The Winnipeg General Strike is often depicted as the unified response of the city's workers to wartime deprivation and repression. That characterization of the Strike has some merit. But each group of striking workers had workplace histories of their own that shaped their demands during the Strike and then their response to employers' efforts to force an end to their militancy. This essay attempts to demonstrate the complexity of workers' aspirations at the end of World War I by focusing on a single group: the postal workers. As we shall see, these workers, and no doubt many others, had long-simmering complaints against their employers. The general militancy of the Strike period caused them to articulate their complaints as part of a more general workers' reaction to state and employer power. On the surface, the postal workers' demands may not appear especially radical. But as we shall see, to the Post Office, the effort of postal employees to have a say, however small, in how their work was organized was a threat to established power that would have to be met by force and firings. In modern day parlance, it could be said that this kind of change was not something the government of Canada was prepared to believe in. The lesson of the Winnipeg General Strike, for postal workers, for
all workers, would be that employers were unwilling to forgo their mastery of the labour process. Workers in Canada, including Western Canada, could indulge themselves in the trappings of parliamentary democracy. But they were to have no or little say in the conduct of their daily work lives. This contradiction is still very much a part of labour relations in Canada.

At the close of World War I, various tensions created domestic instability within Canada. Three main strands—political strong-arming, labour ferment, and bourgeois paranoia—prevailed across the country. Events in Winnipeg helped bring about their intersection.

The Borden Conservatives, in power from 1911, provided the first strand of tension. Masquerading as Unionists in the federal election of December 1917, their imposition of conscription drove a wedge between Québec and the rest of the country, as well as eventually enraging the labouring population because working people were conscripted while war profits were not prohibited. The government’s limited controls on the marketplace resulted in rampant inflation, which enriched a few profiteers and undermined the working-class family budget. The government managed the state with the interests of its friends in mind and used political strongmen to push its policies down the public’s throat.

Labour, the second strand of contention, was becoming increasingly confident by 1916 of its ability to win gains for working people. Wartime production needs temporarily erased the pervasive unemployment of the pre-war period and reduced the threat to those in employment of repression if they demanded their rights. A broad band of labour radicalism and demands for reforms swept the country, beginning in 1917 and reaching their apex in 1919. Particularly strong in Western Canada, signs of the labour revolt could be found in every region of the nation, as well as in the other combatant nations. The third strand was the fear among the elite classes of foreigners in general and foreign-born revolutionaries in particular. During World War I, elites conveniently conflated the foreign enemy with the foreign-born “agitator,” blaming the latter for legitimate complaints about who was profiting from the war and who was suffering. André Cellard and G. Pelletier have shown that bourgeois fear of these political classes dangereuses antedated the war. Then, as now, class fear resulted in the criminal code being used as bludgeon against social and ethnic targets.

Tom Mitchell argues that the hysterical sense of fear, espoused by the bourgeois grouped under the auspices of the Committee of 1000, helped push the Canadian government to repress the General Strike in Winnipeg. Winnipeg labour, with a pre-war radical culture of opposition that the war had reinforced and strengthened, fought back. A face-off between the two sides seemed inevitable. The federal government had to take note of the strike not only because it threatened elite power across the country but also because its own postal work-
ers walked off the job. This was reason enough to send cabinet ministers from Ottawa to help get the situation under control. All three strands of contention played off one other like a party of kid-cars colliding at the midway.

The postal strike in Winnipeg that was part of the Winnipeg General Strike was no small matter. The Winnipeg postal workers, belonging to a vital service sector and consisting of roughly five hundred men, represented, along with the iron workers and the building tradesmen, a hotbed of labour revolt. Their actions were watched by fellow workers and by the government, for whom the postal walkout helped turn the General Strike into a national priority. At the time, the Post Office was the central medium of mass communication. Telephones and telegraphs did exist but were not available to all. In 1919 there was no radio broadcasting in Canada. The press was still enjoying its golden age, but without postal distribution, its reach was much hampered.8 In 1919 the post was the great information highway of the world.

To understand why postal workers joined the confrontation of 1919, we need to examine the decades-long history of labour organization within the Post Office. The management of labour within the postal system had its origins in the late nineteenth century. A system gradually evolved to ensure city home delivery by uniformed letter carriers, central Post Office buildings for coordinating mail, the blanketing of city streets with red mail boxes, and protocols for sorting mail by hand, generally in the rear of a post office outside the public view. The management of postal work was never entirely set in stone. At the turn of the century, the employer was still experimenting with various classification schemes so as to fit all workers into a common postal pecking order, with the letter carriers invariably relegated to the bottom. The “City Post Office Procedure,” put out in 1934, ultimately codified work methods and responsibilities. Labour did not stand idly by as management sought unilaterally to control the work process. The 1919 strike was a manifestation of the demand that postal workers be heard.

Canadian postal employees were hardly pampered. Letter carriers received no salary increases from 1872 to 1902 to compensate for either inflation or a more productive economy. The Federated Association of Letter Carriers was created in 1891 to press for wage hikes.9 The Dominion Postal Clerks Association (later renamed the Postal Clerks Association of Canada) was founded in 1911 to represent the interests of clerks working inside the Post Office, a group at the mercy of managerial and political caprice, though higher in the pecking order than letter carriers. Neither union had a formal collective bargaining agreement with the employer. Each lobbied for statutes and regulations to improve working conditions. Mitchell and Naylor argue that more was at stake in the Winnipeg General Strike than the right to collective bargaining.10 Yet for
the posties, for whom collective bargaining proved elusive until the 1960s, that right was fundamental, though it was linked to their other demands. These demands form the backdrop of the strike in 1918, and the ensuing period of 1918–19, which saw a rise in militancy among postal workers. Examining these two periods in succession, the article explores the strike of 1919 in terms of the issues involved, the government’s response, taking into account the ongoing interface with the union, and the ensuing short- and long-term actions taken to reassemble the postal labour force.

