

Opinion Exchange

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LABOR THEN AND NOW

90 years after the Minneapolis Teamsters' strikes

Peter Racheleff

It's a great time to look back at 1934, to learn how a wide range of workers changed the course of history and to consider how today's workers might change this course themselves.

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' strikes. These strikes changed the course of history and the lives of tens of thousands of working people. They transformed Minneapolis from one of the country's most notorious anti-union citadels into a "union town" and inspired labor organization from Fargo to Omaha and Duluth to St. Louis. The story of this transformation still resonates with the challenges faced by working women and men in 2024.

In the late 19th century a vibrant and diverse labor movement surged across the state of Minnesota. Its ranks included native-born and immigrant workers employed as flour millers and barrelmakers, railroad engineers, firemen, brakemen and track workers, garment workers and laundresses, horse and wagon drivers, building trades craftsmen, longshoremen and stevedores, skilled machinists and shop workers. They were affiliated with the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, the railroad brotherhoods, the Teamsters and the American Railway Union, and they created cooperatives, mutual benefit societies and a broad-based movement for the eight-hour day. These workers participated in the Great Northern Railroad and Pullman strikes of 1894 and built political alliances with farmers. In the early 20th century, many of them took part in the creation of the Industrial Workers of the World and the Socialist Party, and they challenged some of the biggest businessmen in the U.S., including James J. Hill, Andrew Carnegie and Charles Pillsbury.

But bankers, businessmen and their political representatives launched a powerful counteroffensive to regain control of their workplaces and secure their domination of the city and the state. The core of their strategy was to eliminate unions through a double-blacklist (a refusal to hire union members and a refusal to extend loans to employers who bargained with unions). They created a new organization with a slippery rhetorical name — the "Citizens' Alliance" — not only to implement their strategy but also to spin it as a defense of individual independence. Their effectiveness won them the accolades of the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Civic Federation, Chambers of Commerce

and employers' organizations across the country. Minneapolis became an icon of non-unionism.

The Citizens' Alliance's success was devastating not just for unions but also for working men and women. Over the course of the 1910s and 1920s, workers were disciplined, fired and blacklisted at the whim of employers. Although productivity rose with the introduction of new modes of work organization and new technologies, wages lagged. Workers struggled to support their families and find economic security. And when workers organized to challenge the Citizens' Alliance, such as the St. Paul streetcar workers' strike of 1917 or the election of Socialist trade unionist Thomas Van Lear to the mayoralty of Minneapolis in that same year, businessmen trumpeted the ideology of wartime "loyalty" and leveraged state government to provide resources, such as the Public Safety Commission, to limit workers' gains. The reign of the Citizens' Alliance seemed untouchable, despite the establishment of the Farmer Labor Party in 1924, the crash of the national economy in 1929, the election of Floyd B. Olson as governor in 1930 and the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932.

