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Speak Out Now

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Seattle General Strike, 1919 – When Workers Shut it Down

We, the working class, have a rich history of struggle, even if it's not what they teach in school. This month we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Seattle General Strike, a strike that showed the power of the working class when we act together.

During World War I the Seattle docks were booming. Twenty-six percent of all ships built during the war were built there. Shipyard workers were organized into craft unions, meaning workers were organized by category rather than as a whole. This allowed the ship yard bosses to play the unions against one another.

Workers were drafted into the war and millions were forced to kill and die around the world for the profits of their bosses. Workers at home lived under the war economy with scarcity and inflation. By the end of the war, the cost of living nearly doubled! Meanwhile the bosses froze workers' wages, supposedly to support the war effort.

When the war ended the bosses went on the offensive with layoffs, wage cuts, and attacks on the unions. But at the same time, after the war, there were revolts by workers around the world. Many were inspired by Russian workers who made a revolution and took power in 1917. The Seattle workers felt this wave of inspiration and on February 6, 1919 35,000 shipyard workers went on strike against the bosses' offensive.

After several days on strike, the shipyard workers called on other workers to join them in a general strike – a strike of all workers. In response, 30,000 came out on strike. They were union and non-union workers of all backgrounds. The strike was organized through a strike committee of 300 representatives. It functioned as a city government run by the working class. Every aspect of running a city was put before the workers.

Chefs, waitresses, and dish washers set up 21 cafeterias in the dining halls that used to serve the rich. Meals were 25 cents and open to all with 30,000 meals served every day. Returning soldiers formed a security service armed not with guns, but the moral authority of the strike. A local paper reported, "while business men and authorities prepared for riots, labor organized for peace." Milkmen organized milk delivery for babies and the sick. Laundry workers provided sheets for the hospitals. Electrical workers kept power flowing to essential industries.

However, the workers were under tremendous pressure. The top union officials wanted the strike to end. They wanted business as usual, not a full confrontation with the bosses' system, and the federal government was preparing to send the National Guard to restore so-called order. The strike hit its limit and came to an end, but workers held their heads high. They showed their power, and that they were more than capable of running society.

The bosses' government, media and school system tells us that we are incapable of organizing a better social system, that our problems are the result of human nature and capitalism is the best we can do. But in moments like the Seattle General Strike of 1919 we see just how capable we are. It's clear who really hold the levers of power in our world, when we shut the system down. At the same time it shows the power workers have to create a society to meet their needs based on solidarity rather than greed.

Join Us at: Tolerance?!

What happens when Rosie the Riveter meets #MeToo? Tolerance is a one-woman show written and performed by Kathleen Denny. It is a true and funny account of her years as a machinist and mechanic in the air transport industry.

**Saturday, March 16, Doors open
6:30pm.**

2939 Ellis St., Berkeley

\$5 admission (but no one turned away)