**The 1918 Strike**

In Winnipeg, the war occasioned vacancies in the ranks of civilian industry, including the Post Office. The government hired temporary employees to replace letter carriers who had gone to war, some never to return. Four were hired in 1915, eleven in 1916, twenty the following year, and fifteen during the first seven months of 1918. Many workers who escaped death in war were felled by the influenza pandemic of 1918–19. The minute book of the Winnipeg chapter of the Federation of Western Postal Employees of Canada notes that the lifting of the flu ban permitted holding a union meeting on 3 December 1918 at the Labour Temple. A vote of condolences was expressed following the death from influenza of four union members. Another brother lost a daughter.

The latter stages of the war created opportunities for organized labour across Canada. In Winnipeg, a series of rotating strikes commencing with civic employees lasted the entire month of May 1918. The Dominion minister of labour was brought in successfully to make peace. The spring and summer of 1918 saw the offensive of railway shop craft union workers spill over into the entire Winnipeg metal trades sector. Postal workers in Winnipeg were not indifferent to these events. In 1918 they too went out on strike, the letter carriers on July 22, the clerks the following day. The strike would eventually affect post offices in Toronto, Regina, and Moose Jaw, while letter carriers walked off the job in at least eleven cities. The main issue was the cost-of-living bonus, no small matter when inflation ran rampant. The bonus had been promised to postal workers on several occasions but had not yet been paid.

Messages were sent to postal authorities on June 17 and 27 by the Winnipeg-based officers of the Postal Clerks Association of Canada (PCAC) and the Federated Association of Letter Carriers (FALC). Ottawa responded that no definitive arrangement for paying out the bonus had been determined. A mass meeting of postal employees supported by the Winnipeg Trades Council on July 8 demanded a pay increase for permanent employees and fair treatment for temporary employees. The government, opined the workers, was inclined to employ returned
soldiers and keep them at the lowest grade of wages. The letter carriers petitioned on July 18 for a board of conciliation in order to redress conditions within the postal service, noting that “failing the appointment of the said board at once the carriers of Winnipeg will not report for duty after July 21st 1918.” Two days later, the Winnipeg chapter of the PCAC informed the postmaster general that it too demanded a board of conciliation; if that demand was not met, they planned to strike on July 23. The timing suggests effective coordination and solidarity between clerks and letter carriers. This may explain the greater duration of the strike in Winnipeg compared with Central Canadian strikes.

One day before the scheduled strike, the deputy postmaster general informed Winnipeg letter carriers and clerks that the provisional allowance would be paid immediately. Two days later, he informed the postmaster of Winnipeg that the first quarterly cheques were being issued. The next day, as the clerks began their strike, the deputy minister wrote that if the men returned to work, a cabinet sub-committee would meet with the representatives of the postmen and deal with proposals, “within the limits of the Government’s legal powers.”

The strike lasted a little over one week and was successful. The men were even paid for their time off work. The two unions eventually accepted the government’s proposal to institute the Civil Service Commission as a board of conciliation. On July 31 the commission secretary arrived in Winnipeg to enquire into working conditions of postal employees. The men returned to work the following day.

The strike appears to have been both effective and popular. By July 27, two million undelivered letters had accumulated in the Winnipeg post office togeth-

The Main Post Office in Winnipeg, circa 1914. An elaborate four-story building the post office is situated on Portage Avenue, a busy downtown street with a constant flow of cars, trams and pedestrian traffic. The Fort Garry hotel at the foot of Garry Street, right side of photo, dominates the southern skyline.

Provincial Archives of Manitoba N 7392.
er with tons of parcels and newspapers. Yet only ten applications for volunteer work at the post office had been received. Two letter carriers had reported for duty. The postmaster managed to convince twelve members of the registration staff to show up for four hours of work per day in shifts of two. But they threatened that if he brought in temporary help, they would cease work. The situation was “desperate,” reported the postmaster to Ottawa. Local members of parliament and businesspeople lobbied the government. The Board of Trade sent a telegram to the government demanding assurances that it would meet the demands of the letter carriers and clerks. The government was hard put to bring the situation under control. The war was still on. Its reaction a year later would be more energetic.

1918–19

Upon returning to work on August 1, Winnipeg postal workers faced a backlog of mail. The Free Press headline was upbeat: “Men Tear into Stack of Mail with Vim.” Fresh from their successful dispute with the government, workers in Winnipeg and throughout Western Canada established their own union, the Federation of Western Postal Employees (FWPE), renamed the Amalgamated Postal Workers (APW) in the spring of 1919. Unlike Eastern postal worker organizations, the APW represented both clerks and letter carriers.

The first meeting of the Winnipeg chapter of the FWPE was held September 17, 1918. An executive was chosen and basic procedures were worked out regarding stationery, dues collection, and the integration of new members, specifically transfer drivers and mail collectors. Executive officers of the local were to be notified of meetings by postcard. The postal service would facilitate the union business of its employees.

Discussions on workplace issues were ongoing. The meeting of 19 January 1919, lasting four hours, focused on the report of the Civil Service Commission, which addressed the grievances of letter carriers, porters, and clerks. Letter carriers were concerned with overtime, the cost of boots and uniforms, mail-loads, the age limit for men returning from the war to postal jobs (the government offered thirty-five; the union asked for forty), and the poor condition of postal facilities, especially Station A. Clerks argued for promotion based on merit, the abolition of certain classes of employees, and a reduction in the number of years of employment necessary to qualify for work in the more prestigious money and registration section. In short, postal workers were increasingly questioning management’s exclusive right to manage.

In spring 1919, the postmaster general invited five union delegates to Ottawa for further discussions. On April 18, they reported on their deliberations.
The APW president mentioned his encounters with other postal employee associations in Ottawa, though his group preferred to meet separately with the government. The Ottawa sessions did not achieve conclusive results: “they had been asked to bring the bacon home and had failed.” The Post Office, it appeared, was unwilling to yield any ground to unions of its employees.

