women strikers. In various ways, the Exhibition paid attention to the role of women on both sides of the Strike. A caption pointed out that we still know very little about the part played by women in 1919, thus reminding visitors that the writing of history is a continuing and active process which is by no means over and even raising the implicit question in their minds as to what women might have done. What is known, however, was well represented in the Exhibition.

Other three-dimensional replicas included scenes of special constables being sworn in, of returned soldiers, of a telephone operator at her switchboard — all serving to illustrate particular aspects of the anatomy of the Strike, especially when combined with the appropriate photographs and their captions.

In addition, the body of the Exhibition Hall contained a number of displays illustrating the various aspects of Winnipeg's history that combined to make the Strike possible. Visitors were given, for example, an informative survey of the history and culture of labour in Winnipeg before 1919, provided through union memorabilia — banners, membership cards, ribbons, by-laws, convention programmes, and so on. The net effect was that the visitor quickly realized that for many workers, their union was not only a protective organization but also a source of a set of alternative values characterized by solidarity, collectivity, and mutual trust, of a culture that was oppositional to the capitalist workplace within which they earned their living. Some of these exhibits were arranged in display cases for reasons of conservation and protection, but others were posted on pillars and walls, with the result that wherever one looked there was some reminder of the Strike, sometimes at eye-level, sometimes higher, sometimes lower. The overall effect was one of being immersed in the atmosphere of the Strike, but without ever feeling hemmed in by clutter or by an excess of detail. It was obvious that a good deal of



This tableau was the first thing seen by visitors as they entered the Exhibition. Winnipeg's old city hall is in the background and the paraders effectively draw attention to the Strike and to the One Big Union. Typical of the attention to detail taken by the organizers of the Exhibition is the OBU button in the leading parader's lapel.

though had gone into the physical layout and organization of the Exhibition, and that a relatively small exhibition hall had been used to great effect.

A particular strength of the Exhibition was its careful attention to Winnipeg's radical activity. The title of the exhibition was "City in Crisis" and its purpose was to make the point that the Strike of 1919 should not be seen as an isolated incident, a "bolt from the blue" as one school textbook once called it. Rather, the Exhibition showed a city that was divided by the gulf that existed between the political, economic, and social elite on the one side, and the socialists, anarchists, unionists, and assorted freethinkers on the other. The Socialist Party of Canada and the fledgling One Big Union were both well represented in the Exhibition, as were Jewish, Ukrainian, and other radical groups. Banners, posters, leaflets, and programmes in a variety of languages, as well as photographs, combined to provide a picture of the variety and vibrancy of Winnipeg life in the years before 1919. The exhibition gave ample attention to Winnipeg's ethnic history and to the ways in which radical politics found a home in many immigrant communities in the city, as Jews, Scots, Ukrainians, and others found their domestic political ideas confirmed by the North American experience. Consider, as only one example, the rich history implicit in this otherwise mundane Exhibition caption: "By 1914 the Arbeiter Ring in Winnipeg had been formed and included the Revolutionary Marxists (Branch 169); the Labour Zionists and Socialist Territorialists (Branch 506); and the Anarchists (Branch 564)." As is well known, the Winnipeg establishment blamed the strike on "aliens." This Exhibition helped one to understand their fears as they saw such un-British and subversive currents swirling in the North End of what they thought of as their city. Winnipeg was indeed a divided city. It takes only a little imagination to see why Winnipeg's ruling class had begun to worry about its future even before the Strike occurred, and why they saw the Strike as a fundamental challenge to their hegemony. In such circumstances, God save the King indeed, especially since his opponents appeared to believe in neither God nor King.



A tableau of the Labour Café organized by the Women's Labour League, together with an announcement taken from the Western Labor News.

