

Last Back: Folklore and the Telephone Operators in the 1919 Vancouver General Strike

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During the research for the history of the Telecommunications Workers Unions, women telephone operators from eighteen to eighty years of age asked about "the strike where the men sold out the women" or about the time "when the men forced us out on strike and then left us hanging on the line." None of the operators could give an exact date of the strike, though some were able to place it at the end of the First World War or in the early 1920s. No one could describe the issues which had led to the walkout by operators.

Young operators had heard the story of the strike from older operators. The story, handed down from operator to operator, became a legend. A curious feature of this oral tradition is that the legend was unique to BC Telephone's female operators. In other words, the only women who knew the story were, or had once been, operators. The oldest male craftworkers, who doubted the reported experience, repeated the legend as a result of friendly associations with operators, since their own union tradition had not formulated a competing version.

The limited information from the operator folklore and an interview with a retired operator in her eighties helped identify the strike in question as the 1919 Vancouver strike which was held in solidarity with the Winnipeg General Strike. This strike and the role of the telephone operators and craftworkers, after more than sixty years, is living history which has played an important role in reflecting and, at times, moulding the operators' consciousness in the workplace. Throughout the history of the union, the folklore of this strike changed significantly with the evolution of industrial relations and the transformations within the union.

How significant were the telephone operators in the 1919 Vancouver General Strike? Their actions were inspirational according to the leading

British Columbia labour newspaper and organ of the BC Federation of Labour, the *B.C. Federationist*. The following front page editorial appeared in the *Federationist*, the day after the strike was called off.

The action of the telephone girls in responding to the call for a general strike has placed them in a class by themselves amongst women workers in this province. With only a few backsliders, these girls have won the admiration of all those who admire grit and working class solidarity. That their action will be remembered by the workers not only of this city, but by the workers all over the continent for their loyalty, goes without saying. If all the men had displayed the same spirit, the strike could not have been finished with them carrying on their fight against discrimination, after the general strike was called off. The strike was called off as a result of the telephone girls and electricians taking the stand that they could fight the matter of discrimination against the telephone operators alone. This decision was arrived at on Wednesday night after a three and a half hour meeting, at which a resolution was passed urging the other organizations to return to work, as they were of the opinion that Local 213 of the Electrical Workers and the Telephone Operators could fight the discrimination matter out themselves. This was announced at the mass meeting held in the Labor Temple on Thursday, and as a result the strike was called off at 5 p.m.¹

Before discussing the folklore of the strike, a brief reconstruction of the events of the strike is in order. On May 15, 1919, a General Strike in support of metal workers began in Winnipeg. This strike fired the imagination of workers across the country. As word of the strike reached the nation, messages of solidarity from unions and councils poured into Winnipeg. Labour newspapers sent correspondents to Winnipeg, and messages from the city's workers were read at Trades and Labour Council meetings in most Canadian cities. Rallies and information meetings were called to explain the strike and to demonstrate solidarity with the Winnipeg workers.

The General Strike alarmed the federal government. Since the 1917 Russian Revolution, the federal government feared a rise of Bolshevism in western Canada because of radical unionism in the West during the First World War and the widespread support of the Russian Revolution by western labour leaders. To the government, workers seemed to be assuming the power of civic authorities. Because of the magnitude of the strike, the strike committee in essence had the power to decide which services would cease and which services would be continued in the city. Yet, the demands of the strike and the actions of the strike committee were simple collective bargaining goals. They were neither political nor insurrectionary.

The federal government did not take long to intervene in the Winnipeg strike. Mounted Police and militia units with machine guns were sent to Winnipeg. The federal government issued an ultimatum to the striking postal workers who were federal employees, demanding that they return to work, or

lose their jobs. The postal workers who voted to ignore the ultimatum were fired. This action provoked a series of sympathetic strikes in support of the Winnipeg workers.

Like labour across the country, Vancouver workers were alarmed by the federal government's intervention in the Winnipeg situation. At the May 23 meeting of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, the executive was empowered with the authority to call a general strike in case of military intervention in Winnipeg. When word came to Vancouver of the firing of the postal workers, the executive issued a call for a vote on a general sympathetic strike.

At this time, the telephone craftworkers (the men) were members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Local 213, a craft union in the electric trade which included, aside from the telephone craftworkers, electricians working for the street railway, for the local power companies, and for a few construction companies. The operators at the telephone company had been organized a year before into IBEW Local 77A. This operators' local had been formed as a result of a North American organizing drive initiated by the international. Significantly, the craft union wanted women operators who were non-craftworkers to be organized into a separate department of the international union, rather than into existing industrial locals.²

On June 1, the male telephone craftworkers in Local 213 held a special meeting at which they voted down the motion to participate in the general strike: 156 in favour to 176 against. As the numbers indicate, the local was divided on the issue. A subsequent meeting of the local reversed the defeat so the electricians agreed to go on strike. It is not known if the operators held a vote on the General Strike issue, nor what the results were.³