As the APW pursued its demands, a second thematic thread emerged in the minutes: labour radicalism. The Winnipeg local subscribed to the left-wing paper, the Western Labour News. The agenda of the proposed Calgary Conference in March (1919), which approved the establishment of One Big Union (OBU), was discussed by the membership. After the conference, the four main resolutions were read out to the Winnipeg local. These included class action, industrial organization, a strike to protest the allied occupation of Russia, and a two-cent levy per member to be used for propaganda purposes. At a special meeting on April 20, a motion was passed to support the OBU.

At the meeting, Brother Durward, a letter carrier and the postal union’s representative on the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council, declared: “What I do not know of Industrial organization would fill a book, yet I realize we must have a change of organization, the present form having become antiquated through the change of various conditions.” He cited the case of Australia, where unionization by industry had proved effective. Another speaker, representing the OBU, pointed to the divisive tactics of the American Federation of Labor. He emphasized strength in numbers: “[N]umbers win strikes…. We are no longer facing the one small faction but capital in a body.”

Anti-capitalist rhetoric was consistent with OBU discourse and would lead many members to support the General Strike. But there were dissidents. Only 37 of 300 members attended the meeting, and its resolutions lacked effect due to the lack of quorum. Some union leaders adhered to old ways of doing things. In March 1919, the president and secretary of the union local were chastised for sending flowers to the postmaster, who had fallen ill, without consulting the rest of the executive. After a vote of censure passed, the president (F.R. Sutton) resigned and retired from the meeting. A few weeks later, on May 9, votes for and against a city-wide sympathetic strike were tallied. The yes side scored a resounding victory among the postal workers, 259 for the strike and 19 against, with workers voting not just to sympathize with the strike’s overall demands but in favour also of a set of demands of their own.

The strike opponents, though a minority, continued to challenge the strike effort. Secretary F.J. Perry stated that, while he favoured better working conditions, everyone needed reminding that postal work, unlike other types of work, had a long-distance impact upon the Dominion and the United States. Another officer warned that by taking a strike vote in favour of their demands of their
employer, as distinct from the vote already taken in favour of the sympathetic strike, they were acting too hastily. He suggested they negotiate for another week before striking for their demands. The question was resolved by allowing the executive to take a strike vote when they saw fit. The following meeting opened with the charge that Perry was undermining union morale. A motion called for his expulsion from the organization. In his defence, he claimed there was insufficient justification for a strike, “considering our position as an organization.” Furthermore, he charged, some were using the organization to forward trade-union ideas not germane to APW interests.

Further dissatisfaction with strike action surfaced on the first day of the postal strike and Winnipeg General Strike, 15 May, when F.R. Sutton, former president of the Winnipeg local and still vice-president of the Manitoba branch of the APW, declared his opposition to the strike. He defied the strike and showed up for work along with thirty-four other men. This was the same man who, along with F.J. Perry, had sent flowers to the postmaster. In an effort to remain on good terms with the employer, Perry sent a letter to the assistant postmaster explaining his own and Sutton’s resignation from the union. Despite their efforts, they were unable to prevent members of the Winnipeg local from jumping into the sympathetic strike.

1919 Strike

The 1919 postal strike raised similar issues to the 1918 strike but occurred in a different context that conditioned the responses of both postal workers and management. The intervention of the Civil Service Commission in 1918 had left many grievances unaddressed. What was different was the buoyancy that the General Strike gave to the postal strike: “the strike came like a cyclone over Winnipeg,” and postal workers felt obliged to support it. This time the men went out not for one week but for over a month. They were branded as Bolsheviks and revolutionaries. The government defended itself by implementing an aggressive short- and long-term response. In the end, only those who accepted the employer’s terms would be allowed to return to their jobs.

In the standoff between the post office and its employees, more was at stake than the resolution of grievances. Each side came to the table with a different set of priorities. Well aware of union grievances, the Post Office department was unwilling to relinquish its power over the work of its postal employees. Service came first, grievances afterwards. Moreover, in the midst of a General Strike, the Crown could not accept a challenge to its authority. The very legitimacy of the state was at stake. The employees viewed matters differently: there had to be more humane ways to get the work done.
Post Office employees demanded reforms, some small, some substantive. The dispatch men called for printed labels on pigeon holes, as well as for suitable stools. They wanted the mail from the T. Eaton Co. to arrive earlier so that the workers were not so inconvenienced by the huge volumes of mail generated by the company’s Winnipeg mail-order operation. Clerks, conscious of their position in the hierarchy among workers, were reluctant to hang bags on a parcel post rack, for this was porters’ work. They wanted all work in the basement to cease until proper ventilation and windows were installed. A later memo stated that when the fan in the basement was not working, the stench from the lavatory would waft into the area where the men worked.

The single most important issue was time. The practice was to divide work into four shifts: 9h to 18h, 13h to 20h30, 17h to 23h, and 23h to 6h30. The one-hour overlap (17h to 18h) of the first three shifts and the 3.5-hour overlap (17h to 20h30) of shifts two and three was no accident, for this was the postal rush hour when the contents of mail boxes and mail bags were brought in for sorting. The system was demanding, especially for the junior sorters, who were required to work five or six evenings per week or in split shifts: from 9h to 13h and then from 17h to 20h30. The union proposed a three-shift platoon system: 9h to 18h; 17h to 24h; 23h to 6h30. The men would be allowed to alternate between shifts so they could enjoy their evenings elsewhere than at work.

