

# A HUNDRED-YEAR JOURNEY: Back where we began

By Sudhir Sandhu, CEO, Manitoba Building Trades

*"That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons of history."*

– Aldous Huxley

If history repeats, Aldous Huxley succinctly explains why. Our perspectives are shaped by our experiences and our environment. History, though we are aware of it, was someone else's lived experience and shaped someone else's perspectives. Unless we have a direct connection to a historical lived experience, it is unlikely to have a strong influence on our daily lives.

So, it is human to forget history and not carry its lessons with us. The act of remembrance is not passive. It takes a collective effort each November to honour and remember

the sacrifices made during the two World Wars. Historical events not actively remembered will eventually fade into the recesses of our individual and collective memories.

One hundred years ago, tens of thousands of Winnipeggers walked off the job in an act of defiance and an assertion of their rights. It was a remarkable event. The strikers – some union, but mostly non-union workers – rose up together to protest unacceptable conditions and demand change.

As we mark the one-hundred-year anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike, are there lessons worth remembering? Should we look back to that era to try and understand why the strike happened? And if we can understand why it occurred, can we look to the present day and see any similarities between then and now?

The General Strike of 1919 was an outcome, not an event. It was an exploding powder keg of frustrations, fears, discontent and anger that had been pent up over many years. Events

like this don't just happen. There may be a catalyst event that finally blows the lid off, but conditions that bring people to the tipping point take years to build up. The General Strike was an end result, not a beginning.

Discontent. While the word can simply mean disgruntlement, it meant a lot more to regular working people in the years leading up to 1919. The labouring populations of two continents felt sadness, gloominess, displeasure, and restlessness; all driven by war, poverty, hunger, disease, death and displacement of millions of people. It was the worst of times and nothing about the period could be considered the best of times.

Dire circumstances faced by populations on both sides of the Atlantic eroded an essential ingredient needed for human success. That ingredient was hope. When the aspirations of millions of people seemed impossible to realize, hope was the first casualty. As journalist and author James Fox said, "It is the absence of hope, which equals the despair that is the punishment." Despair will lead people to act, sometimes violently, sometimes in collective action to demand change. The General Strike of 1919 saw some of the former, but was primarily a remarkable of expression of the latter.

The years leading up to 1919 were occupied by the Great War, the Spanish Flu epidemic, and a great



*Together We Can Do It.*

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displacement of people. For many in Europe, the war meant hunger, homelessness and death. In North America, the war drew an entire generation of young men to the killing fields of the old countries across the Atlantic. For these young men, fighting in Europe was a pursuit of ideals, of heroism, and the defense of liberty.

Just as young men from North America sought something noble on the battlefields of Europe, others were leaving Europe for the greater promise of Canada. They dreamt of better opportunities for themselves and their families. Millions sailed across the ocean to land on the Eastern shores of Canada and many rode the trains into Winnipeg's North End.

Eventually the "war to end all wars" gave way to peace. The masses of Europe were finally released from the brutality of war. But they remained hungry and sick, and even as they began to rebuild their lives, the seeds of new conflicts were being planted. Capitalism and communism were emerging as the new adversaries.

As the war ended, the erstwhile liberators of Europe returned home to North America as wounded heroes. But their wounds weren't only physical. Today, we understand the psychological impact of war and the disorders it can unleash. Back then, our ignorance of the demons that haunted surviving soldiers was profound.

Upon return, these men expected to reclaim their rightful place in society. They expected to find work, build homes and support the families they hoped to start. But instead of a heroes' welcome, they faced indifference to their contributions and found their former jobs occupied by "cheap labour" migrants from the far-off places they had just liberated at great personal cost.

Already suffering from the trauma of war, returning Canadian soldiers now also faced unemployment, poverty



Brexit protestors near the Houses of Parliament, London.

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and dependence, all of which extinguished what little hope they may have clung to. That absence of hope soon led to despair and more punishment to those already suffering. The General Strike of 1919 was really about that absence of hope. It was about crushing the aspirations of those who had given so much and who now only sought the dignity of work and self-reliance as their rewards.

But the world had changed. It was now consumed by fear and suspicion fueled by various colliding "isms" and bloody revolutions that ousted aristocrats, disturbing the old social order and power structures. The world was at a crossroads and millions of people were caught in the middle of upheaval on both sides of the Atlantic. In Canada, agitation among the

working people was seen as another threat to the old order, something to be suppressed at any cost.

The worst instincts of the public were stirred up by fear, suspicion, poverty and despair. Fear manifested itself as xenophobia and intolerance. One side sought to change the oppressive order while others sought to protect their familiar "way of life." These solitudes collided in May of 1919, paralyzing Winnipeg and throwing its citizens into turmoil.

The strike ended without yielding the results the workers had hoped for. A few lost their lives, many were jailed, and others were deported from Canada. The event slowly faded into the pages of history.

The three decades following the strike were both tumultuous and promising. In the 1930s, the Great Depression crashed the economy and devastated lives. The 1940s brought another war, despite the earlier "war to end all wars."

