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Kurt Korneski

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Prairie Fire: The Winnipeg General Strike

Kurt Korneski

ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH THE DEBATES among historians about how best to interpret the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 will find themselves disappointed with the account of the strike given in *Prairie Fire*. The film is modeled on an interpretive framework that has come to be termed western exceptionalism. With little regard for challenges to that framework, the collaborative efforts of historians and film production staff have resulted in an account of the strike that fails to place it in the more general atmosphere of unrest that has been shown to have existed. Furthermore, inconsistencies of the western exceptionalist view make historical studies, whether books, articles, or, as is the case with *Prairie Fire*, films, little more than a means of justifying a present political viewpoint. What follows is a summary of the film that is intended to show that the account of the strike in *Prairie Fire* does indeed borrow heavily from the western exceptionalist interpretation of the strike. Next a brief overview of a divergent, labour-revolt interpretation of the strike will follow; the overview will highlight the insights of scholars who have challenged the view found in *Prairie Fire*, and make clear that the thesis implicit in the film does not adequately explain working-class unrest in early 20th-century Canada, including the unrest in Winnipeg in 1919. Identifying the tautological nature of the western exceptionalist view will show that it is a problematic explanation that does more to reaffirm present day political visions than it does to explain the past.¹

¹For examples of western exceptionalist interpretation of early 20th-century labour strife see David Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montréal and Kingston 1974; 2nd edition 1990). Also see Bercuson's "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier," *Canadian Historical Review*, 2 (June 1977), 154-177, and *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978). A. Ross McCormack's *Reformers, Rebel, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977) also follows this interpretation.

Besides these analytical and historiographical considerations, another troublesome aspect of the account is the portrayal of non-British immigrant workers. Specific information about groups of central and eastern European immigrant workers may be understandable, though that friendliness is supposed to have characterized relations between government officials and non-British immigrants is difficult to understand.

In *Prairie Fire*, Winnipeg workers provide a good example of workers who came to western Canada looking for "free land and a fresh start" but more often found, as the narrator of the film explains, "that the roads were not paved with gold." Rather, they found "harsh winters and primitive living conditions." Daily realities for them included the premature deaths of their children who fell victim to disease, while many adults themselves faced dangerous workplaces where they risked injury or death regularly. Furthermore, western employers were ostensibly a particularly tough bunch. For example, the owners of the big three metal shops — Manitoba Bridge and Iron Works, Vulcan Iron Works, and Northern Iron Works — apparently "ruled with a firm hand" and refused to grant any concessions to dissatisfied workers. The poor living conditions, hazardous workplaces, and struggle with the particularly hard-nosed employers had been a fact of life for Winnipeg's workers since around the turn of the century. World War I made an already bad situation worse.

During the war years both local and international events provided an atmosphere of "excitement" that, according to this view, greatly contributed to the development of the general strike in Winnipeg. Turmoil in Europe and especially the Russian Revolution of 1917 made workers believe that united action brought results. The general strike in Seattle, Washington along with other large-scale US strikes brought broadly-based protest movements close to home. Finally, runaway inflation caused by the war made a difficult existence even more miserable.

These international events combined with the endemic problems that Winnipeg's workers, like other western workers, endured and made the "radicalism" of socialists such as R. B. Russell appealing. Apparently, the appeal of "radicalism" was not so great for eastern workers who, according to the account in the film, organized primarily in conservative craft unions. As David Bercuson explains, "what you had [in Winnipeg] was an opportunity for labour leaders who were inherently radical because they believed or at least thought they believed they were Marxists or Bolsheviks, or whatever, being able to come forward and win the trust of large numbers of just ordinary workers who would say to themselves, 'well look at that guy, he really has our interests at heart and he'll fight for the welfare of the workers'."

Workers' willingness to accept "radical" ideas developed into their taking "radical" action by 1918. About a year before the general strike of 1919 workers in Winnipeg emerged victorious from a partial general strike which made them, according to the account in *Prairie Fire*, more brazen. Bercuson clarifies this point.

He explains that the "problem with the 1918 partial general strike in the city of Winnipeg was that the workers, for all intents and purposes, won it." The unfortunate victory, he elaborates, "gave the lesson that if you want to get somewhere in [Winnipeg], ... hold a general strike." The convergence of the tension and excitement resulted in the general strike in the spring of 1919.