E.J. Underwood, an Ottawa postal official temporarily stationed in Winnipeg, criticized the proposal. It would leave just one shift to handle the evening rush. During slack times, there would be more clerks on duty than necessary. Twenty more employees would have to be added to the payroll at Winnipeg. In his view, the evening work schedule, though challenging, was explained to the men when they first came on. The system encouraged junior sorters to get ahead “by intelligent application to their work.” Men could aspire to become primary sorters, thus relieving them of evening work duties. It was more important, Underwood believed, to encourage good work habits within the ranks over time than to provide an equitable schedule of work, day in and day out.

The strike challenged the organization of labour and interfered with the circulation of mail. By May 1919, almost all postal workers were on strike. The Railway Mail Service transfer men were out, as were most of the employees working for the mail contractor. The Railway Mail clerks were set to hold a strike vote. Underwood and the assistant postmaster had to sleep overnight at the post office to guard the currency packages until they were able to move them to a bank. Underwood, a man loyal to the department, despaired. The city was in disarray. Fourteen hundred citizens had been sworn in to bear arms, and there were many loyal veterans in Winnipeg, if it came to a matter of force.
Lines of communication and persuasion

It was almost impossible to communicate by post. Postal authorities in Winnipeg exchanged coded telegrams with Ottawa. Letter correspondence would feature a decoded transcription of the message sent or received by cable in order to make sure that it was properly understood. In some cases, letters were carried by reliable railway mail clerks journeying to and from the city. But the telegraph was key.

Access to the telegraph allowed the department to implement a calibrated response to the dispute in Winnipeg and elsewhere. At Ottawa’s behest, the Winnipeg postmaster telegraphed the postmasters of Calgary, Saskatoon, and Edmonton—where employees had struck in solidarity with the Winnipeg postal workers—the good news: “situation improving here rapidly”; two hundred new employees of “fine calibre” had been taken on at the post office; the railway mail clerks were back at work; many civic employees and firemen were back on the job. The object was to persuade strikers in these cities to return to work. In Saskatoon, the good news was to be accompanied by a warning instructing employees to return to work within twenty-four hours or face dismissal. The government employed a carrot-and-stick approach in an effort to disable the strike west of Winnipeg. The union responded by exchanging wires with locals in Calgary, Saskatoon, Vancouver, and elsewhere. Delegates were sent to points east and west of Winnipeg to obtain information and counter the disinformation campaign of the government.

Inside Winnipeg, the strikers’ mood was far from conciliatory. Underwood encountered a strong undercurrent of confidence and solidarity. An official from Ottawa, he was able to spend several hours among the men without being recognized. He wrote his superior: “You have no idea of the situation here. The Strike Committee thinks that they can bring the Government to their knees.” Not surprisingly, the union minutes of the same day report that the Winnipeg postal workers’ local, its confidence in full bloom, considered the possibility of approaching fellow workers at the Lakehead (Port Arthur) and Sault Ste. Marie to stop entirely the flow of mail to and from the West.

The lack of proper information among the men and the public was “glaringly apparent,” in Underwood’s view. The general understanding in Winnipeg was that letter carriers were underpaid. This was the result of information spread by the letter carriers who, Underwood believed, “have time for propaganda work and are experts in that line.”

How could the government persuade strikers and influence public opinion? A mixture of political prestige, intimidation, and reliable reportage was necessary. The strategy was briefly complicated by the silencing of the media. A strike by
pressmen shut down the *Manitoba Free Press* from May 19 to 22. Pro- and anti-strike publications battled each other for the allegiance of Winnipeg readers. The battle extended into June, when the Strike Committee persuaded newsboys to distribute only the *Western Labour News* in the streets. Once it resumed publishing on May 22, the *Free Press* served as a reliable mouthpiece for anti-strike views, welcoming back its readers with a robust front-page headline: “Anarchists and aliens: The combination which has tried to take this country by the throat.” Two days later, the headline targeted postal employees: “[Posties] Must return to work noon Monday or be dismissed, says government.” The government was determined to adopt a hard-line approach vis-à-vis the postal strikers. The strategy foreshadowed the eventual use of force to defeat the Winnipeg General Strike altogether. With postal service at a standstill, the government felt that it had to act immediately.

**Ultimatum and short-term response**

Around May 22, Minister of the Interior Arthur Meighen, Minister of Labour Gideon Robertson, and Winnipeg South Member of Parliament George William Allan began contemplating an ultimatum to the postal strikers. The strategy may have been concocted in Winnipeg or while Meighen et al. were en route from Ottawa. The idea appealed to other public employers including the Province of Manitoba and the City. The government intended to seek out and punish the guilty. The next day they called at the Post Office asking for a list of agitators among the employees and demanded an explanation regarding incidents of Railway Mail Service clerks refusing to handle mail. Underwood complied and sent his deputy minister a copy of everything he had given Meighen, Allen and Robertson, including a list of ten troublemakers and an explanation for each incident.

On Saturday, May 24, the *Free Press* published a statement from Robertson and Meighen enjoining postal workers to return by noon Monday or face dismissal; in the meantime, voluntary workers would take their place. One hundred fifty volunteers showed up for work that morning. Pointed statements by the postmaster were published in the news: “It should be made illegal for employees in the Post Office or any other branch of the government service to go on strike”; “Post Office must go on, even if none of the strikers return.” A meeting was scheduled for the following day. The labour minister would address the men on the importance of returning to work.

Dispatched to Winnipeg to bolster the government’s position during the General Strike, Gideon Robertson was a known personality in labour and Manitoba circles. Born in Portage la Prairie, the former vice-president of the Order
of Railroad Telegraphers occupied a seat in the Canadian Senate and was appointed minister of labour in Robert Borden’s Union government in November 1918. In his first public test during the strike, Robertson was less than successful. Only fifty men showed up to listen to him. Strike picketers deflected the balance of employees to a union meeting at the Labour Temple. The minister warned his audience that while they would not be paid for time on strike, it might be possible to deduct strike time from their leave time if they returned. Robertson did not address the strikers’ demands. He talked only of getting them back to work. Management would not tolerate a strike nor discuss strikers’ demands.