In many ways, the strike in Vancouver was far more radical than the precipitous strike in Winnipeg. In Winnipeg, unionists were marching in solidarity with their co-workers who were engaged in a struggle with the local captains of industry. The Vancouver strike was remarkable because it was in support of workers who lived over one thousand miles away. Also, the strike demands of the Vancouver workers were political: they were addressed to the government, not to employers. The seven strike demands called for reinstatement of the Winnipeg postal workers and immediate settlement of their grievances, guarantees of the right of collective bargaining, pensions for soldiers and their dependents, compensation for veterans' overseas service, nationalization of all food storage plants and the enactment of legislation to provide for the six-hour day in all industries where unemployment was prevalent.⁴

The Vancouver General Sympathetic Strike started on June 3, 1919, but the strike took almost a week to build up momentum. Some of the first to respond to the strike call were the shipyard and waterfront workers, who shut down Vancouver's waterfront on the first day of the strike. The Typographical Union voted in favour of joining the protest, but the numbers in favour did not constitute the two-thirds majority required by the union's constitution to take strike action. As a compromise, the members remained at work, but they set up a committee "to ensure the publication of the strikers'

views and [to prevent] deliberate misrepresentation...under penalty of cessation of work." By the second week of the strike, the Typographical Union decided to call a five-day suspension of the Vancouver *Daily Sun* for its biased editorials against the strike. The Vancouver *Province* was also closed for a day, when the printers refused to set anti-strike advertisements.⁵

An important union which did not join the strike at first was the Street Railway Workers' Union. Its members voted against participation, but they reversed this position within a few days to join the walkout on June 5. The walkout by the Street Railway Workers brought the first countermeasure of the strike. In an attempt to lessen the effectiveness of the city transportation workers' strike, City Council rescinded the anti-jitney bylaw, thereby allowing others to operate these small passenger-carrying motor vehicles. The strike committee responded to Council's attempted strikebreaking action by calling out the unionized city employees. The widening strike action resulted in City Council's issuing an ultimatum demanding that all civic employees report back to work or be fired.⁶ Once again the strike committee responded to City Council's action with a threat of further strike action. If Council did not reinstate the anti-jitney bylaw, and promise not to take disciplinary action against the city employees, the telephone operators would be called out on strike.

Earlier, the strike committee had exempted some unions from the strike, in order to avoid criticism that it had usurped the role of the city government. Emergency services such as firemen, policemen, milk deliveries, and hospital deliveries were all exempted. The telephone service was included in the list of exemptions, so neither the operators nor the craftworkers at BC Telephone were called out at the beginning of the strike. However, when Council refused to be moved, the union telephone operators were asked to join the sympathetic strike. On the morning of June 13, about 325 telephone operators and operator supervisors joined the strike. At Seymour, the major Vancouver toll exchange, the total toll staff on the first morning of the strike consisted of the chief operator, one supervisor, two toll operators, and the traffic engineer. As the women of the outlying telephone offices were called out they left locking the doors and throwing the keys through the windows.⁷ The walkout of the telephone operators, the last offensive action by the strike committee, marked the peak of the strike. The strike committee had lost the initiative. It was forced to stop making demands on the Dominion government and instead defend the workers out on strike, and seek a method for returning them to work without victimization.

With the first walkout of the sympathetic strike, anti-strike forces also started to organize. On June 10, a group of "concerned citizens" dedicated to maintaining "law and order," formed the Vancouver Citizens' League. The Citizens' League published an anti-strike paper and bought space in the Vancouver dailies to place advertisements against the strike. The Citizens' League spent much of its time recruiting strikebreakers, first for the jitney service and then for the telephone company.

The telephone company claimed that through its own efforts and those of the Citizens' League, seventy-six strikebreakers were eventually employed at the telephone offices. These were either middle-class women doing



From the *Strike Bulletin*, Vancouver, June 1919.

volunteer strikebreaking, or ex-operators, who were no doubt attracted by the generous pay offered for strikebreaking.⁸

As the strike extended from days into weeks, the financial situation of the telephone operators became acute. The tiny financial resources of the local were depleted within a short time. The Operators' local had no strike fund, so most operators were left to work out their own arrangements for rent and board. A fund set up for the operators received donations from the wealthier unions, but there was only money for the needier operators.⁹

By the third week, the Strike began to seriously deteriorate throughout the city because of widespread fear of victimization. On June 19, the CPR workers voted to return to work. The following day, about a third of the striking city employees abandoned the strike. Over the next few days, groups of woodworkers, teamsters and brewery workers started back. Just when dwindling support was bringing the strike to a close, word came to Vancouver of the arrest of the Winnipeg strike leaders, and then of "Bloody Saturday," the violent confrontation in Winnipeg between the Mounted Police and strike supporters. News of these events kept the Vancouver strike alive. Victoria joined the sympathetic strike on June 23. But the momentum was short-lived. Winnipeg ended its General Strike on June 26; Victoria went back to work a day later.