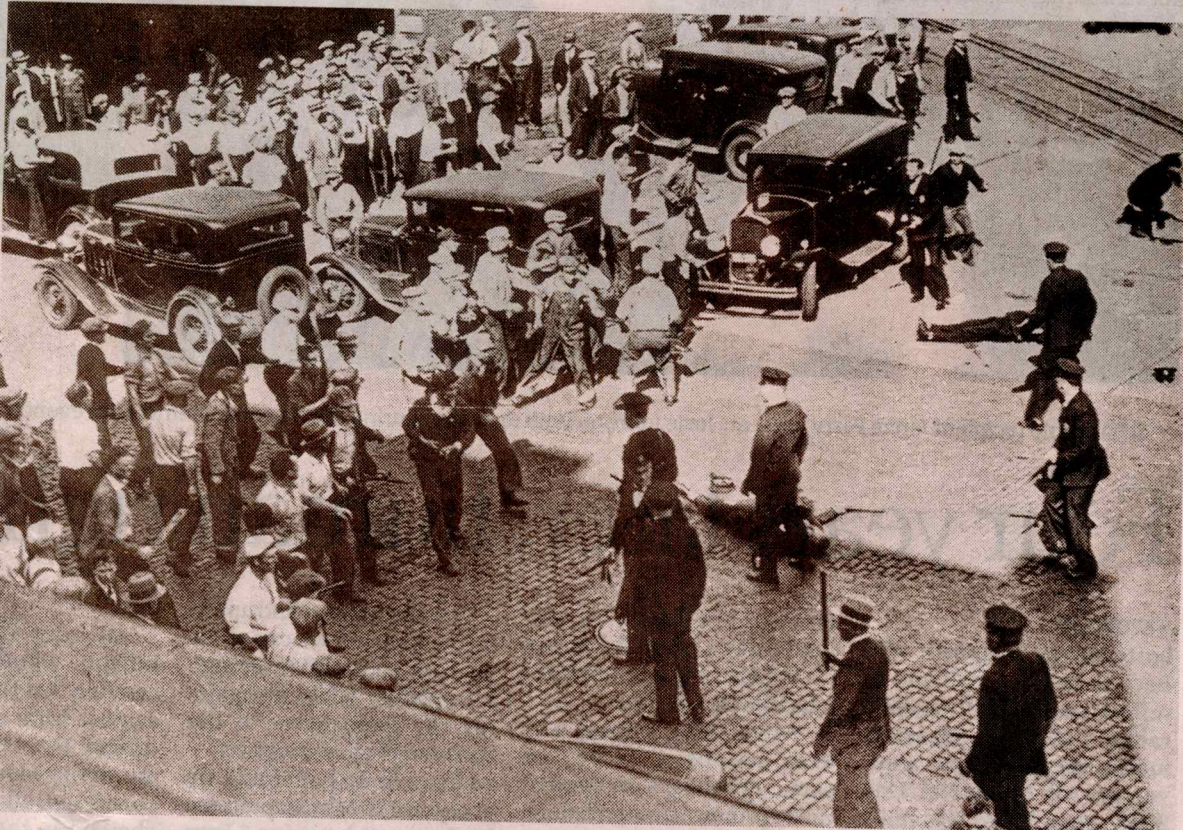
Then in the winter of 1934, a small group of experienced, dedicated labor activists began to change the course of history. Several of them had been working in the city's coal yards, earning miserable wages for handling and delivering the coal that Minneapolitans used to heat their homes, apartments and businesses. Members of the 75-member Teamsters Local 574, they initiated a strike on Feb. 7 that spread within three hours to 65 of the city's 67 coal yards. They organized "inside" (warehouse and coal yards) and "outside" (drivers and helpers) workers together in an

industrial strategy, and they ignored both the New Deal's weak labor board system and the cautious advice of the Teamsters' national leadership. They relied on cruising pickets that shut the entire industry in the midst of a cold snap. Two days later, the coal employers offered the union a settlement, and the strike ended. An estimated 3,000 trucking and warehouse workers signed up to join Local 574. The inspiration was spreading.

In May, Local 574 called a larger strike, all across the city's market district. Again, they linked inside and outside workers, ignored the weak mechanisms of the government labor board, and relied on cruising pickets. Activists built an impressive infrastructure — a rented garage as a strike headquarters from which mobile pickets could be dispatched; a soup kitchen and an infirmary, fully staffed by volunteers, many from the newly organized women's auxiliary; a "committee of 100," mostly stewards from individual shops and warehouses, to make key decisions for the union; a committee of the unemployed, not only to prevent strike-breaking but also to advocate for those without jobs; a network of farmers to bring food for strikers and their families. They also secured the support of other unions and the Central Labor Council. The strike, which lasted 10 days, revolved around control of the streets. Despite police violence, the roving pickets were effective, and on May 25, employers offered an agreement, which the union accepted.

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by
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5/25-26/2024

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Police and strikers battle in the Farmers Market district in Minneapolis during the truckers' strike in 1934.