The government broadcast the ultimatum in the paper and via a large poster in the front window of the Post Office in plain view of the picket line. On the morning of May 26, Postmaster McIntyre visited the picket line. He invited W.J. Cuthbert, a letter carrier, to come around the corner for a talk. The postmaster emphasized that by staying out on strike, Cuthbert was jeopardizing career, pay, and pension; he was being carried away by Bolsheviks and demagogues. Cuthbert responded that he was man enough to think for himself, “and that he was upholding a principle and would do [so] till the fight was finished.” He repeated the conversation from the platform of the union meeting later that day.

Cuthbert was a proud union man, as was Lawrence Pickup, a clerk with the Post Office inspector active in the events of both 1918 and 1919. Pickup left work on May 15 and never returned. The inspector phoned him on the morning of May 26, explaining that the whole section was needed for work. Pickup promised to be in by noon but didn’t arrive until three. There followed a brief exchange—Inspector: ”You are out on strike with the rest of the boys”; Pickup: “Yes I suppose so.” No hard feelings were recorded. Pickup said he would return the next day to clean out his desk, and left. With one twist of fate, Pickup marched out of his postal career. He was not alone.

A total of 393 employees did not return before the deadline. Forty-seven did, and added to the 35 who had refused to strike. Eighty-two of the initial 500 workers were on the job. The loyalists consisted in the main of clerks, with only 10 letter carriers deciding to return; perhaps the latter were made to feel like second-class employees? Significantly the table below shows that temporary employees accounted for 34 percent of the postal workforce.

With most of the Post Office staff absent, the union stepped up the pressure by persuading the Railway Mail Service (RMS) clerks to go out. Their strike was set for midnight May 27. Robertson’s response was quick and effective: on May 28 he demanded they return within twenty-four hours. The ultimatum was posted on the RMS Order Book and in the room used by the clerks. The entire staff (upwards of fifty) returned within a few minutes of the deadline on May 29. The department gained a small but significant victory. Without the RMS, mail could not
enter or leave Winnipeg. Here was a good news story for management to build on. Force would prevail; postal service would resume. The principle that workers should have some say over their working conditions would be pushed aside.

Newspaper reports offered a rose-tinted view of the remaking of the postal labour force. On May 27, the Free Press reported under the headline “Rush for Positions as Postal Clerks”; on May 29, “[a] constant stream of applicants for the vacant positions on the post office staff again thronged the entrance to the postmaster’s office”; and on June 4, “[w]ork at the local post office is rapidly returning to normal.” The reports were misleading. The firing of 400 employees sent shock waves through the organization. Authorities had to integrate inexperienced recruits in a short period of time, a tall order.

Considerable effort was required to remake the labour force. Staff numbers had to be increased above pre-strike levels since the new, unskilled staff could not be expected to work as efficiently as the seasoned staff that they were replacing. As new employees learned their trade, less efficient ones could be let go. There was a continued influx of substitute workers from May 26 to the end of August. The majority of clerk and porter positions were staffed with replacements by June 21: 202 clerks (out of a total of 270) and 44 of the 69 porters. Finally, 148 of 278 letter carriers were substitutes.

The department aimed to replace clerks first because they were responsible for sorting mail. Particularly in demand were hands experienced in city sortation. The backlog of incoming and outgoing mail was substantial. Special sorting cases were devised to make the work of new employees easier. Clerks familiar with Western distribution were brought in: 5 from Montreal, 1 from Toronto, 4 from Ottawa and 2 from Hamilton. The work was arduous: the Montréal postmaster stated that each of his men worked from twenty-four to eighty hours of overtime.

Letter carrier delivery early in June was irregular. A new system was introduced on June 5. Mail would be distributed from the postal station closest to customers’ homes. The schedule of service at each of the four stations was as follows: residents of street names beginning with A to D were to call for their...
mail Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 9h to 12h; streets E to L, the same
days from 13h to 17h; M to Q, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings; and
R to Z, the afternoon of the same days. Four more stations were soon added
to the distribution network. This freed up letter carriers so they could work in
the more peaceable neighbourhoods. The postmaster hoped that the residents
inhabiting quieter areas would receive mail once a day, “and by the time the
savages are tamed,” he said presumably in reference to the people of the city’s
North End, there would be letter carrier service for them too.

Clerks worked in an enclosed space protected by Mounties. Demonstrators
might parade by, as they did on June 2, hurling verbal abuse at those working
inside the Post Office, but they couldn’t see inside. Letter carriers worked
outdoors in full view of strikers and the public. It was difficult to recruit substitue
letter carriers, for would-be postmen feared they would be molested while
out on their walks.

On June 2, Underwood reported that two carriers had quit due to intimidation, and a rumour circulated that a letter carrier had been mauled. The same source reported that members of the public were refusing to receive mail from the hands of new letter carriers. Two days later, six letter carriers resigned due to intimidation, but, Underwood happily reported, only one was mauled. In the meantime, letter carriers were accompanied by North West Mounted Police officers on their downtown routes.

A basic solidarity between strikers and the public underlay the union re-
sponse to attempts to reactivate letter carrier delivery. The preferred tactic of
picketers was to have five or six men accompany a hireling (“scab”) during his
walk. They were not to speak to him or interfere with him in any way; “other
people would do the rest.” The other people likely consisted of workers and
their families engaged in the General Strike. From the vantage point of the
Post Office, delivery in the city’s North End was inadvisable in the absence of
colic protection, “as the attitude of the public there is becoming more hostile,
the community being made up chiefly of the working classes.”

The General
Strike was eventually called off on June 26. As the weeks turned into months,
the government could pursue its policy of rebuilding the Winnipeg postal ser-
vice unfettered by hostile public opinion.