The Vancouver strike, focusing on the demand for no victimization, continued for a week after the Winnipeg strike. The demand was aimed primarily at the city government. A third of the city's striking employees had successfully returned to their jobs, but the strike committee wanted formal assurance that the rest could return. As the days wore on, groups of workers negotiated their own "back to work" agreements, bypassing the strike committee. On June 30, the remaining striking civic employees returned to work.

By the beginning of July, the strike committee decided to try to formally end the rapidly disintegrating sympathy strike. But there remained one group of strikers who were still having difficulty negotiating a no-victimization return to work: the telephone operators. The telephone company would rehire returning operators, but it demoted the striking supervisors to ensure that only anti-union strikebreakers would be in supervisory positions. The women would not return under those terms, so they decided to stay on strike and fight the company's attempted victimization of the striking supervisors. At a meeting of the operators and craftsmen from the telephone company, the members decided to release the rest of the labour movement from continuing the strike with the telephone workers. On July 3, 1919, one month after it had started, the Vancouver Sympathetic Strike was officially ended.

The telephone workers, though, were still on strike. The operators continued their fight with the company for almost two weeks after the end of the strike. By mid-July, the union was forced back on essentially company terms. The company agreed to take back all the employees without discrimination, but senior operators and supervisors were reduced to operators. A few of the supervisors were to be reinstated to their senior positions within thirty days, and the remaining supervisors were to be first in line for vacant supervisory positions. The men returned to work on July 15; the women returned to work a day later, July 16.¹⁰

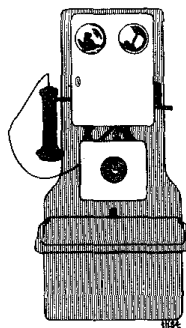
Over the next two years the operators' local was deserted by the operators until it finally disappeared. The abandonment of the operators in their fight against victimization was a serious blow for the local, but it was not necessarily the terminal one. In the following two years the male local burst apart due to internal rifts between the telephone craftworkers and the other electricians, and a major battle between the international union and the Vancouver local. In this atmosphere, there was no time for fence-mending with the operators. Their local was gone but not forgotten.

Folklore or oral traditions in the workplace are always history with a moral. Acquired knowledge, some of which may be false, is handed down to upcoming generations. The story of this strike has been used to illustrate three very different "morals" reflecting different conditions and consciousness amongst the operators. First, in the years between 1920 and 1940, after the destruction of the union, it was used to show how the women were used as "canon fodder" in a labour dispute in which they did not have a stake. As well, it was used to reinforce company paternalism. Older workers told new employees that in spite of the "damage" done to the company by the strike, the company was a good, forgiving, company since it gave the workers back their jobs. Second, in the years between 1940 and 1960, with the formation of a

company dominated union, the Federation of Telephone Workers emphasis shifted to undermine the dependability of the male craftworkers who, having placed the women's jobs in jeopardy, abandoned them in their struggle against victimization. The moral of the lesson was still that strikes were futile, but the added twist was against international unions like the IBEW. Sympathy strikes were a disease of international unions, or so the story went, when the telephone workers were being courted for affiliation by two international unions. What is particularly ironic about this version is that the IBEW was very much opposed to the Vancouver electrical workers joining the general strike. Much of the trouble experienced by the local, for many years after the strike, was a direct result of punitive actions by the international against the local for striking.

Third, in the years between 1960 and 1970, the story changed again. This time the story was told as proof that the women were as militant as the men at the telephone company. This period reflected the militant transformation of the union: the first strike in fifty years took place in 1969. The lesson to be learned was not that strikes were futile, but that successful strikes needed complete solidarity between craft, clerical and operating staff. All must strike; all must return to work together.

With the new growth of militancy among the telecommunications workers and with a new interest in their own history,¹¹ which has been published and circulated to all members of the union, there is a new interpretation of the old folklore. Today, the general strike is cited as a proud example of the operators' militant tradition. A unique and militant group of organized female workers won the distinction of being the last back to work at the end of the country-wide wave of sympathy strikes. However, for over sixty years, the folklore of the "1919 betrayal" was a barrier to solidarity between craftworkers and operators. The events and the subsequent folklore of the 1919 strike underline the power of folklore not only to reflect worker consciousness, but also to mould it.



Footnotes

1. *B.C. Federationist*, "General strike called off at 5 pm Thursday," July 4, 1919: 1.
2. Elaine Bernard, *The Long Distance Feeling: A History of the Telecommunications Workers Union*, (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1982) and Michael A. Mulcaire, *The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers* (Washington, D.C.: publisher unknown, 1923).
3. *Live Wire*, IBEW 213, November 9, 1951: 24.
4. *B.C. Federationist*, May 30, 1919.
5. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1919.
6. *Ibid.*, June 13, 1919.
7. B.C. Telephone Historical Record, Chapter 1919 (g): 1-3.
8. *Vancouver Citizen*, No. 1, June 16, 1919, UBC Special Collections.
9. Interview with Leona Copeland, November 10, 1981.
10. Department of Labour, Canada, *Trade Disputes Record*, strike file 19 (285), Public Archives of Canada, RG 27 2338.
11. See note 2, above.