After the victory of 1918 and the Western Labour Conference early in 1919, western workers felt that they "were on a roll." Increasingly combative, railway workers struck over wages precipitating mass walkouts, including work stoppages by the unorganized; these strikes shut the city down for the next six weeks. Winnipeg's General Strike drew national, even international attention.² After weeks of deadlock, the strike leaders were arrested, and street clashes between pro and anti-strike veterans occurred. The most climactic of these confrontations, Bloody Saturday, occurred after street cars were put back into service and run by "volunteers." Large crowds of workers and pro-strike veterans gathered to try to prevent the street cars from running. In the end the Royal North West Mounted Police opened fire on the crowd killing two people and injuring approximately thirty others. Workers, beaten by the combined efforts of employers and government officials, returned to work having, at most, helped to hammer out a system of collective bargaining in Canada, and, at worst, having gained nothing at all. The radical West/conservative East dichotomy, the emphasis on harsh, frontier living conditions, the supposed particularly hard-nosed group of western employers all figure as components of the western exceptionalist analytic backdrop against which this episodic confrontation is supposed to have unfolded. The "excitement" of revolutionary rhetoric generated by "radicals" like R.B. Russell, the particularly receptive audience for this rhetoric among western workers, the unusually intense combativeness of workers encouraged by their 1918 victory, and, finally, the emphasis on the history of tense relations between particularly tough bosses and exceptionally desperate workers are elements of this account that further indicate that it derives from this interpretive framework.

Over the past two decades scholars have challenged the western exceptionalists' East-West dichotomy and its narrow, localized view of radicalism. Historians such as Craig Heron, James Naylor, Gregory Kealey, Ian MacKay, Suzanne Morton, and Nolan Reilly — their analyses developed within a variety of left, often Marxist perspectives — have all argued that rather than an East-West dichotomy, in the last years of World War I and the years immediately after the war, working-class people, albeit in differing ways, expressed their dissatisfaction with the extant

²Historian Ed Rea of the University of Manitoba in one of his appearances in *Prairie Fire* notes that more than twice the number of organized workers who voted to strike actually downed tools, indicating that a large number of Winnipeg's poorly paid, unorganized workers were involved in the strike. It is also worth noting here that besides Creative Consultant David Bercuson, historians Ed Rea and Mildred and Harry Gutkin appear in *Prairie Fire*.

industrial capitalist socio-economic system in Canada.³ Naylor, for example, argues that amalgamation movements in Ontario's labour movement showed a tendency among workers to consolidate their efforts in a struggle to ameliorate and assert a measure of control over their lives.⁴ Ian MacKay and Suzanne Morton, writing about early 20th-century labour unrest in the Maritimes, show that Independent Labour Party (ILP) movements gained in popularity in this period indicating that working people actively sought, though through the electoral political arena, to shape the future of Canada, or at least their part of the country, in accordance with the needs of working people.⁵ Nolan Reilly has explored the general strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, and found a remarkable expression of solidarity. Gregory Kealey analyzed strike statistics and workers' responses to the 1919 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, finding that workers in all regions of Canada involved themselves in strike activity more than ever before, and that they expressed their dissatisfaction with industrial capitalism to the government's investigators. All of these studies suggest that while not all early 20th-century Canadian workers engaged in general strikes like Winnipeg's workers, labour across Canada found itself dissatisfied with the socio-economic system. Historians

³See Craig Heron, *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* (Toronto 1998); James Naylor, *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario, 1914-25* (Toronto 1991); Gregory Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 11-44; Nolan Reilly, "The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia 1919," *Acadiensis*, 9 (1980), 56-77. These books and articles are intended as examples of this literature. There are many other articles and books that might have been discussed. For example, Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992); Linda Kealey, "'No Special Protection-No Sympathy': Women's Activism in the Canadian Labour Revolt of 1919," in Dein Hopkins and Gregory Kealey, eds., *Class, Community, and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (Aberystwyth 1989); see also Linda Kealey's *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto 1998) for chapters covering this period. Other studies include James Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1909-1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 9-37; and Tom Mitchell, "Repressive Measures: A. J. Andrews, the Committee of 1000, and the Campaign Against Radicalism After the Winnipeg General Strike," *Left History*, 3, 1 (Fall 1995/Spring 1996), 133-167. See also Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 41-66; and Peterson's "Revolutionary Socialism and Industrial Unrest in the Era of the Winnipeg General Strike: The Origins of Communist Labour Unionism in Europe and North America," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 115-131. This is merely a sample of the considerable body of literature that has developed since the 1970s about early 20th-century labour unrest in Canada.