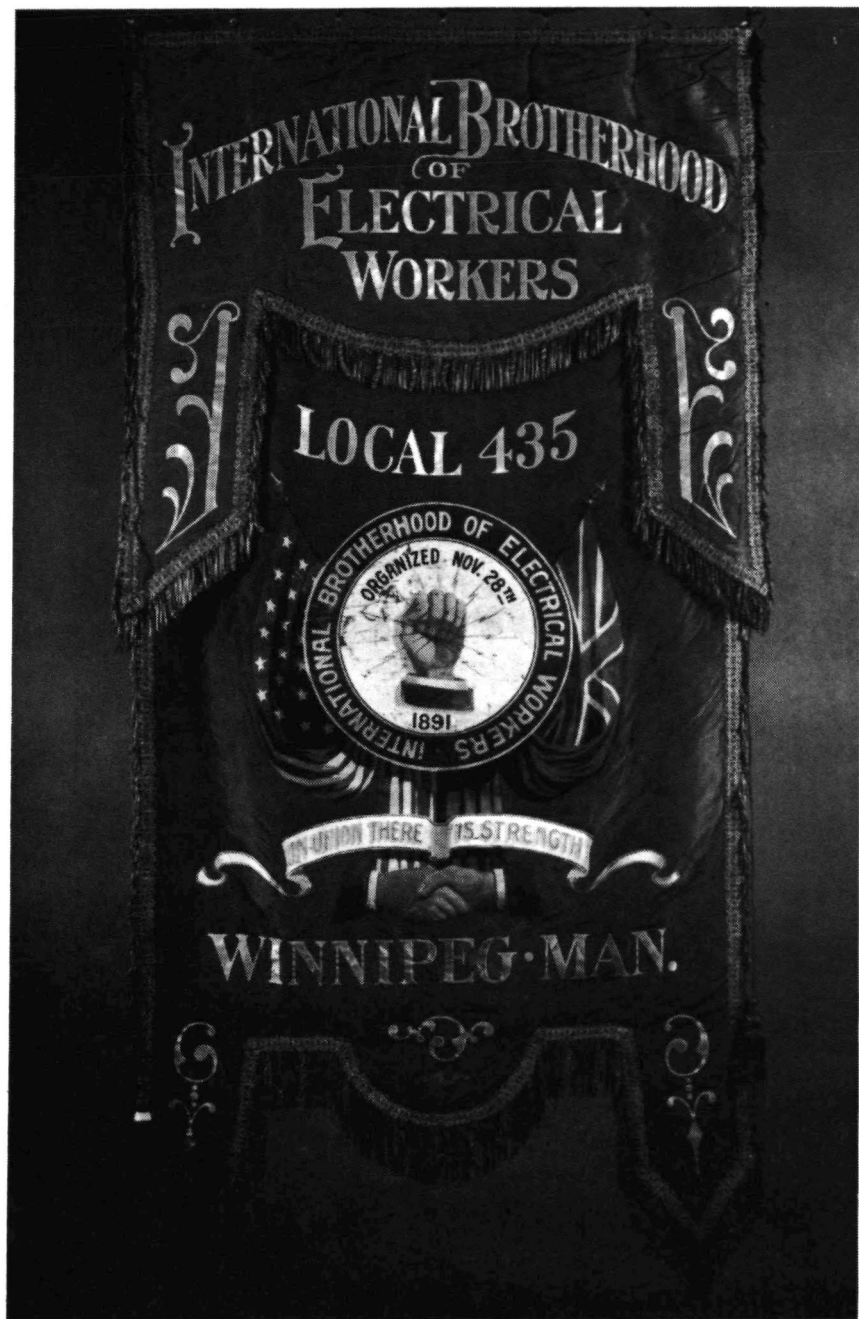
NO NEED TO HUNGER

The Women's Labor League is doing splendid work through their restaurant adjoining the Strathcona Hotel. Hundreds of free meals are supplied there daily. No one need want.

