

Economic Effect of General Strike in June, 1919

14,839 Men Involved as Workmen, Losing \$1,192,010 in Wages, With a Loss of 271,097 Working Days, and an Average Loss Per Employee of \$80.34—Much Larger Loss to Business.

The results of strikes in British Columbia during 1919, as disclosed by the report of Deputy Minister of Labour Mr. J. D. McNiven, is a valuable commentary on industrial conditions and furnishes much valuable food for thought.

Some idea as to the prevalence of strikes last year may be gauged from the fact that in January there were two; February, five; March, five; April, four; May, seven; June, two, including the great general sympathetic strike over Western Canada; July, one; August, three; September, six; October, three; November, five, and December, one.

The comment or report of Mr. McNiven on the June general strike is especially valuable. It will be noted that the wages lost are laid out in detail, but the losses otherwise involved are much larger, although they cannot be definitely determined.

Mr. McNiven says:

"This strike, by far the most serious economic disturbance which occurred in the Province during the year, was avowedly 'sympathetic' in its origin, being initiated by a large number of trade-unions in Vancouver to demonstrate their unity with the workers already on strike at Winnipeg. The Winnipeg strike, it may be mentioned, began on May 10th, when the employees of three engineering or metal firms in that city left work. The dispute had reference to the subject of 'collective bargaining' at these works, the employers contending that this term meant the bargaining by each firm with its own work-people collectively, which arrangement they were willing to accept; while the Metal Trades Council insisted that a bargain made between the collective employees of a concern and that concern should not stand as a bargain made between the collective employees of a concern and that concern should not stand as a bargain until it had been ratified by the Council itself. The strike at first called affected only the three concerns directly involved, but a few days later, on May 15th, a general strike was declared in the City of Winnipeg. This strike lasted until June 26th, when most of the people affected returned to work on the promise of the Provincial Government of Manitoba of an inquiry into its causes and effects, and the metal and building trade strikes were ended about a week later. The strike was marked by occasional scenes of violence, leading to one fatality, and the arrest of several strike leaders. "The strikes in British Columbia, which were the 'sympathetic' outcome of the events briefly detailed above, began with the calling of a general strike at Vancouver on June 3rd. This action was contrary to the instructions of the International officials of the several unions involved, and in certain cases those officials intervened successfully to bring about an early resumption of work. For the first few weeks, however, the tendency was for the number of unions and work-people affected to increase. Most of the labor organizations in Vancouver were involved in the strike, the exceptions being chiefly the Railroad Brotherhoods. In Victoria the strike was not called until June 23rd, and the response was not so general as in other cities, the street car men, the electricians, telephone operators, and telegraphers being among the more important of those who remained at work. At Prince Rupert the general strike began on May 29th, and about the same time, or within a week or two afterwards, strikes broke out at a number of logging camps on the line of the Grand Trunk Pacific, increase wages being demanded. This demand was successful at one camp in Prince Rupert, but at most camps the men returned to work, after being out a few weeks, on the same terms as before.

"A singular feature of the strike was its continuance in British Columbia for fully a week after the Winnipeg

men had returned to work. Most of the strikers in this Province resumed work on July 4th, having been out just over a month. In the case of the British Columbia Telephone Co., certain complications arose with reference to the reinstatement of some of the supervisors in their former positions, and here the settlement was delayed until July 13th.

"The companies and firms whose employees went on strike were asked to make returns to the Department, giving the number of employees on strike, the loss in wages, the loss in working days, etc. This request was complied with by fifty-six firms in Vancouver, fourteen in Victoria, five in New Westminster, and six in Prince Rupert. The figures supplied by them show the following aggregates:—

Employees on strike—

Vancouver	9,731
Victoria	4,811
New Westminster	67
Prince Rupert	230
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	14,839

Wage loss—

Vancouver	\$ 996,408.00
Victoria	145,628.87
New Westminster	3,605.43
Prince Rupert	46,368.00
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	\$1,192,010.30

Working days lost—

Vancouver	233,736
Victoria	29,850
New Westminster	1,071
Prince Rupert	6,440
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	271,097

Averages—

Wage loss per employee	\$80.34
Days lost per employee	16.33
Daily wage of employees	\$4.91

"Only thirty nine firms, or rather less than one-half of those making returns, gave definite figures in response to an invitation to estimate the "amount of business in dollars approximately lost through the strike." Their estimates amounted to a total of \$680,733.26. Many firms who did not mention a specific figure alluded to considerable losses, and probably the figure mentioned should be taken as only a fraction of the total loss of trade to the Province which the strike brought in its train.

"With regard to the general effect of the strike, firms were asked to state how, in their opinion, it would affect their business, not merely while the strike was on, but for the rest of the year. The great majority of such firms took a serious view of the general situation. 'The outstanding effect on business,' wrote one large firm of employers, 'is that the strike and labor difficulties at Vancouver are the most serious retarding influence on the industrial growth of Vancouver.' 'Stopping of production,' writes another firm, 'can only mean the loss of that much wealth and nothing can ever make it up.' A firm of machinists thought that enterprise would be discouraged 'until some guarantee is given that sympathetic strikes will not be called by unions.' A comparatively new firm, employing nearly a hundred workers in a special line of manufacture, wrote: 'We were behind on orders when strike commenced, and orders received during strike made conditions still worse. It is hard for us to obtain help; there is only a limited number of skilled workers here, and we practically employ all of them. The strike, of course, hurt us with our Prairie trade, because when they could not get our goods they naturally bought from competing firms elsewhere.'