⁴Naylor, *The New Democracy*, 64-71, 245-246.

⁵Ian MacKay and Suzanne Morton, "The Maritimes: Expanding Circle of Resistance," in Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 54-56. Also see the first chapter, "The Great War, the State, and Working-Class Canada," for an overview of the period.

like Heron, Naylor, Kealey, MacKay, Morton, and Reilly all argue that there existed in early 20th-century Canada a national labour revolt.

Despite two decades of research highlighting the fact that workers across Canada articulated their dissatisfaction with existing socio-economic relations, and that they actively sought to alter those conditions, the narrow, localized view of the general strike in Winnipeg given in *Prairie Fire* suggests that the historians involved with making the film have paid insufficient attention to the broader historical context outlined by the proponents of the labour revolt thesis. While there is passing mention that workers participated in sympathy strikes across Canada in support of the Winnipeg General Strike, no attempt to incorporate the insights of the left and Marxist historians has been made. Only the cities of Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, Edmonton, and Toronto receive mention, thus ignoring working-class activity in the Maritimes and Québec. Moreover, the sympathetic strike in Toronto, for example, does not appear explicable given the regionally specific nature of radicalism and the peculiarly western conditions that made workers more open to radical messages that, according to *Prairie Fire*, existed in Canada in this period. Historians have shown that working-class activity occurred in all regions of Canada, and the failure of those historians involved with the production of *Prairie Fire* to draw on their findings is difficult to understand. What is further problematic, but what may go a long way to explaining the lack of attention paid to scholars arguing that the strike must be placed in the context of a Canadian labour revolt, is the circularity of the western exceptionalist view.

One key concept for the western exceptionalist view is radicalism, defined as socialist political movements and general strike tactics. It is instructive to pause here to recall Bercuson's commentary about "inherently radical" labour leaders who "believed or thought they believed they were Marxists or Bolsheviks, or whatever" which draws on the definition of radicalism outlined above. In any case, radicals are those who support socialist political movements and general strike tactics. By defining radicalism in these terms, these historians have effectively defined any instance of working-class protest that might take a different form, for example, the form of an ILP movement, away.

What is more troubling than this type of rationalization, however, is that these historians have developed a seriously flawed argument. Radicalism was primarily a western phenomenon, goes the argument, because western workers supported socialist political movements and engaged in general strikes, the very movements and tactics that define "radicalism." The problem with this argument is that it is not an argument at all; since the conclusion is simply a restatement of one of the premises it is a tautology. As such, it amounts to an incoherent statement that seems to serve more to justify its proponent's belief that fighting in the streets, riots, and class strife are, as *Prairie Fire*'s narrator explains, "not the stuff of Canada."

By portraying the strike as a bizarre, local upheaval, historians can remain confident that the political climate in Canada has generally been peaceful, conser-

vative, and reformist. Further, they can argue that this political climate serves and has served the interests of Canadians and as evidence of that they can point to a supposed lack of strife in Canadian history. Those instances like the Winnipeg General Strike that have occurred, and that cannot be ignored, they explain away, albeit by employing logically flawed lines of reasoning.

Obviously it would be ridiculous to suggest that proponents of the labour revolt thesis are not influenced by political beliefs. To the contrary, these scholars' accounts are all informed to greater and lesser degrees by Marxist thought. Indeed, it will likely come as no surprise to most readers that scholars' beliefs and preferences, political or otherwise, do inform the accounts they produce. Acknowledging that historians' own personal views shape the accounts they provide is not to suggest that history and political rallying cries are the same. What is important, and seemingly what should be expected, is that historians will scrutinize their own views as well as rival interpretations.

