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The Whole World was Watching: The 1919 General Strike and its International Legacy of Class Struggle.

The momentous events unfolding in Winnipeg 1919 culminated in a General Strike involving 35,000 workers. In this epic class battle, in which both English-speaking workers in organized craft unions and largely unorganized immigrant workers were centrally involved, routine working-class grievances around the right to form unions, bargain collectively, and the hours and conditions of work pitted labour against capital and the state. Set against the backdrop of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the privations of World War I, Winnipeg's intensifying class struggle in 1919 was recognised around the world as an example of working-class self-activity that would culminate in a vast social transformation in which production for profit would be replaced by production for use. Conscious socialists, who were active in the unions as well as in various ethnic communities, played a central role.

As the struggle escalated, the General Strike mobilization, in conjunction with the animating mythology of 'one big union' of all workers, traumatized employers and the state, who mobilized a repressive onslaught, drawing on animosity toward 'aliens' and all manner of radicals, drawing on a post-war ideology of chauvinism and anti-communism. This resulted in the defeat of the strikers after six weeks of escalating confrontation and the widening participatory democracy of the workers' movement. This keynote address outlines these developments and closes with a reflection on the meaning of Winnipeg 1919, how it relates to the current state of the labour movement, and poses questions about the necessity of recovering the legacy of this historic event and how that might be done.