**Long-term perspective**

The Post Office was determined to reconstruct the postal labour force in such
a manner as to check militancy among workers and preserve management’s au-
thority. The process took time. Initial policies eventually adjusted. The department had to train and then hold onto new people. Solutions were adopted that
would have been unthinkable during the summer of 1919. For a time, the de-
partment stuck to its decision not to reinstate striking employees. Delegations sent on behalf of the strikers to the postmaster in Winnipeg and the prime minister in Ottawa were put off or rebuffed. In the end, however, the lost workforce would come back to haunt postal authorities.

By September 1919, the Winnipeg staff was up to about 540, considerably more than the pre-strike level of 439. The payroll was not greater because so many junior employees had replaced senior ones. Postmaster McIntyre was content with this group, which consisted of men opposed to strikes in public utilities. He recommended that no striker be allowed back into the fold so as to prevent any campaign by others to return. Department officials and politicians concurred, but labour shortages forced a compromise.

During the climax of the strike, Winnipeg postal officials scrambled for labour. Substitutes hired during the early days of the strike were promised that if they performed satisfactorily, they could obtain permanent status without having to take the civil service examination. In late August 1919, the Civil Service Commission decided that henceforth no such promises were to be made. Ottawa resumed control of staffing. Employees hired on a temporary basis prior to August continued to petition for access to permanent jobs during the coming year. The government did not disregard them entirely, but it was in no hurry. There were so many others, including returning soldiers, desperate for work.

Over the following months, the Commission drew up lists of prospective employees eligible for work in Winnipeg. But in spring 1920, the postmaster complained that 46 of 88 eligible candidates for permanent positions were either unavailable or impossible to locate. Another complaint refers to the faulty nature of five other lists: they contained names of men who were already employed, difficult to locate, or unavailable. The postmaster wanted more names or the authority to hire temporary employees.

By July 1920, Assistant Postmaster Bower revealed that they were as badly off in the Post Office as a year ago. He expected that they would lose men during the summer months: those not granted holidays during July and August would likely resign or take unpaid leave and go elsewhere. He was sure that the postal service would never make it through the busy fall and Christmas season. Bower was so anxious about the personnel shortage that he had taken to sleeping at the Post Office. A memo prepared by a senior Toronto postal official got to the heart of the matter: the staffing problem in Winnipeg was the result of an exceptionally high turnover rate in personnel, in excess of 50 percent. In the year ending 30 June 1920, 299 of 536 staff members had resigned their positions. The category hardest hit was the clerks, 173 of whom resigned.

Was postal work especially arduous or unpopular with workers? Was management’s unwillingness to alter work procedures and conditions the root cause
of the problem? Whatever, the Post Office had to reconsider its position and start recruiting from among the dismissed strikers. Throughout summer and fall 1919, the Post Office received several proposals for reinstatement from former strikers. A union delegation reporting to dismissed strikers in July gloomily concluded that “nothing could be done to get us back.” Yet in December the deputy minister advised the postmaster general that the older strikers could be allowed back in. They were family men, less militant and too specialized to apply elsewhere for employment. In January 1920, a cabinet memo officially offered clemency to dismissed workers. In exchange, those reinstated were to abstain from engaging in future sympathy strikes. There were other conditions for reinstatement: there had to be a suitable vacancy at the Post Office, and the re-employment of ex-postal employees required cabinet approval.

The news of clemency was announced in the papers, but the new policy was not immediately enacted. The postmaster told the Free Press that he was not authorized to deal with the dismissed strikers asking to be reinstated. Local postal officials continued to recruit elsewhere. According to the Free Press publisher, “[T]he post office here is in the habit of posting notices in the Great War Veterans’ Association whenever there is a shortage of help.” The dismissed employees were convinced that they were the victims of the government’s preference for veterans; that the government offered clemency but in reality was discriminating against them.

The department was highly selective about whom it would allow back in. The Civil Service Commission, in the summer of 1919, began keeping a card index file with the names of all strikers dismissed from the postal staff of various Western cities, including Winnipeg, in order to keep them out of the civil service. The commission approached the department, which then selected the men it wanted. A list was prepared in August 1920 containing the names of fifty-three former employees whose reinstatement was not recommended. Some were put aside owing to union activism, but other criteria influenced the decision as well. One man was too old for postal duty; had he remained in the service, he would have qualified for superannuation. Another was allegedly of below average aptitude for postal work. Another was tubercular and inclined to be incorrigible; still another was ever dissatisfied. There was the “veritable chatterbox” always disturbing others. Finally, there was “[a] somewhat stupid postman…. Stupid mentally and unfit physically.” Here was a staff-cleansing blacklist long on vengeance, short on compassion.

Well aware that it could draw from three pools of labour in reassembling the staff of the Winnipeg Post Office—temporary postal employees, returned soldiers, and dismissed employees—the government now had the upper hand. It went out of its way to accommodate veterans, who were in the process of becoming sacred fixtures of Dominion hiring policy. Yet the Post Office could
not adequately function without some strikers. From June to August 1920, a flurry of staff lists was exchanged between Winnipeg and Ottawa with a view to bringing more strikers back. The assistant postmaster believed it was best to take back the strikers before the men got wind of how much they were missed, for they would then surely take advantage of the government. Of the hundreds of trained clerks available in Winnipeg, only one had appeared on a formal list of appointments. It was, stated Bower, as if a hospital in dire need of trained surgeons and nurses were to take in butchers and dishwashers.

What the Winnipeg officials emphatically desired was experienced clerks. Fifteen or twenty trained men for inside duty “would be a bonanza for us,” wrote the postmaster in July 1920. The assistant postmaster was jubilant upon receiving a list of fourteen trained sorters in September. He hired nine at once; “we were at our wit’s ends in our efforts to keep the work going.” Each sorter represented a saving in training time for postal officials. It took two or three months to teach a letter carrier but much longer to make a successful primary sorter. The key ingredient in the era of manual sorting, in Winnipeg as elsewhere, was human memory, which enabled the clerks to memorize entire schemes of distribution and, through fast hand-to-eye coordination, to sort the mail.

