

AFD Ep 384 Links and Notes - 1892 New Orleans General Strike (feat. Justin LaGrande) - Recording June 20 at 2 PM ET (1 PM CT, Noon MT)

Intro [Bill]: This week we're discussing the successful, cross-racial New Orleans General Strike of November 1892. It happened in the waning days of the failed and very violent Homestead Strike the same year in Pennsylvania, which has remained much more widely discussed in American labor history than the events in New Orleans. Across the South in 1892, the reaction to the end of Reconstruction and the imposition of Jim Crow was in full swing for at least a decade, but there were still areas where the situation was at least a bit different, and New Orleans had always tended to be an exception to the broader South.

As usual, our sources and notes will be posted with the episode in a PDF at arsenalfordemocracy.com.

As a succinct overview, I'll quote first from a summary at the Zinn Educational Project website: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/massive-labor-strike-in-new-orleans/>

- *On Nov. 8, 30,000 factory and dock workers staged the 1892 New Orleans general strike, demanding union recognition, closed shops, wage increases, and more. They were joined by non-industrial laborers, such as musicians, clothing workers, clerks, utility workers, streetcar drivers, and printers. Most importantly, African American and white workers united despite active attempts to divide the workers on racial lines.*

[Bill: I want to provide a bit of basic background on the lead-up to this general strike. And here we'll be going back and forth from my notes from the Wikipedia article and the various books or articles it cites and some extensive quotes from an article that Justin pulled for us from New Orleans Historical dot org, a project by The University of New Orleans and Tulane University. Meanwhile, Rachel has been digging up articles and quotes from the time period itself.]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1892_New_Orleans_general_strike

- In May 1892, streetcar conductors won a smaller strike demanding a closed shop (i.e. the hiring of union members only) and a shorter workday. This success sent a powerful ripple through the working class of New Orleans, which rushed to form union locals across a wide range of occupations, inspired by that victory. By the end of the summer of 1892, the city had 49 unions (many affiliated to the American Federation of Labor, although the AFL would not be taking the lead on the events of the fall of 1892, given their racist segregated union policies and orientation toward craft-unionism) and the overwhelming majority were new that year. 30,000 workers formed a Workingmen's Amalgamated Council. **[go down to Justin here - B]**
- The core of the emerging union movement was a so-called Triple Alliance of racially integrated unions of Teamsters, Packers, and Scalesmen. (Scalesmen, also known as weighmasters, are the professionals who measure bulk commodity shipments accurately to try to reduce scamming.) The Teamsters were majority-Black, but the Packers and Scalesmen were majority-White, according to Daniel Rosenberg's 1988 book "New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism 1892-1923," which tracks the New

Orleans interracial unions' careful internal decisionmaking in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to fairly distribute work assignments and union leadership positions to both White and Black workers under a system referred to as "half and half" by the locals.

https://books.google.com/books?id=yYo_Zjj52gC [go down to Justin here - A]

- The Triple Alliance went on strike in late October 1892 to seek a 10-hour workday, overtime pay, and union shops. [go down to Justin here - C]
- There was no initial flexibility on the part of the business community, which is why things would eventually escalate within a couple weeks into a general strike. [go down to Justin here - D]
- Efforts to divide the Triple Alliance with side deals racial lines failed. [go down to Justin here - E]
- The General Strike that unfolded in solidarity with the Triple Alliance's strike was coordinated by the Cotton Screwmen's Union, the Cotton Yardmen's Union, the Printers, the Boiler Makers, and the Car Driver's Union. [But Justin can tell us more about the other occupations that joined the general strike and how it played out. - G]
- [Reflecting on the aftermath] The general strike was considered a success by its participants in the immediate aftermath and should probably be considered a success today as well. Even Samuel Gompers of the national AFL said at the time, "To me the movement in New Orleans was a very bright ray of hope for the future of organized labor and convinces me that the advantage which every other element fails to succeed in falls to the mission of organized labor. Never in the history of the world was such an exhibition... With one fell swoop the economic barrier of color was broken down." But there was an immediate national propaganda effort to paint the strike as a failure so it couldn't serve as a model to other industrial communities across the country. On December 12, 1892, the New York Times blared an editorial headline "Labor's Defeat In New-Orleans; The Victory of the Employers Complete." This view, if taken seriously, would have come as a shock to the employers in New Orleans who were furious at their defeat. Historians of the period from the 1890s until the Great Depression, much like their Lost Cause revisionism of Civil War, Reconstruction, and antebellum history in the South, made a concerted effort to describe the strike as a "massive" failure. This likely contributed to the strike fading from view and from critical re-evaluation until the mid-20th century, by labor historians such as Philip Foner. [go to Justin and Rachel for some contemporary quotes celebrating or acknowledging the strike's success - L & M]