Star Tribune

The ink had hardly dried on the agreement, however, when employers began to violate its terms. More than 700 complaints of discrimination were logged in June and early July. On July 17, Local 574 renewed its strike. This time, there were more than 10,000 participants, while 35,000 other workers engaged in a sympathy strike. The union mobilized its resources, adding a new weapon, a daily strike bulletin (the first ever in the U.S.) which they called "The Organizer." Once again, control over the streets was central to the effectiveness of the strike and, this time, there was more violence, even deaths on both sides. One hundred thousand union members and sympathizers took part in a funeral procession for striker Henry Ness. The dispatch of the National Guard and the arrests and imprisonment of many union leaders could not bring the strike to an end. With pressure exerted by Roosevelt through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Citizens' Alliance finally yielded on Aug. 21, and employers were ordered to hold union elections, almost all of which ended in victories for Local 574 and the negotiation of collective bargaining contracts. This broke the more than two decades' reign of the Citizens' Alliance.

Here begins the story of Minneapolis' transformation into a "union

town." Some 10,000 truck drivers, helpers, warehouse workers, coal heavers and other unskilled workers not only won substantial raises, but also got seniority provisions and a grievance procedure, both of which held a promise of justice in the workplace itself. Their defeat of the Citizens' Alliance and their success inspired other workers in Minneapolis and St. Paul, across Minnesota and the Midwest, that they, too, could organize and improve their work lives. Rank-and-file teamsters' participation in the strikes and their continuing participation in the life of the union gave them a new awareness of their class position, in contrast with employers and in solidarity with other workers. Their experiences also fueled their sense of their own capacity and power. They shared their new consciousness with their family members, their neighbors and other workers. They also embodied it in expressions of solidarity, from support for the women workers in the Strutwear Knitting strike a year later to the building of an interstate network of trucking workers, and the unionization of packinghouse workers, timber workers, iron miners and steelworkers from Lake Superior to the Iowa border and more. Minneapolis had become a "union town" and workers' activism there was becoming a rising tide to lift all boats.

This situation persisted for half a century, for two generations. It became normal for workers throughout the Midwestern economy to earn a living wage, to enjoy health care benefits, vacations and pensions, to gain access to easier assignments as their seniority grew, and to expect a safe workplace and to be treated respectfully on the job. This was especially true in unionized workplaces, but non-union employers felt pressure to provide similar conditions, as did all levels of government. It was not a labor paradise; workers still worked hard and often felt they deserved a larger share of the wealth they created. But many were able to buy cars and homes, send their children to college and expect to enjoy their retirement years.

This changed abruptly in the 1980s and 1990s. Employers closed plants and exported manufacturing jobs abroad. They reorganized work through outsourcing and subcontracting. They chipped away at benefits, then wages, then unionization itself. While legislatures and judges weakened workers' rights to picket, employers threatened those who still dared to strike with permanent replacement. The unionized cohort of the working class no longer enjoyed economic security, their ability to improve their own conditions was greatly diminished and,

increasingly, their role as trendsetters for all workers faded. By the turn of the 21st century, Minneapolis could no longer be called a "union town." For that matter, neither could St. Paul or anywhere else in Minnesota and the Midwest.

But workers' situations have not simply deteriorated; they have changed. Immigrants play an increased role in the economy and are more vocal, visible and significant in the labor movement. Public employees, white-collar workers, retail, service and fast-food workers have come to the fore. Teachers and educational assistants, and health care workers, from doctors and nurses to personal care assistants, see that unionization enables them to provide the care that brought them into their occupations in the first place. Members of Generation Z, struggling for economic security since the recession of 2008-10, are bringing new energy into the labor movement. We are living in exciting times.

This year is a great time to look back at 1934, to learn how a wide range of workers changed the course of history, and to consider how today's workers might change this course themselves. A diverse group of activists, some of them descendants of the 1934 strikers, are organizing a series of events — an art exhibit, a picnic, film screenings and panel discussions — to curate a series of conversations between the past and the present. Join us! Please see rem34.ampmpls.com for details of activities.

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