The post-war 1950s launched an unprecedented era of prosperity for Western Europe and North America. Rapid economic and population growth, rising incomes and more equitable wealth distribution created the largest middle class in history. Despite the Cold War, there was hope and optimism. It was an age of possibility and upward mobility.

Sit-down strikers at Woolworth's in New York City's Union Square, with sign demanding a forty-hour week.

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## BACK WHERE WE BEGAN

The 1960s and '70s added space travel and the progression of civil rights to the Western world's list of accomplishments. Hope grew and even extended to the most marginalized. Prosperity, it seemed, would leave no one behind. Coming on the heels of the civil rights victories, the end of the Vietnam war suggested that peace had finally won the day, and a new, more promising era was dawning.

War returned with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Perhaps the

decade-long proxy war in Afghanistan sapped Russia of the will to carry on the Cold War, because the late 1980s saw the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall. *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* entered the world lexicon, as the Soviet Bloc peacefully collapsed. The good guys had finally won without the violence and sacrifice of war. The wars of years past were replaced by new kinds of war; the one on drugs being the most prominent. The 1980s was the decade of

"deregulate everything," as Reagan's push to free the markets took hold.

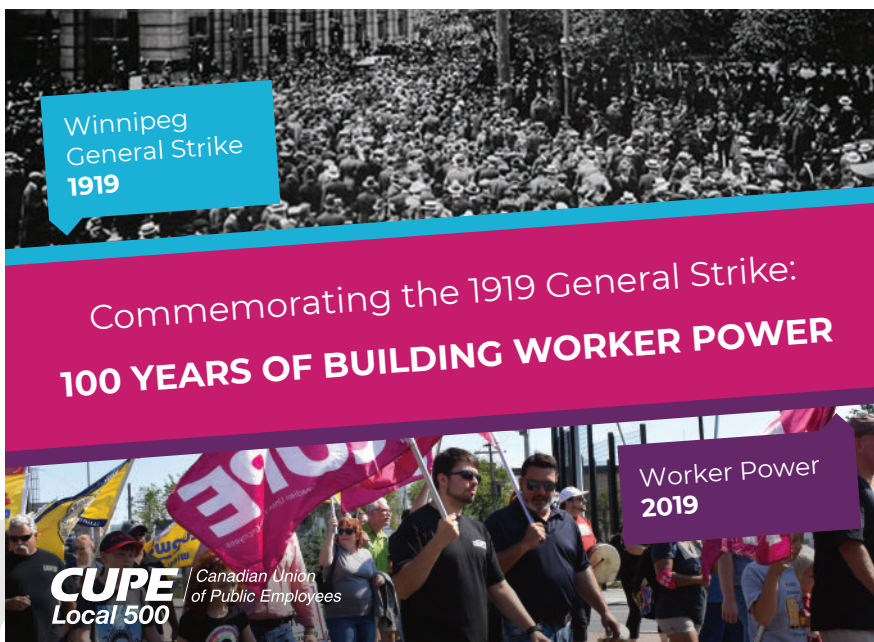
The decade leading up to the new millennium saw the first Gulf War, as Saddam Hussein was evicted from Kuwait. But for the most part, the last two decades the 20th century remained free of large-scale conflicts. The excesses of war were replaced by the excesses of consumption. The American dream in particular was recast, as unchecked consumerism and ostentatious purchases became the ideal.

While America celebrated greed and excess, two sleeping giants were stirring in the East. America's quest for unlimited profits led to a steady decline in its industrial base as more and more operations moved to China, India and other offshore locations. That exodus continued unabated through the 20th century's final two decades. Globalism and free-trade preoccupied policymakers across the globe.

Despite a reduction in major conflicts, the world was far from perfect. In spite of warning signs that peace and prosperity would not endure, there was a prevailing sense of calm across the West, as old enemies fell by the wayside and money seemed easy to come by. Life was good and peace was at hand.

The world rang-in the year 2000 as the start of the new millennium (even though it was officially the end of its first year). A decade that started with the almost comedic fiasco of hanging chads in the U.S. election was soon shattered by the events of 9/11. A new enemy had appeared, vanquishing the illusion of peace. America declared war on terror and terrorists. The WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) case drew Iraq into a conflict that, eighteen years later, still engulfs the Middle East, pitting former Cold War adversaries, Russia and America, in a new proxy war.

As traumatic as 9/11 was to America's sense of physical security, the banking crisis of 2008 was equally traumatic



to the country's sense of economic invincibility. Nearly three decades of deregulation had created fertile ground for dangerous market speculation. The global financial system was jolted by a flood of toxic assets and untenable risk, disguised in shiny packages that created the illusion of hard asset backing.

All of a sudden, life in the West no longer seemed secure and safe. Citizens lived in fear of arbitrary, random attacks on the streets and subways, while facing rising unemployment, declining opportunities, and hopes for more equitable wealth distribution fading fast. If the end of the last century had promised a rising middle class, the first two decades of the new century have been about its looming demise.