[Justin] <https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/1406>

- **A.** *Scalesmen and Packers were skilled laborers. Scalesmen's labor was that of weighing commodities, a function that determined the value, the exchange value or selling price of a commodity. Packers were those laborers who loaded or 'packed' commodities for shipment on vessels such as boats, trains or other moving vehicles. Packers had specific tools to pack or 'screw' the commodities in place. Teamsters were those laborers considered not as skilled as scalesmen and packers. Teamsters moved commodities by carriages, wagons, drays (carts) as drivers and general laborers.*
- **C.** *On October 24, these three unions went on strike for a shorter work day (10-hour day), overtime pay for after 60 hours and a union shop. There were between two to three*

thousand workers on strike. The city's employing class (banks, stevedores, foundries, hotels, merchants, etc.) was struck with terror. Less than 30 years after the end of the Civil War, and with the counterrevolution of Reconstruction, Black and white workers united to walk out for joint demands.

- **B.** That summer, the workers had organized a city-wide united front called the Workingmen's Amalgamated Council. This form of organization was a clever idea designed to pursue a specific form of struggle. [...] The council represented the widely exploited and most oppressed sections of the community. The purpose of this council was to provide solidarity and aid to the workers' struggles. The more 'enlightened' or 'conscious' workers knew that the strike's outcome would affect the wages and conditions of all workers. In preparing for the fight, the workers raised \$7,000.
- **D.** The exploiter and oppressor social class of owners and bosses organized an all-out strike-breaking assault. Their allies consisted of the bosses of the four railroads that entered the city, and also the bosses of cotton, sugar, and rice commodity exchanges. They amassed a huge strike-breaking and terror fund. The New Orleans Board of Trade, located at 316 Magazine Street, represented the interests of this social class of owners and bosses. The Board of Trade would make decisions for them.
- **E.** Wavering and vacillation appeared in the ranks of the Scalesmen and the Packers union. But conscious white workers, members of the radical Knights of Labor, struggled and argued with their class brothers. They agitated that the Black workers were not their real enemy but instead their class brothers. This struggle inside the workers' movement enabled the workers to see and embrace their true class interests. The 'enlightened' labor leaders prevailed amongst their white brethren. Consequently, the Workingmen's Amalgamated Council demanded that there be negotiation with the three unions (the two whites and one black) or no negotiation at all.
- [Continue here: F. Discussion of some of the terrible local media of the time fomenting racial hatreds to try to break the strike]
- **G.** Refusing to submit to threats or fear, the Workingmen's Amalgamated Council escalated the fight and called for a general strike on November 8. Over 25,000 workers, of African, Caribbean, Spanish, French and other European descent that also included 45 locals responded to the call. More than half the city's workforce struck. Carpenters, joiners, warehousemen, screwmen, coopers, coachmen, musicians, freight handlers, horseshoers, grain shovelers, plasterers, piledrivers, pressmen, tinnerns, drivers, cotton men, gas and electric workers united and struck together. When night fell, New Orleans economy was further paralyzed. Without utility workers, the city was in darkness. Not a ship nor boat moved. Not one dray nor delivery carriage operated. Not a hotel worker greeted a guest. Not a cigar rolled. The economy had been halted. [We should probably talk here about the shutdown of the New Orleans gas infrastructure, including streetlights, and the electrical grid.]
- **H.** The Board of Trade offered 'special higher wages' for anyone or any scab to come forward. With a population of 100,000 people in New Orleans, only 59 people stepped forward. Calls were made for scab labor to come from Birmingham and Mobile, Alabama; Memphis, Tennessee; and Galveston, Texas, but many prospects declined to come. [go to Rachel to talk about why scabs were reluctant & the Mayor's response -K]

- **I.** *After three days, the Board of Trade surrendered to most of the strikers' demands. They got a shorter work day. They got a 25% wage increase. Years later, the [federal] government's legal suits against the strike leaders [for Sherman Antitrust Act violations] were eventually dropped. There were some gains made in the working conditions. But they did not win the closed shop which was full recognition of their unions.*
- **J.** *Shamefully, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) – the only all-U.S.A. labor federation at that time did not follow up this historic victory but continued to organize all-white crafts. Because of the stand and actions of the AFL, the AFL contributed greatly to the shops remaining a haven of white supremacy, low wages, and non-union labor. In time, the millionaire owners and bosses were able to re-divide the workers and regain what they lost. There were some important lessons and gains made. The strike demonstrated the power of the workers. The strike demonstrated that gains can be made and won when 'proper leadership and proper organization' are in place.*