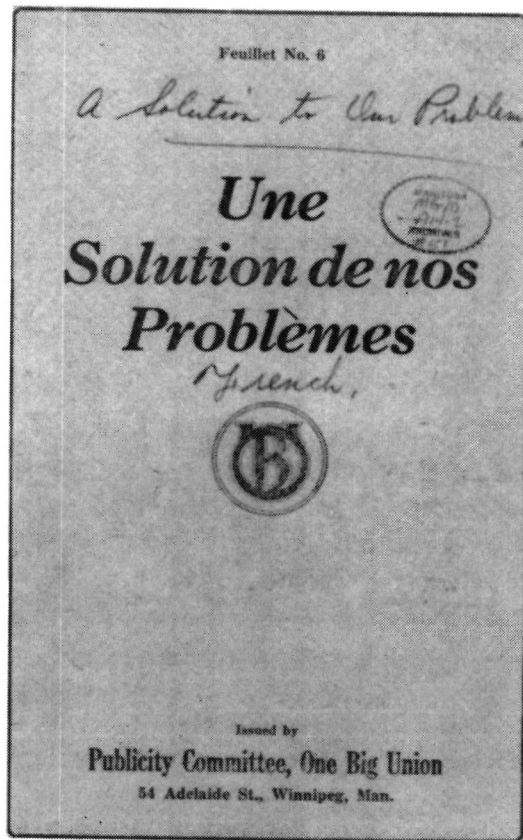
This institution is receiving fine financial support from individuals and organizations and is well able to carry on.

Strikers, get your meals at the Labor League Restaurant. If you can pay for them do so. If you can't you are welcome.

This is the biggest thing in town today.—Real Brotherhood.



This particular union banner was rescued from disintegration by the Museum and put to good use in illustrating union solidarity and culture.



Two versions of a One Big Union booklet. Note the address of the Winnipeg OBU office at the bottom of the page. Displays like this effectively illustrated both the internationalism of the Strike leaders and their determination to reach all sections of the Canadian working class.



A Jewish socialist children's group, in this case the Arbeiter Ring, staging a pageant emphasizing the theme of international solidarity against the forces of oppression. Note the Ku Klux Klan figure. Note also the banner and the picture of Lenin the background.
 Photo courtesy of the Jewish historical Society of Western Canada.

The Winnipeg establishment was amply represented in the Exhibition. Their values, their houses, their fears, and their hopes for the future came through clearly, as did their concrete manifestations in May and June, 1919, in the form of special constables, armed troops, the Riot Act, political wheeling and dealing, and their fundamental determination to smash the Strike and those who led it. Historians have long debated the extent to which the Strike was a revolution in embryo, as opposed to a strike for collective bargaining rights, with opinion these days emphasizing the second view. What emerged from this Exhibition, at least for this visitor, was a third interpretation: that the Strike was a struggle for power and control, or at least was seen as such by the city's ruling class. Having, as they saw it, virtually created Winnipeg, and remaining determined to turn into the Chicago of the North, while at the same time sitting securely in the positions of economic, cultural, and political power, Winnipeg's rulers were not prepared to concede anything to working-class demands, which they saw as not only a threat to their material position but as subversive of their whole world-view. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that they took such an apocalyptic view of the Strike and were prepared to do all in their power not simply to end it but to smash it and everything that it represented. Unfortunately for the fortunes of the Strike, the Strike leaders were not as clear headed on this point as were their opponents.

In these and other ways, the Exhibition made clear that the Strike was not a sudden eruption in the calm of Winnipeg life. Rather, it had deep roots and represented the conflict of deeply entrenched forces in Winnipeg. In addition, as the Exhibition pointed out, it represented the emergence in Winnipeg of forces that were at work in many parts of the capitalist world. As one display in the Exhibition put it, "The struggle between labour and capital transcended national boundaries."

Even so, the Exhibition, in my view, tended to downplay the revolutionary implications of the Strike. It is true that nowadays most historians see the Strike as a struggle for collective bargaining, but it has always seemed to me that this view of the Strike unnecessarily dismisses the revolutionary ideals of such people as Bob Russell, Dick Johns, and other Strike leaders. The overall assessment of the Strike represented in the Exhibition was to be found in this statement:

Leaders of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council were not conspiring to create a revolution in Canada. Their primary objective was to achieve collective bargaining and a living wage for all workers. Many shared a vision of a new society created through democratic processes. As written in 1919 "... workers want control of industry in their own hands as soon as possible so they can get the full product of their toil and eliminate production for profit. But they will wait until this is accomplished through constitutional processes."



Two returned servicemen posing with their machine-gun, ready for Anti-Strike duty.