By November 1920, Bower was persuaded that all the desirable clerks recommended by the department had been taken on. There were too few vacancies to take many of the former letter carriers back. Perhaps he did not care. Bower had what he needed: the necessary brains, and, soon enough, authority to operate the Winnipeg postal service. He succeeded McIntyre early in 1921 and would continue to run things until 1934.

Conclusion

By 1921 the government had reassembled the Winnipeg postal labour force. It was a blend of substitutes taken on in the aftermath of the strike, veterans of the Great War, and reinstated strikers brought back on the employer’s terms. The result was a staff that in the very least would know how to snap to attention. How compliant were these workers in the ensuing period?

It is clear that postal militancy did not end during the early 1920s. A national strike involving postal workers in Toronto, southern Ontario, Moncton, and Montréal erupted on 18 June 1924. Fifteen hundred employees took part, roughly a third of the national postal work force. Ultimatums were issued and disobeyed. The lion’s share of the strikers did not return until after July 1. That they could afford to stay out and literally taunt postal authorities confirmed their conviction that, as in Winnipeg, they had something their employer needed, namely the sorting skills and the memory of distribution schemes to direct
mail wherever it had to go. Skilled leverage would co-exist with a system of labour organization characterized by strong employer authority mixed with political patronage and caprice. But the 1924 strike marked the last major incident of organized unrest in the Post Office for four decades.

The era following the 1920s was not marked by significant unrest in the postal service. It was as if labour chose to sleep for four decades, only to stage a dramatic return. Gilles Parrot, who joined in 1929, would enjoy a 28-year career in the Montreal post office. He and an entire generation would adhere to the pattern of obedience in the workplace and subdued trade unionism. Gilles passed away in 1957. His son, Jean-Claude, entered the postal service in 1954. A decade later Parrot and his workmates would begin to challenge the postal status quo. In so doing they followed a trajectory of contest whose momentum reaches back to the events of the Winnipeg postal strike during the long spring of 1919. This was Winnipeg’s moment: a rebellion energized by a context of general labour revolt and characterized by unprecedented solidarity between clerks and letter carriers. The strike planted the seeds for a subsequent élan that would gather steam over two generations. The underlying cause of unrest in the post office from the late 1960s to the 1980s was, in our view, a decades-old heritage of job frustration integral to the postal system that first erupted in the wildcat strikes of 1965. Winnipeg’s moment was one high water mark in the history of Canadian labour. There have been and there will be others.

Notes

1 I wish to acknowledge the research collaboration of Lorna Chisholm, Marguerite Sauriol, and Jesse Alexander. Rhonda Hinther, Robert Tremblay, Jennifer Anderson, and two anonymous readers read through a previous draft of the article: un gros merci!


10 Mitchell and Naylor, “In the Eye of the Storm,” 176.


12 Our interpretation is based on a rich file in the archives of the Post Office: Underwood and Bower Special Correspondence, Library and Archives Canada, Archives of the Post Office and Canada Post, RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2 (hereafter cited as RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2). The file contains Underwood’s reports to the deputy postmaster general back in Ottawa, as well as his exchanges with Thomas T. Bower, the assistant postmaster of Winnipeg. Other material includes the *Manitoba Free Press* and the minutes of the Winnipeg chapter of the postal employees union.

13 Library and Archives Canada, Archives of the Post Office and Canada Post, RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 1, 120 (hereafter cited as RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 1), Winnipeg Postmaster to Superintendent of Staff Branch, 25 October 1918. The actual number of temporary employees was much higher; see below.

14 Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Minute Book of the Winnipeg Branch of the Federation of Western Postal Employees of Canada, P5790 file 12 (hereafter cited as PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch), 3 December 1918; Bumsted, *Winnipeg General Strike*, 14.

15 David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations and the General Strike* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1974), 70–74. For a more complete picture of labour agitation in the West, see Mitchell and Naylor “In the Eye of the Storm.”


17 Heron and Siemiatycki, *Great War*, 20-21. Their data demonstrate that inflation was a reality and not a mere figment of labour’s imagination. For a counter view, see “The Trials of War,” in Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, chap. 3, 32ff.

18 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 1, G.W. Andrews, M. to the Postmaster General, 8 July 1918.
The West and Beyond

19 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 1, telegram, J.A. Elrick, Secretary, letter carriers to C.J. Doherty.
Acting Premier, Ottawa, 18 July 1918.

20 Ibid., draft prepared by deputy postmaster general, 23 July 1918.

21 Manitoba Free Press, 30 July 1918, 1 August 1918.

22 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 1, postmaster to postmaster general, 25 July 1918.

23 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 1, Winnipeg postmaster to deputy postmaster general, 27 July 1918.

24 Ibid., telegram, secretary of Winnipeg Board of Trade to deputy postmaster general, 19 July 1918. In Winnipeg and cities elsewhere in Canada, the press chastised the government for being unfair with its postal staff. See Siemiatycki, “Labour Contained,” 205.

25 Manitoba Free Press, 1 August 1918, 1.

26 Logan, Trade Unions in Canada, 295. See also Lee “Canadian Postal System,” 319. Western letter carriers broke with the FALC over the One Big Union issue; the founding of the western Federation was likely their initiative.

27 PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 18 April 1919.

28 Ibid., 20 April 1919. R. Durward, a grade E letter carrier, would eventually serve on the central committee, which ran the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. See Bercuson, Confrontation at Winnipeg, 120.

