

# A Great Change is Coming

**Winnipeg, Manitoba  
May 13, 1919**

Meeting Room number 10 at the headquarters of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council (TLC) on the second floor of the Labor Temple on James Street, was packed with dozens of men and a few women, all union representatives and workers. The mood was tense and exhilarating. In the crowd was 39-year-old Douglas Fraser, a proud and opinionated Scotsman.

Born in 1880 in the coastal Highland town of Nairn, 25 kilometres east of Inverness, Fraser was a skilled carpenter. He had come to Winnipeg with his parents in 1890 and his father had found work as a clerk for the Hudson's Bay Company. Douglas quit school when he was 14 and apprenticed as a carpenter with Powell Construction, where he immediately displayed an affinity for the trade. But he wasn't happy with the low pay and dictatorial attitude of the company's owner, Samuel Powell, who only begrudgingly had permitted his company to be a union-affiliated shop.

Fraser was a member of the local carpenters' union and, in 1914, was elected to the executive of the Building Trades Council that represented all of the building trades unions in the city. No socialist

or radical, Fraser was a proud Fabian. "Society and the capitalist system must be reformed," he frequently argued, "but gradually." He campaigned for a minimum wage, better health care and improved education for the masses. He also held firmly that collective bargaining was an essential right that had to be recognized by employers. He was prepared to act to achieve this objective, but not with violence.

On Tuesday May 13, 1919, Fraser was at the TLC meeting ostensibly to represent the Building Trades Council. But he was as eager as anyone there to hear the result of the general strike vote that had been cast over the previous few days. All that was needed was a simple majority and the TLC, the umbrella organization of the city's labour groups, would be in a position to do something truly transformative – to effect what the strikers in Seattle had called a "Great Change" during their six-day general strike in February. It was not about staging a rebellion or revolution. It was about changing how industry was conducted in Canada.

James Winning, a bricklayer, a city alderman, and president of the TLC, raised his right hand for everyone gathered to be silent. Winning was well-respected, and at the age of 38 was recognized as a labour leader and politician with the communication skills required to convey the workers' demands to the business community in an unthreatening way. Everyone in the room immediately stopped talking.

"The final vote," declared Winning, "is 11,000 in favour of a general strike and 500 against."

A thunderous cheer reverberated through the meeting room. After an animated discussion between the union leaders, Winning announced that a general strike would begin in two days, on Thursday May 15 at eleven o'clock in the morning.

Fraser and other men in the building trades had already been on strike since May 1, when the Building Trades Council had been unable to reach an agreement with the Builders' Exchange, the construction industry owners' organization. The council had asked for a 20 cents-an-hour increase, but the owners were only prepared to offer half that much.

Fraser and every other individual present that night wanted a living wage and the right to collective bargaining. The vast majority were not interested in a radical upheaval as had occurred

Bottom left:  
Headquarters Citizens  
Committee 1000.

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L.B. FOOTE COLLECTION. 1688 (4561)

Bottom right: Ukrainian  
Labour Temple, corner  
of Pritchard and  
McGregor.

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WINNIPEG BUILDINGS (4601)



in Russia in 1917, but they believed passionately in industrial unionism. In their view, the general strike was the best tactic for achieving this worthy objective.

Two days later, the Winnipeg General Strike began at eleven o'clock as planned, bringing the city to a near standstill. The "Hello Girls" - operators of the Manitoba Government Telephones - were not assisting callers. Streetcars, the main mode of transportation in the city, stopped running. Postal service was halted, and restaurants were empty. Elevator operators were nowhere to be seen.