What is also troubling about this account of the strike is its focus on the British-immigrant and Canadian-born strikers. These workers no doubt did play an important role in determining the direction of the strike and in advising rank-and-file labour in Winnipeg on what action, if any, was advisable. It is instructive, however, to consider the information provided in the film. Historian Ed Rea informs us that an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 workers walked off the job, while only about 11,000 of those organized into trade unions actually voted to go on strike, leaving us with a minimum of about 14,000 workers who were on strike, but evidently were not organized in unions. Rea surmises that a large percentage of these workers were the "low paid workers." We learn at the beginning of the film that these low paid workers were primarily those from central and eastern Europe who "earned a dollar a day for ten hours work." It follows that if possibly more than half, and at least a large portion of the strikers on the streets likely were non-British immigrant, non-Canadian-born workers, it seems reasonable to believe that a more complete account of the strike would include how, for example, Ukrainian and Finnish workers, taking into account their exclusion from the mainstream union movement, organized. One might speculate that these immigrants' own organizations — for instance language locals of the Socialist Party of Canada — might have served as centers of coordination. Whether or not the central and eastern European communities in Winnipeg's North end provided some structure to these immigrants' participation in the strike is also a possibility worth exploring. While the list of speculations about how these immigrants might have been organized and the significance of their presence during the strike may go on indefinitely, information about central and eastern European immigrant strikers would have been welcome. In fairness, that the film provides little information about these strikers may be attributed to a paucity of secondary material on them. While the absence of specific information on particular immigrant groups is unfortunate but perhaps understandable, the portrayal of relations between Canadians and non-British immi-

grants, particularly between eastern and central Europeans and the Canadian government or Canadians more generally for that matter, is more difficult to rationalize.

According to the film, the Canadian government "warmly welcomed" central and eastern Europeans, encouraging them to settle the West. The acceptability of these immigrants only became questionable during the latter years of the war and especially after the Bolsheviks toppled the Russian aristocracy in October of 1917. The notion that fellow feeling characterized the relationship between these immigrants and Canadian government officials is difficult to support. The government, not unlike a large portion of the Canadian populous, were suspicious of non-British immigrants. This discomfort became manifested in draconian legislation at the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914.

Almost immediately after European countries declared war the Canadian government made all "subjects of enemy countries ... liable to arrest and detention." By war's end the government interned more than 8500 immigrants from presumably "enemy nations," while subjecting more than 80,000 to inspection and registration.⁶ While the account in *Prairie Fire* implies that such abusive treatment did not develop until near the end of the war, the most pressing problem with the account of immigrants found in the film is the failure to recognize the more general sentiments from which these legislative maneuvers developed. To focus on the wartime abuses "aliens" endured misses the more general chauvinism of early 20th century Canadian governmental officials, as well as the intolerance of a sizeable portion of the nation's population.

As early as the late 19th century corporations, often backed by the Canadian government, imported large numbers of immigrant labourers, many of them from eastern and central Europe. The search for "good sturdy" people to settle western Canada, and the insatiable demand for inexpensive labour to fuel developing Canadian industry did not lessen their discomfort with the "type" of immigrants recruited. Even if not stringently enforced, legislation such as the Alien Labour Act of 1897 which disallowed individuals and companies importing immigrant labourers into Canada suggests some discomfort with the idea of allowing large numbers of "foreigners" into the country.⁷ While it may be true that corporate demands for this human resource overrode discomfort with "alien" labour, the ambivalent attitude toward the foreign-born population was unarguably present well before World War I, the Russian Revolution of 1917, or the Winnipeg General Strike.

The presence of large numbers of "undesirable" immigrants weighed heavily on even such a progressively minded man as J. S. Woodsworth. A would be leader of the Winnipeg General Strike, founder of the Co-operative Commonwealth

⁶Francis Swyripa and John Herd Thompson, *Loyalties in Conflict: Ukrainian Canadians During the Great War* (Edmonton 1983), 1-2.

⁷Donald H. Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994* (Toronto 1995), 20-42.

Federation (predecessor to the New Democratic Party), and Social Gospeler, Woodsworth became so concerned, in fact, that more than ten years before the general strike he felt compelled to write a 200 page book discussing the desirability and undesirability of immigration, and if various foreigners might be "Canadianized."

The Winnipeg General Strike is an important event in Canadian history, one that might interest an audience well beyond the confines of professional historians. The failure of historians and film production staff to incorporate recent literature on the strike, as well as the focus on British-immigrant and Canadian-born workers' experiences and contributions has, unfortunately, resulted in an account of the strike that is seriously lacking.