The excesses of the 1980s and '90s brought inequity of wealth distribution to historical highs. By 2010, the haves and the have-nots had respectively become the 1 per cent and the 99



Trump MAGA rally in Johnson City, Tennessee.  
CHARLOTTE CUTHBERTSON / THE EPOCH TIMES

per cent, with the former controlling nearly 40 per cent of America's wealth. As the rich got richer, globalization and free-trade took a disproportionate bite out of the industrial workforce in Western nations. The benefits of trade were not evenly distributed. In fact, free trade created a

hierarchy of winners and losers, with far fewer citizens left to settle into a comfortable middle class.

While the winners experienced inordinate wealth growth, the losers lost their jobs, either becoming permanently unemployed or having their previously high-paying industrial jobs



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## BACK WHERE WE BEGAN

replaced with much lower paying service jobs. When industries packed up and left for distant shores, real people lost their jobs, careers, homes, and hope. For many, the new American dream turned out to be a nightmare.

The losers rightfully became angry about the downturn in their economic prospects and standards of living. Whereas previous generations could expect their children's generation to be better off, the new America was poorer and less hopeful than in the past.

Americans have not been the only ones to experience the loss of wealth and hope for a better future. Brexit and the rise of right-wing parties across Europe reflect the same discontent with the current state of affairs. People have become angry, and angry people who experience fading hope look for someone to blame. They become susceptible to fear, suspicion and intolerance, with baser instincts replacing reason.

This state of despair is manifesting itself as suspicion and fear of the


"other," with "other" often represented by Islam, immigrants or even fellow citizens who seem different in appearance or opinion.

In Trump's America, in post-Brexit England, in Viktor Orban's Hungary, the *Gilets jaunes* protests in France and in many other parts of the world, anti-trade sentiments and a misplaced blame on immigrants for lost jobs have fueled a rise in racism and xenophobia. Across the world, governments are actively suppressing minority rights at home while seeking to build walls to protect "civilized society" from "criminal hordes" of migrants whom they groundlessly assume will destroy their way of life.










The more that standards of living and shares of wealth decline, the angrier people at the losing end become. Many will become susceptible to scapegoating and blaming those who they can see are weaker than they are.

When these sentiments are enflamed by incendiary rhetoric, whether in Europe or in America, the result is an unprecedented level of political polarization that reflects far more than differing values and opinions. Irreconcilable differences arise between neighbours and within families. People line themselves up, for or against, and become less inclined to seek common ground or work at reconciliation. When circumstance experiences, and stations in life compel people to take sides, reason suffers. Emotions and instincts govern.


In the years leading up to 1919, post-war hopefulness was giving way to despair as those who had fought the enemy in Europe faced unemployment and economic distress upon their return. The power-holders feared the Bolsheviks were seeking to import the revolution that had upended the ruling class in Russia. Those who sought societal change, including unions, were accused of being *agents provocateurs*. Immigrants were blamed for




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driving down wages and taking away working-class jobs, creating a potent mix of fear and despair. Intolerance, prejudice and xenophobia were the natural result. Distrust flourished and the human instinct to blame someone else prevailed.

In the years leading up to 2019, millions of workers in the industrialized world have lost well-paying union manufacturing jobs. Real wages remained flat or declined within their lifetimes. For the first time since the onset of the industrial revolution, a wide swath of the Western workforce expects a decline in living standards for their children. They have become the economic losers in a globalized marketplace.

Following the events of September 2001, the "Islamic terrorist" replaced Cold War communists as the new enemy. Today's enemy dwells in far-away places like Afghanistan or, for many fearful citizens, in the home of the immigrants next door. Individual acts of terror in many Western states have reinforced the fear that "our way of life" is under attack. Intolerance and xenophobia have once again come to the forefront. In many places, the United States in particular, hard-earned rights and liberties, including the right to unionize, are in retreat as slogans like "right to work," "America first," and "MAGA" have become rallying cries for nationalism, protectionism and the beating back of unions.

One hundred years is a very long time; longer than the life span of most people. The world in 2019 hardly resembles the one in the 1919. A citizen of a century ago, transported across time, would find today's world a very alien place. Except, sadly, the visitor from 1919 would find the atmosphere of distrust, fear, xenophobia and economic duress quite familiar. Despite many extraordinary changes over the past one hundred years, in many ways the world has come full circle.

The similar social and economic conditions do not mean Winnipeg or Canada stands on the verge of another great strike. That was the cathartic release a century ago. But the 21st century version of the conditions that prompted the 1919 strike will need its own catharsis. What form that may take will depend on how much of our history we remember, and what lessons we've carried forward.

It would serve us well to remember that when the legitimate aspirations of

a people become unreachable, hope is replaced by discontentment and anger. And we know that anger and despair are the natural enemies of reason. As Dostoevsky wrote "When reason fails, the devil helps".

While the challenges faced by many of our fellow citizens today are similar, things are not as dire as they were a century ago. Now is a time, not to repeat history, but to remember it and use its lessons to guide our future to a better end.



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