That day, Fraser was elected as one of 15 leaders of the Strike Committee, which also included Winning, Robert B. Russell, Reverend William Ivens, Ernest Robinson, and Harry Veitch. Fraser was one of the moderates on the committee, while Russell, a member of the Socialist Party of Canada and the committee's acknowledged leader, was more radical, at least in his outward attitude and pronouncements. Although Fraser admired his grit, Russell made him nervous. Russell was a promoter of the One Big Union - an industrial union that would represent all workers and have an overall goal of securing political power. Fraser recalled Winning saying that, at the Walker Theatre labour rally in December 1918 at which the seeds of the general strike were sown, Russell had predicted the demise of capitalism, saying, "The red flag is flying in every civilized country in the world, and it will fly here." Fraser felt such rhetoric was unnecessarily antagonistic to the business community, whose members were quick to label the Strike Committee "Bolshevik" sympathizers intent on establishing a Soviet-style government in Winnipeg.

Fraser accepted the responsibility of communicating directly with lawyer Alfred J. Andrews, the recognized head of the Citizens' Committee of 1000, formed in the days leading up to the strike. The 54-year-old Andrews was a small man, but he made up for his slight stature with an outspoken and firm personality. Two decades earlier, at the age of 32, Andrews had served as an alderman and the city's mayor. He had a well-deserved reputation as a tough opponent in the courtroom and Fraser knew he was not a man to be easily dismissed. At a meeting at the Citizens' Committee headquarters in the Board of Trade Building on Main Street, Fraser assured Andrews of the strike committee

and workers' honourable intentions. Andrews eyed Fraser suspiciously throughout their discussion and asked him why he should trust anything he said. No matter what Fraser said in defence of the strikers and their rights, Andrews' mind was already made up. Who could entirely blame him? Fraser thought to himself.

At issue was the Strike Committee's decision, reluctantly supported by Fraser, to allow certain essential services - police, waterworks, the Winnipeg General Hospital, and milk and bread delivery - to keep operating. What raised the ire of the businessmen as well as Mayor Charles Gray and city council, were signs on the milk and bread wagons reading: "Permitted by the Authority of the Strike Committee." To them, this brazen act was evidence that the strikers were intent on taking over the city government. The provincial government of Premier Tobias Norris federal Justice Minister Arthur Meighen and Labour Minister Senator Gideon Robertson were monitoring the situation closely. Witnessing this display of power by the strike committee, Andrews, Sinclair, Meighen and the others became convinced that the general strike was indeed a threat to Canadian democracy.

As the strike entered its third week, Fraser feared the situation would become violent. In his view, the unknown element was the returned men from the Great War. A majority of veterans resented what they regarded as "foreign alien" influence in the city, but they differed sharply on the strike. Most supported it, yet a fair number of so-called "Loyalists" did not. Fraser believed a confrontation between them was inevitable.

His fears were confirmed on June 10. He was at the Labor Temple when shouts from Main Street startled him and other Strike Committee members. He ran toward the noise and was stunned by what he saw. "Special constables," mainly anti-strike veterans the city had recruited to keep order, were on foot and horseback wielding wooden clubs and trying to disperse a large group of strikers, who in turn were throwing stones and bricks at the mounted "specials." Suddenly some strikers grabbed one of the



Winnipeg Strike, volunteers patrolling Main St. - 21 June 1919.

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L.B. FOOTE COLLECTION. 1702 (4609)

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**Fraser was taking another sip of tea when he heard rustling outside... Suddenly, ten burly Royal North-West Mounted Police Officers stormed through the front door.**

specials and pulled him from his horse. As he fell to the ground, several of the strikers beat him.

The Committee of 1000 was incensed by this blatant act of lawlessness. Something had to be done to end the strike, and soon.

In the very early hours of June 17, the kitchen light was still on at 805 Furby Street, the two-storey home of Fraser, his wife Anne and their two children, ten-year-old Fergus and six-year-old Emily. Anne and the children were asleep.