It is obviously true that the Strike leaders did not "conspire" to create a revolution. They made no plans and took no steps whatsoever for such an eventuality. But this does not mean that some of them did not dream of revolution occurring somehow or other, perhaps in some kind of democratic spontaneity of the kind desired by such activists as Rosa Luxemburg. The Second International, after all, always hoped and assumed that world war would be prevented by general strike. They did not plan for it or organize it; they just hoped that it would happen. In the same way people such as Russell and his socialist colleagues might well have hoped that the Strike would somehow generate the longed for revolution. One can accuse them of naivete and utopianism, perhaps, but one should not ignore their revolutionary dreams. They organized a strike, but there was something more. They were not Leninists but when they called for a socialist transformation of society, they meant what they said. They can be faulted in hindsight for relying too much on rhetoric and not enough on strategy, for waiting on events rather than trying to shape them, but their desire to create the cooperative commonwealth was none the less serious for that. Some of these potentially revolutionary aspirations came through in the Exhibition, and if not to the extent that I would have liked to see, nonetheless they were not ignored.

In a sense, there is more to be said for the reaction of Winnipeg's ruling class to the Strike than is sometimes allowed. It is the tendency these days to dismiss the reaction of the establishment of the Strike as an unfounded and hysterical exaggeration of what was involved. But, from its point of view, perhaps the ruling class was not altogether wrong to take revolutionary rhetoric more seriously than we do today, especially in the context of 1917 and all that followed. I thought the Exhibition could have made rather more of how Winnipeg's ruling class reacted to the Strike and of how the coercive powers of the state were called on to crush it. A powerful statement could have been made, for example, by an opening diorama, not of a peaceful parade, but of the Mounted Police charging down Main Street with guns firing. Similarly, the Exhibition could have included a blown-up reproduction of the well known photograph of returned soldiers manning their machine gun. To walk into the Exhibition and find oneself confronted by that particular picture would have created a certain atmosphere. The Exhibition took the view that the Strike was, when all is said and done, precisely that — a strike, with radical political and social yearnings floating in the air. The authorities, both local and federal, obviously thought otherwise and brought out the guns. Looking at things from their point of view, one can even see why they did. To say that the Strike leaders did not conspire to create a revolution is not to say that some of them would not have welcomed one should it have occurred. I should add that my point in all this is certainly not to complain that the Exhibition ignored the class conflict that ran through the Strike. No visitor to the Exhibition could have missed this. The point is one of shading rather than of substance.

The Bolsheviki and World Peace



~ by Leon Trotsky ~ extract from page 238. ~

The revolutionary epoch will create new forms of organization out of the inexhaustible resources of Proletarian Socialism, new forms that will be equal to the greatness of the new tasks. To this work we will apply ourselves at **ONCE** amid

The mad roaring of the machine guns, the crashing of cathedrals, & the patriotic howling of the capitalist jackals.

We will keep our minds clear amid this hellish Death Music.

We feel ourselves to be the only creative force of the future.

Get a Copy of this Book from the S.P.C.

Perhaps this Socialist Party of Canada poster helps explain why Winnipeg's ruling class thought machine guns might be needed.

Given the circumstances and context of 1919, it is surprising that there was so little violence, injury, or loss of life during the Strike. The Exhibition was certainly correct to portray the Strike as an amazingly non-violent event — at least on the part of the Strikers — and to emphasize the constitutionalist values of the Strike leaders. For a major strike that lasted as long as did the Winnipeg Strike of 1919, involving so many people, arousing such depths of feeling, and facing the coercive intent of its opponents, it is amazing that it remained so free of property damage and personal violence.

The organizers of the Exhibition, working under the guidance of Sharon Reilly, the Museum's Associate Curator of History and Technology, deserve full credit for what they accomplished. Museum boards around the country being what they so often are, it seems reasonable to assume that an exhibition of this nature on this topic must have raised the eyebrows of at least some board members. And these days funds are not easy to come by for any exhibition, let alone one of this nature. But, despite all the obstacles, here a rich and informative array of materials of all sorts illustrating the full nature and impact of the Strike was gathered together for the first time. This point deserves particular emphasis. So far as I know the artifacts and materials brought together in this Exhibition had never been brought together before. Moreover, in organizing the Exhibition the Museum staff came across materials that no-one knew existed, notably a CBC tape of a programme commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Strike in 1959, featuring interviews with some of the veterans of the Strike, including Bob Russell himself. All in all, this Exhibition was a unique occasion and it was obvious that an enormous amount of time and thought and effort had gone into it.

