



## **Minneapolis Teamsters' Strikes of 1934: The Strikes That Made Minneapolis a Union Town**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – one hundred years ago – Minneapolis was one of the most notorious anti-union cities in the United States. The city's key banks and largest employers had come together to form "The Citizens Alliance," a secret organization pledged to keep workers from organizing unions. Historian William Millikan has called them a "union against

unions." Not only did they share resources with each other, but they also hired attorneys to sue unions and private security companies to spy on unions, and they exercised considerable influence over city, county, and state government. As a result, Minneapolis workers, many of them immigrants from northern, eastern, and central Europe, found low wages, dangerous working conditions, and disrespectful treatment all too common.

Between the late 1890s and the early 1920s, local workers made several efforts to challenge the power of the Citizens Alliance. There were worker cooperatives, especially among flour barrel-makers, which had begun in the 1880s with the sponsorship of the Knights of Labor and had persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the city's mill district. The Industrial Workers of the World, also known as the Wobblies, offered workers an industrial structure (as opposed to the craft structure of the American Federation of Labor's unions), militant and creative tactics, and a vision of solidarity. And the American Socialist Party gave a political choice in elections to those workers who could vote. In 1916, against great odds, they elected their candidate, Thomas Van Lear, mayor of Minneapolis (for one term). But during and after World War I, the Citizens Alliance used government power, anti-immigrant nativism, and a "red scare" to crush what was left of organized labor. They called their revitalized anti-union program "the American Plan" as they brought their power down on workers.

Union activists hunkered down, held onto their jobs in a variety of industries, and kept the idea of unionization alive through the dark days of the 1920s. They learned a lot from the Wobblies' ideas on structure (industrial rather than craft) and tactics (direct action, workplace power, cultural creativity like songs, poems, and plays), and they waited for the economic and political situation to change in ways that might weaken the employers and the Citizens Alliance. They also built a new political party, the Farmer Labor Party, which linked labor activists with small farmers, kept progressive ideas alive in the electoral arena, and produced newspapers through which criticisms of big business could be fleshed out and circulated.

The Great Depression, which began in the fall of 1929, made change possible. Around the country, workers and labor activists launched a renewed labor movement. Minneapolis proved to be a leading site for these developments. Led by a mix of immigrants (such as Carl Skoglund, who was undocumented and would later be threatened with deportation) and Midwesterners, activists transformed the Teamsters' Union into a vehicle for linking warehouse workers and truck drivers, connecting workers across the city, and reaching along roads and highways to spin a web of labor solidarity. In February 1934, a short strike of coal delivery workers inspired other workers to believe that change was possible. In June, a massive strike shut down the city's huge warehouse district, leading to another victory for workers. And, in late July, when

employers sought to cheat on their promises to workers, a third strike virtually shut the city down. Strikers used "roving pickets" who followed trucks in cars and set up mobile picket lines wherever they tried to unload. There were confrontations, some with weapons, some with casualties, between strikers and police and private security guards. Governor Floyd Olson, of the Farmer-Labor Party, called out the National Guard and arrested strikers (who were put in tents at the State Fairgrounds) and, later, raided the headquarters of the Citizens Alliance. Finally, under the pressure of the federal Roosevelt administration, the Citizens Alliance gave in, recognized the union, and allowed workers to vote on union representation. More than 10,000 voted for the Teamsters.

The balance of power had shifted in Minneapolis, as it would throughout much of the country over the rest of the 1930s. Of course, no changes – neither the good ones nor the bad ones – are forever, and the labor-management situation would change here in the years after World War II. But nothing can take away from the achievements of thousands of workers during the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' strikes.