29 PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 17 May 1919.

30 Ibid., 11 March 1919. F.R. Sutton was a clerk, grade 2-A.

31 Ibid., 9 May 1919.

32 Ibid., 14 May 1919.

33 Brother Sutton’s decision to cross the picket line was noted by his fellow union members (see meeting of 15 May) and is confirmed in RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 1, letter from the Winnipeg postmaster to the postmaster general, 13 June 1919.


35 PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 22 June 1919.

36 From an editorial in the Free Press, 2 August 1918: “apart from the courts and the machinery of justice, there is no function of government that more completely expresses the sovereignty of the state than the operation of His Majesty’s mail.”

37 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2, attachment from Underwood to deputy postmaster general, 19 May 1919. See also PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 15 May 1919. E.J. Underwood was sent by Post Office headquarters to keep an eye on matters in Winnipeg when the strike broke out. During the war, he served with the censorship division of the Post Office. By 1924 he had risen to the level of chief superintendent.

38 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2, memo for deputy postmaster general, 10 June 1919.
39 Ibid., correspondence by Underwood, 20 May 1919.
40 Ibid., Underwood to deputy postmaster general, 19 May 1919.
41 Ibid.
43 Ibid., Underwood to P.T. Coolican, Ottawa postal inspector, 26 May 1919.
44 PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 26 May 1919.
45 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2, Underwood to deputy postmaster general, 24 May 1919. One worker floated the idea of printing their side of the story for home distribution at a union meeting, but the proposal was not enacted. See PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 2 June 1919.
46 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2, Underwood to deputy postmaster general, 4 June 1919. See also Bumsted, Winnipeg General Strike, 31, 34. One union member opined that the newsboys’ strike was defeated by the policy of publishers giving out copies of papers for free and then paying a bonus to those who distributed them. The measure created a parallel network of newsboys. PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 9 June 1919.
47 Manitoba Free Press, 24 May 1919, 1.
48 Authorities with the Province of Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg would enforce their own ultimatum, hiring replacement workers after the deadline at Manitoba Telephone and the city police. See Bumsted, Winnipeg General Strike, 39, 40.
49 The view expounded in Mike Dupuis’s forthcoming book (dealing with press coverage of the Winnipeg General Strike) is that members of the Winnipeg Committee of 1000 who boarded, at Thunder Bay, the westbound train carrying Meighen, Robertson, and Allen to Winnipeg dictated the hard-line strategy to the Ottawa ministers.
50 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2, letter and attachments from Underwood to deputy postmaster general, 23 May 1919. There were five incidents. Four of the ten trouble-makers—Durward, Hoop, Pickup, and Hammond—were active during the 1918 troubles as well. Not surprisingly, their names appear prominently in the APW local minutes, as union officers, delegates, and speakers.
51 Ibid., 24 May 1919. There is no indication of who the volunteers were. It is known that two days later, volunteers in the post office consisted of businessmen, bank clerks, real estate men, lawyers, and staff members from various wholesale houses. The presence of so many white-collar notables testifies to the importance of the postal situation. See Provincial Archives of Manitoba, M 268 Preliminary Hearing, The King v. William Ivens, R.J. Johns et al., “Testimony of Peter McIntyre August 10, 1919.” Thanks to Mike Dupuis for this reference.
52 RG-3 vol. 676, vol. 2, Underwood to deputy postmaster general, 24 May 1919.
Robertson’s name comes up again and again in the minutes of the postal workers’ union local as a government spokesman or a compromise man. Borden made considerable use of him in other labour conflicts. Mitchell and Naylor, “In the Eye of the Storm,” 181–82.

Robertson’s name comes up again and again in the minutes of the postal workers’ union local as a government spokesman or a compromise man. Borden made considerable use of him in other labour conflicts. Mitchell and Naylor, “In the Eye of the Storm,” 181–82.

Robertson’s name comes up again and again in the minutes of the postal workers’ union local as a government spokesman or a compromise man. Borden made considerable use of him in other labour conflicts. Mitchell and Naylor, “In the Eye of the Storm,” 181–82.
No doubt the government had to maintain a balance between substitute workers and reinstated strikers so as not to poison the workplace with antagonistic elements.

In this letter, Underwood wrote a decoded transcription of a telegram received from the deputy minister, for this was an important matter that required a decision from Ottawa.

Superintendent of Post Office Staff Branch to Winnipeg postmaster, 29 August 1919.

In this letter, Underwood wrote a decoded transcription of a telegram received from the deputy minister, for this was an important matter that required a decision from Ottawa.

Superintendent of Post Office Staff Branch to Winnipeg postmaster, 29 August 1919.

Ibid., Winnipeg postmaster to postmaster general, 8 April 1920.

Ibid., 25 June 1920.

Bower to Underwood, 12 July 1920.

Ibid., vol. 1, chief Post Office superintendent, Toronto to superintendent of Post Office Staff Branch, 14 July 1920.

Ibid., 19 August 1920. Ross and assistant postmaster Bower corresponded regularly.

PAM, Minute Book Winnipeg Branch, 4 July 1919.

Ibid., deputy postmaster general to postmaster general, 24 December 1919.

Ibid., correspondence sent to Acting Prime Minister of Canada (Sir George E. Foster), 7 May 1920.

Ibid., Dafoe to Chisholm of Ottawa Press Gallery, 28 April 1920.

Ibid., secretary of Civil Service Commission to superintendent of Post Office Staff Branch, 22 July 1919.

RG-3 vol. 677, Winnipeg 39, vol. 2, Assistant Secretary of Civil Service Commission to superintendent of Post Office Staff Branch, 20 August 1920.

This was as true of the rural as the urban postal service.

Ibid., vol. 2, Thomas Bower to Underwood, 13 August 1920.

Ibid., vol. 1, Thomas Bower to Underwood, 17 September 1920. See also Winnipeg postmaster to postmaster general, 12 July 1920.

Ibid., vol. 2, 12 November 1920. McIntyre had passed away by 4 November 1920.