Sitting at the table with a cup of tea, Fraser was reviewing his notes for a speech he planned to deliver at Victoria Park at noon that day. It had been another unusually hot day following a tremendous rainstorm that had downed powerlines. All the windows in the house were open. The night breeze was slightly cooler, and it relaxed him. As a member of the Strike Committee, Fraser felt compelled to speak out against further acts of violence before the situation got truly out of control. He knew that the intentions of the pro-strike returned men were honourable and well-meaning. But he feared that another riot like the one a week ago would provoke the federal government to unleash Brigadier-General H.D.B. Ketchen, the military commander at the Osborne Barracks. The rumour was – and Fraser had no doubt it was true – that the General had arranged for a shipment of portable Lewis machine guns that he planned to use to keep the peace. Fraser intended to argue that yes, the strike must continue, and collective bargaining must be won, but not by throwing rocks and causing mayhem. That was not the answer.

Fraser was taking another sip of tea when he heard rustling outside. He stood up and peered out the kitchen window into the darkness. Suddenly, ten burly Royal North-West Mounted Police officers stormed through the front door.

“Douglas Fraser,” one of them shouted. “We have a warrant for your arrest and a warrant to search the premises.”

“What am I being arrested for?” Fraser demanded to know.

“The charge is seditious conspiracy.”

“Seditious conspiracy. That’s absurd,” said Fraser. “I want to see a lawyer.”

The Mountie ignored the comment and the request.

The noise had woken Anne and the children. She came running downstairs in her nightgown and was commanded by a Mountie to stand to the side. Fergus and Emily were on the landing at the top looking down in bewilderment. Anne told them to go back to bed, and they reluctantly obeyed.

The whole operation took only a few minutes. The lead Mountie ordered Fraser to put his hands behind his back and handcuffed him. Meanwhile the other men tore apart the kitchen and living room, opening and emptying drawers and grabbing Fraser’s speaking notes from the kitchen table. Once the search was over, Fraser was escorted out of the house towards a waiting car. He turned to his wife and smiled, whispering that he loved her, and she shouldn’t worry.

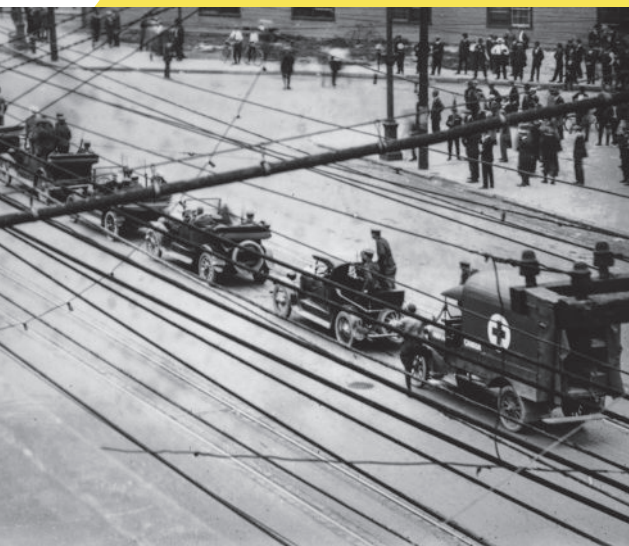
Fraser was driven 20 miles down a bumpy road outside of the city to the Stony Mountain federal penitentiary. During the hour-long ride, he learned from one of the Mounties that 11 other men – including Russell, Ivens, George Armstrong and Abe Heaps – had also been arrested. He and the other men were told they would be held at the prison while they waited for Canadian justice.

The next morning, as hundreds of returned men gathered at Victoria Park in anticipation of hearing Fraser, news of his and the other strike leaders’ arrests filtered through the crowd. The veterans were incredulous that the authorities would take such extreme measures.

Three days later, early on Saturday June 21, Fraser and most of the other strike leaders were released on bail. One of the conditions was that they not engage in any strike-related activities. Government officials also told them that the metal trade owners had reached a tentative deal with their workers to recognize unions and collective bargaining-although not with the workers’ representative, the Metal Trades Council. Nonetheless, Fraser, Russell and the others agreed that if this was the case, they were prepared to recommend ending the sympathetic strike.

