

Citywide General Strikes in American History

Mass strikes of any kind are not common in the contemporary United States, and general strikes have been even more rare throughout American history. However, such events have occurred on a number of occasions, often with a major impact on conditions of work and public policies. These instances and the possibility of organizing something similar in the near future are gaining renewed interest now as potentially effective tactics to resist authoritarian rule.

1835 Philadelphia

Supporting a coal heavers' strike on the docks, the General Trades Union (GTU), an early central labor council, issued a call for a standard ten-hour day, sparking the first citywide general strike in US history. The GTU also pioneered solidarity between skilled and unskilled workers when it admitted the coal heavers into a previously skilled-only organization. The general strike achieved its goal of a ten-hour day for most workers. But the GTU, like most labor organizations of the nineteenth century, could not survive an economic depression, which in this case occurred two years later, at which point the ten-hour day disappeared as well.

1877 St. Louis

In the midst of the first national strike of an entire industry, fought by railroad workers against employers pushing wages down to starvation levels during a severe economic depression, workers in St. Louis led by the socialist Workingmen's Party of the United States walked out in solidarity with the railroad strike and on behalf of demands of their own. A chaotic affair, in which many workplaces were shut down for anywhere from a few hours to several days, the general strike lasted a week in late July before the national rail strike was put down by the federal government together with the railroad corporations through a combination of federal troops and hired thugs.

1886 National

The only national general strike in American history was called by the labor movement for May 1 to support a decades-long campaign for the eight-hour workday. A third of a million workers walked off the job. Chicago saw the largest demonstrations, essentially a general strike, which continued for days. But a rally protesting police murders of strikers was interrupted by a bomb, followed by brutal repression. Assaults by the authorities on civil liberties, especially harsh for immigrant workers, included death by hanging of several labor leaders in a transparent miscarriage of justice. This "red scare" set back the eight-hour movement for decades, but also resulted in May 1 being declared "International Workers Day" by the Socialist International to honor the eight-hour martyrs.

1892 New Orleans

About half the working population of this port city struck on November 8. These workers swelled the ranks of three unions already walking picket lines seeking a union shop, pay for overtime work, and a ten-hour workday. Notable during the general strike was the ugly race-baiting divide-and-conquer tactics of the employer-controlled newspapers, and the firm commitment by the Workingmen's Amalgamated Council in charge of the strike to keeping its

Black and white membership unified and peaceful on the streets. After five days the employers' association agreed to the ten-hour day and overtime pay, but not the union shop.

1919 Seattle

Backdrop: an upheaval of the international working class in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution, and industrial layoffs in a shipbuilding town following the end of World War I. When employers broke their promise to negotiate with the shipyard unions, first those workers shuttered the yards, and then all the unions affiliated with the labor council walked out in solidarity. With a high proportion of single male workers reliant on restaurants to eat among the 65,000 workers on strike, the unions organized meals for the thousands at union halls for several days. American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) locals, usually split along ideological lines, cooperated to keep the city running and peaceful before employers, city government and the National Guard crushed the strike. The repression of labor leadership and left organizations following the strike's end foreshadowed the upcoming national Red Scare and Palmer Raids.

1934 San Francisco, Toledo and Minneapolis/St. Paul

Not one but three city-wide general strikes rocked the country during one of the most militant years of the Great Depression, with a national strike of the textile industry thrown in for good measure (see below).

- The San Francisco General Strike emerged out of a west-coast-wide maritime strike, in response to police shootings of strikers. Longshoreman Harry Bridges rose to national prominence for his role leading the general strike, which established the power of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union on west coast docks.
- In Minneapolis-St. Paul a large Teamster local organized drivers across the city and occupational lines. When its demands for union recognition and wage increases were rejected by employers the local struck, with other unions joining in a general strike. After success in the strike, IBT Local 574 helped unions in other industries organize the city into one of the most unionized in the country.
- In Toledo, a strike of auto workers for union recognition and wage increases featured enormous picket lines with thousands of participants, demonstrations and violent confrontations.

In each of these three city-wide strikes the intransigent anti-union behavior of employers and public authorities—who unleashed police and national guard violence on their behalf, on top of ongoing dire economic circumstances for working class communities—led to powerful and courageous collective action by the workers. In each city they were led by radical labor organizers (Communists in San Francisco, Trotskyists in Minneapolis, and Socialists in Toledo). In each city the unions carefully built alliances with unemployed workers beforehand to reduce the potential pool of strikebreakers. In each city strikers died at the hands of police and hundreds were injured. Not coincidentally, the National Labor Relations Act, setting up rules for peaceful conflict resolution between labor and capital, passed Congress the following year.