[Rachel] K. Why was the new Louisiana Governor, Murphy J Foster, a vicious white supremacist for most of his subsequent tenure, not brutally deploying troops, even before the General Strike, to put down labor? What was the new New Orleans mayor John Fitzpatrick up to during this?
https://small-resistance.tulane.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/327/2018/11/WallPanels_ToPrint_noprintersmarks_optimized_Part8.pdf

- *In response to pressure from the business community and press, Mayor Fitzpatrick declared martial law, but refused to offer police to protect scabs. Frustrated, the Board of Trade appealed to Governor Murphy Foster to send in the state militia, pointing to inflammatory and virulently racist coverage in the New Orleans press. Arriving on November 10 [at the mid-point of the general strike], and finding New Orleans exceptionally quiet, the state militia withdrew the next day.*
- The strikers, without escalation from local law enforcement, were able to be so anti-violent that they defeated the state militia.

L. [Justin] http://www.pennfedbmwe.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=95506

- John Swinton, a labor editor, addressing the national convention of AFL one month after the strike:
"Halt! ... We must take a broad view of the warlike operations of which these strikes were incidents. Skirmishes may be lost by a regiment which may win. Regiments may be defeated in the battles of a triumphant campaign. Campaigns may end in dismay for the army that conquers in the war. Be not in haste. ... This thing is not over yet. The forces of the advance have but begun to learn their drill. Serious revolutions move in large arcs, along a course which is orderly, though it may appear to be zig-zag. ...

"The 50,000 brave men who, in the six great strikes and the many lesser strikes of this year, stood the enemy's onslaughts, rendered a service of incomputable worth to the working masses of the United States. ... If they had failed to strike a blow before they fell – what do you think would have happened elsewhere? Do you doubt that cowardice would have invited further reprisals, that the conditions of labor would have been made harder in other places and other industries? ...

“If, therefore, many of the hostile schemes of the enemy were checked or balked this year ... due credit for this must be given to ... the strikers who resisted aggression, set their comrades on the watch by raising the alarm. ...

“I ask you to bear it in mind, to hold it in grateful memory, that American labor in general has been benefited by the action of the brave strikers of Homestead, Buffalo, New Orleans, who took the field in its defense and fell while battling for a few of the items of its rights.”

M. [Rachel] <https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/489>

- November 11, 1892 *The Times-Democrat*:
This morning at an early hour, after nearly the entire night spent in negotiations, the differences between the employers and the striking employes {sic} were practically settled.
The basis of settlement is that the strike is to be called off. Questions as to wages and hours of work are to be arbitrated. The employers are to take back old employes as far as possible without displacing new men whom it is desired to retain. All dealings are to be directly between employers and employes and applicants for employment.
The entire community is to be congratulated on the happy result.
- November 12, 1892 *The Times-Democrat*:
A Satisfactory Arbitration of the Wages and Hours of the Triple Alliance
- These headlines seem to contradict the “failure” narrative that showed up later.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4232306> Cook, Bernard A. “The Typographical Union and the New Orleans General Strike of 1892.” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1983 (Autumn 1983), pp. 377–388.

- The Local 17 of the International Typographical Union voted to join the General Strike, despite having no-strike clauses in their contracts. They even joined the strike against the advice of national leadership. There was also a minority faction within the union who opposed sympathy strikes, favoring a more narrow scope of organizing within the confines of, and in the interests of, the trade.
- On a November 1, 1892 meeting, the printers said the issue wasn’t “one of mere matter of hours and wages, but one of recognition of Unionism.”
- At a November 6 1892 meeting, the point was reiterated by the local’s secretary, Isaac Hinton: “The merchants still obstinately refuse to recognize any committee or committees emanating from any union. They are willing to confer with working men singly or in any number, provided they eskew [sic] unionism. The question then, is simply this: Shall unionism be sustained in New Orleans?”
- From the conclusion: *The division within New Orleans’ Typographical Local 17 concerning the general strike has more than just local or momentary significance. At odds here were two conflicting visions of the labor movement, one narrow and restrictive, with workers combining to advance their limited interests within the context of their exclusive*

craft, the other general and expansive, which viewed the labor movement as a whole. This expansive view, however, in which workers saw their advancement occurring within the context of the advancement of the whole working class, a vision in which an injury to one was regarded as an injury to all, in general gave way in the country as a whole, as it did in New Orleans in the wake of 1892, to a more "pragmatic" vision of the labor movement.