More generally, exhibitions of this sort not only bring to people aspects of their history not customarily taught, they also provide a means of bridging the gap between labour and working-class historians and their potential audience. This Exhibition served as a powerful indicator of the potential of exhibitions in general to popularize the research findings of working class history.

In fact, it served to allow at least some people to become contributors to the historical record and, as such, helped to democratize history. Too often history is presented as something produced by specialists, working with methods and on materials that non-specialists cannot understand. As a result, history becomes something which most people can only receive from the hands of others, rather than creating for themselves. Moreover, in the process they often come to see their own history as not really "history" at all, in the sense that they believe that it is not important enough to appear in history books. Even professedly radical historians can easily become agents of popular disempowerment. By contrast, this Exhibition stimulated some people to bring to the museum objects that they had previously either ignored or thought of as too trivial to be worth bothering with. Instead of being part of the tourist industry, heritage began to come alive. Here also is a message for working-class historians.

Not least, exhibitions such as this can serve a valuable educational purpose, both broad and narrow. In the case of this Exhibition, it attracted considerable attention from the local media and was even taken advantage of by Lloyd Axworthy when he wanted to make a political announcement. It is also worth noting that the Exhibition was accompanied by a range of special events, some arranged by the Museum and some by the Labour Education Centre of the Manitoba Federation of Labour. They included tours of Strike sites, story-telling, sing-alongs, films, a play, a high school conference, a labour conference featuring Stanley Aronowitz as the keynote speaker, and the providing of labour speakers for schools. Thanks to the Museum's work with the local school community, the Exhibition proved to be highly successful with local high schools, attracting over 700 students and necessitating the laying on of more guided tours than had been originally planned.

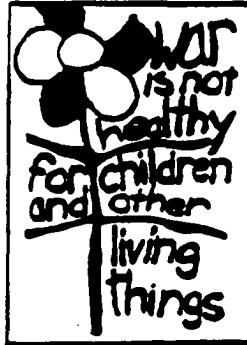
The Exhibition, in fact, deserves more than local exposure. It certainly merits a national tour. It could also serve as a model for similar exhibitions in other parts of the country. Not the least of the attractions of this Exhibition was the way it brought together the museum community and the labour movement. The location of the Exhibition in the Museum under Museum auspices had the effect of taking the Strike out of a narrowly partisan context to make it part of the history of all Winnipeggers. To hold the Exhibition in a union hall, for example, though perfectly natural in one sense, would have had the effect of turning the commemoration of the Strike into an act of union hagiography and thus discouraged many potential visitors from attending it. To locate the Exhibition in the Museum, by contrast, not only made a statement about the Museum and about the history of the Strike; it also served as a contribution to a redefinition of heritage by showing the Strike as an important episode in everyone's heritage.

Organized labour has often been suspicious, with good reason in many cases, of attempts by outsiders to write its history. In the case of this Exhibition, however, Winnipeg's unions, to their credit, gave it their full support and cooperation. They provided some of the resources that made the Exhibition possible in the first place and generally made the 75th anniversary of the Strike an important part of their agenda. As already noted, the Labour Education Centre organized a variety of related activities, with a particular focus on schools. It was a rewarding experience, especially in these neo-conservative times, to attend the official opening of the Exhibition at the Museum and hear the main speech given by the President of the Manitoba Federation of Labour and to hear a programme of labour songs performed by the Labour Choir. In one of his unduly neglected novels, Raymond Williams distinguished between folk history and people's history. This Exhibition made a notable contribution to the latter. Given all the pressures — ranging from the inertia of tradition to the power of the dominant ideology — people's history must always struggle to make itself known, in Winnipeg in May and June it succeeded in doing so. If there is any wider lesson to be learned from this experience it is the power of exhibitions of this sort to reach a broad audience. It is a lesson of particular relevance for working-class history.

All photographs were taken by Rob Barrow of the Museum staff, except for Photo 8, which comes from the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (Winnipeg Strike Collection #52).

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