Doubling the previous record for city-wide general strikes in a year, 1946 witnessed six: five in the eastern United States and one in the west. Each of these city work stoppages featured their own local grievances and demands. But they were also part of the largest wave of strikes in American history, as the wage and price controls from World War II were lifted, prices of basic goods rose, and workers demanded that their wages keep pace. In all, four and a half million workers walked picket lines throughout the year.

Related mass strikes and similar events

(1863-5) Slave resistance in the Civil War per Dubois

Author/scholar/activist W.E.B. Dubois proposed an unconventional way of understanding the behavior of enslaved people at work in the South during the Civil War. In his landmark book *Black Reconstruction in America* he asserted that, by a widespread slowdown of work and desertion from southern workplaces to the North, slaves in essence went on a general strike to sabotage the Confederate war effort.

1934 National strike of the textile industry

In late summer, emboldened by the citywide general strikes earlier in the year, the United Textile Workers of America called a strike of several hundred thousand workers in a great arc from Maine down through the south. It lasted three weeks until ended by presidential decree. Two dozen workers were killed in violent incidents instigated by mill owners and the local authorities that they controlled. The strike's defeat set back union organizing in the south for decades.

1946 National strikes of several industries

Nearly two million workers were on strike at the same time in basic industries—steel, auto, oil, rubber, coal. But the labor movement was split between AFL and CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) union federations, and between left and liberal leadership within each federation, and little coordination of the type that might have led to a national general strike occurred. The result—substantial wage increases—was welcome, but unions at a moment of peak strength missed an opportunity to reorder the bargaining relationship between workers and employers. Instead, focusing on bread and butter, unions ceded larger possibilities for topics of collective bargaining (e.g., not passing costs of workers' raises to consumer product prices) to “management rights”.

1959 National strike of the steel industry

Although wages and benefits were factors, the heart of the strike was Section 2(b) of the collective bargaining agreement, which said management couldn't unilaterally change the staffing of jobs in the steel mills. The longest strike in the history of the steel industry (106 days) by more than half a million workers resulted in wage and benefit increases and retention of Section 2(b) for a few more years. It also alerted steel corporations—quite profitable at the time—to the even greater profits available through importation of cheaper foreign steel, leading eventually to disinvestment in and decline of the domestic steel industry.

2006 Immigrant Rights demonstrations (“A day without Latinos”)

In response to the passage of a bill in the House of Representatives that proposed to restrict immigration and criminalize support for undocumented immigrants, a wave of demonstrations in spring 2006 culminated in “a day without Latinos” on May 1, traditional International Workers Day. Millions of immigrant workers, joined by students and American-born workers, boycotted work and school, and demonstrated to protest the bill. The AFL-CIO supported the protests. A million people marched in Los Angeles alone. The bill failed passage in the Senate. Not a strike in a collective bargaining sense, the events of May 1 2006 nonetheless corresponded to mass strikes in their size, composition, and call to stay away from the workplace.

2011 Occupy Oakland port shutdown

In the wake of the 2007-8 Wall Street meltdown, millions of families lost jobs and homes. Out of the wreckage rose the Occupy Wall Street movement, protesting bank bailouts and growing economic inequality. In tent encampments across the country, thousands of people organized marches, demonstrations and civil disobedience on behalf of “the 99%”, demanding “the 1%” pay their fair share of taxes to support public services. One of the largest moments of protest occurred on November 1, when thirty thousand marched to the Port of Oakland and shut it down, shutting banks along the way while answering a call from the assembly of Occupy Oakland for a “general strike”. Although most workplaces remained open, thousands of employees called in sick, came out after work, and swelled crowds who took over the streets of downtown in the name of the 99%.

2018 Red State Revolt public education strikes

Pushed to the wall by years of austerity funding and conservative PR offensives against teachers and public education, public school teachers and support personnel in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona launched the #Red4Ed mass statewide strikes of public education in 2018. These walkouts proclaimed their goal to be “the schools our students deserve”, and received solid community support. More than two hundred thousand educators participated, sparking strikes in other states and spilling over into strikes in Los Angeles, Oakland and other locations in 2019. More workers in all industries went on strike in those two years than had occurred since the 1980s, although the numbers were not comparable in scale to those of 1946.