

General Strike! An American Tradition

(Part 1 of a many-part serial)

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dedicated to the Detroit newspaper workers who have been on strike and locked-out for over four years

Strikes - a recent development

Websters's Dictionary defines "strike" as a verb meaning "to refuse to continue to work ... until certain demands have been met."

While human beings have always worked to survive, strikes are a new phenomenon, only a few hundred years old. For several hundred thousand years our ancestors lived as hunters and gatherers. Everyone worked together to eke out an existence, sharing the fruits of their labors. Refusing to work, striking, was unthinkable.

The later great civilizations of Egypt, Sumeria, Greece, Rome, etc. came after agriculture and improvements in technology made possible a surplus of food. Cities and empires were built on the backs of slave labor which could now produce an abundant surplus to feed the masters. These workers could not "strike" but occasionally they revolted. The story of Spartacus is perhaps the most well known. All of these revolts were drowned in blood.

Peasant serfs in the feudal period in Europe had more rights than ancient slaves. But they, too, were squeezed dry by the lords of the manor. Their weapon was the peasant uprising. These were usually easily crushed by the military superiority in armament and organization of the "nobility." The Peasant Wars in Germany in 1525 have been much studied.

Only with the development of capitalism did the two modern classes emerge - capitalists and workers. Industrial capitalism has made this minority of owners vastly wealthy, but it also has created a huge majority of workers gathered in large establishments and crowded into huge cities.

The strike, at one time outlawed and punished as conspiracy, won recognition over the past two hundred years due to the persistent struggle of masses of workers. Strikes which began as a united effort by some workers to better the conditions of their employment can, and have, appealed to ever wider sections of the working class to lend assistance. This became known as the general strike.

The First U.S. General Strike - 1835

The tactic of the general strike first emerged in England where the capitalist overthrow of feudalism occurred earliest in Europe (1640-1660). The industrial revolution was in full swing in England by the early 1800's.

In the United States a proposal for a general strike was first made at the 1835 Convention of the National Trades' Union. This

was the first national labor federation in the U.S., founded in August 1834.

Workers in Boston in 1835 had tried to organize a city-wide general strike for the 10 hour day, but were crushed. Workers in Philadelphia, inspired by the Boston struggle took up the banner. Three hundred armed Irish longshoremen marched through the streets calling workers to join them on strike. Leather workers, printers, carpenters, bricklayers, masons, city employees, bakers, clerks and painters joined in, carrying their tools.

John Ferral, the leading Philadelphia trade unionist, described it: "The blood sucking aristocracy stood aghast; terror stricken they thought the day of retribution had come." [Foner v.1, p. 117]. The Philadelphia city government met and ordered that city workers would now only work 10 hours, from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. with one hour for lunch and one hour for dinner. Three weeks after the longshoremen walked out, the other employers gave in to the general strike. The 10 hour day was adopted throughout the city along with some wage increases.

A wave of strikes then swept the country as workers heard of the Philadelphia victory. By the end of 1835 the standard working day for skilled workers was ten hours. Only in Boston, where the workers had first been defeated, were hours not reduced. In 1840 President Martin Van Buren instituted the ten hour day for Federal employees.

Unskilled textile mill workers organized the North East Workingmen's Association to fight for the 10 hour day. A proposal circulated for a general strike to begin on July 4, 1846. It was called a "Second Independence Day." Five thousand women mill hands struck in western Pennsylvania but were crushed and a general strike never materialized.

The General Strike Against Slavery

A tremendous obstacle stood in the way of the further development of the U.S. labor movement. As bad as conditions were for the skilled and unskilled northern workers, four million workers and their families labored under the most horrible oppression of chattel slavery on southern plantations. Karl Marx noted that "Labor with a white skin cannot be free while labor with a black skin is branded."

Slavery did not simply divide the working class. The slave system itself was an obstacle to the further development of capitalism and industrialization. The overriding power of the slave owners over the government of the United States had to be broken and it was broken in a brutal Civil War from 1861 to 1865.

One of the decisive factors in that war, a factor usually ignored by historians, was described by the brilliant African-American scholar W.E.B. DuBois. In his monumental "Black Reconstruction in America" DuBois wrote: "As soon ... as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army ... this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war." [DuBois, p. 57].

The northern armies at first repulsed run-aways by all means. They even returned them to southern masters. But nothing could stop the flow. When General Butler began accepting run-away slaves as "contraband of war," first eight came, then 47 more. Soon they

numbered in the thousands. Fort Monroe became known as "Freedom Fort." "Gradually the fugitives became organized and formed a great labor force for the Army ... as laborers, servants and spies." [DuBois, p. 65].

DuBois went on: "This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system and to do that they left the plantations." [DuBois, p. 67].

The Union Army put tens of thousands of these fugitives from slavery to work growing crops. After the Emancipation Proclamation "this army of striking labor furnished in time 200,000 Federal soldiers whose evident ability to fight decided the war." [DuBois, p. 67].

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