None of this was known to Tom Matthews and other pro-strike veterans, who had announced at a gathering in Market Square the evening before

*Winnipeg Strike, volunteers patrolling Main St. – 21 June 1919.*  
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FOOTE COLLECTION. 1702 (4610)





that despite Mayor Gray's ban on parades, they would hold a "silent march" the next day to show solidarity with the arrested strike leaders.

By 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, thousands of returned men, including Tom Matthews, were assembled on Main Street, not far from City Hall. Saul Hershberg was in the huge crowd of spectators who had come to watch the parade. Against his wife Eva's strenuous objections, Saul had come to offer his support – whether it was welcome or not. Watching all of this from the safe confines of the second floor of the Bank of Hamilton at Main Street and McDermot Avenue was Frederick Sinclair, who knew what was about to happen.

Looking to his right, Tom Matthews saw a long line of North-West Mounted Police charging toward the crowd on their horses. Someone on the street screamed and Saul quickly moved backwards. The Mounties were riding hard. Most had their pistols out; others were holding wooden bats. As they reached the centre of the crowd, shots rang out and the veterans ran in every direction. One person standing to the side was struck in the head by a bullet and slumped to the ground. More screams followed. Once the Mounties passed McDermot Avenue, they turned and charged the crowd again.

In the meantime, Harry Smith and about two dozen other "specials" appeared behind spectators on the sidewalk. Without warning, they began flailing their clubs and hitting anyone they could reach. As Saul turned to run, he found himself face to face with Harry.

"I know you," said Harry, holding his wooden club high over his head.

Saul stared at him for a moment. "Blumenberg's shop. That was you."

"Yeah, it was," said Harry, "and now I'm gonna finish what I started."

He raised his club and was about to strike Saul in the head when Tom Matthews suddenly appeared, grabbed Harry's arm and pushed him hard backwards. Harry stumbled against a storefront.

"Have you no sense of decency?" shouted Tom.

Harry stood up, faced Tom and raised his club again. Another shot rang out and all three men instinctively crouched down. Saul took the opportunity to move away and ran toward Market Avenue, yelling, "Thank you!" in Tom's direction. Harry swore under his breath and, without saying a word to Tom, walked toward an

adjacent alley to join a group of specials who were assaulting three strikers. Tom shook his head in disgust as he stood further back on the sidewalk to avoid being trampled.

A few hours later, the riot was over. The returned men had dispersed, and the army was patrolling the streets on horseback and in trucks mounted with Lewis machine guns. The police had made countless arrests and Winnipeg seemed like a war zone. The violence had shocked everyone involved, including Frederick Sinclair and other members of the Committee of 1000. But by the next day, Sinclair believed that the government's harsh response had been justified to stop the Bolshevik threat.

Of course, Tom and the other returned men who had been attacked saw it much differently. Tom agreed with the assessment published on Monday in the *Western Labor News* that compared the events of June 21 to "Bloody Sunday," the January 1905 assault by Czarist soldiers on Russians in St. Petersburg. What had transpired on Winnipeg's Main Street, in Tom's opinion, was indeed, "Bloody Saturday."

Five months later, Douglas Fraser was convicted of seditious conspiracy for his role in the General Strike and sentenced to one year in jail. He held his head high as he was led from the courtroom.

The strike may not have achieved everything Fraser and the other leaders had been fighting for. And his conviction and the convictions of several other strike leaders – as legally dubious as they were – signified the lengths to which the authorities would go to stifle dissent. Yet Fraser remained optimistic about the future. The General Strike would never be forgotten, he thought, and the city had changed for the better. Whether the governments and business would concede it or not, Winnipeg labour would never again accept a status quo that robbed hard-working people of their right to a decent wage, their right to fair and safe working conditions, and their right to collective bargaining.



*Winnipeg Strike, crowd at corner of William and Main – 21 June 1919.*

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L.B. FOOTE COLLECTION. 1702 (4612)

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