

seattle's crisis

1914-1919

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What I plan to do in this essay is not unique in manner or method in studies of the culture of American cities, but has not been done often, and it certainly has never been done about Seattle. Like most cities, Seattle has been studied extensively, mostly by local journalists and by students in one or another of the social sciences. The strengths and weaknesses of work done by such people are well enough known to need no rehearsing here. Although in writing what follows I have drawn extensively from the work these people have done, my aims and methods are generally quite different from theirs. I want to try to "read" a city during one of its critical periods. The criteria one uses to define a "critical period" are not easily described or analyzed; the methods one uses to "read" a city are not easily capable of theoretical defense. It is hard enough to know what one's data are when trying to imagine the life of any city at any point in time; it is harder still to say exactly how one decides from the available data just what is important. One has, to be sure, evidence aplenty, and a good deal of it is solid. But reading the evidence, making it make sense, letting it be itself and yet also shaping it into a "history" that makes clear what the "crisis" is—that is another story. All kinds of things are happening in a city at any given moment, and if you take one activity at a time—making and losing money, building roads and parks, responding to national or international circumstances, developing or retarding means for social mobility or economic diversity, creating or stultifying "cultural awareness"—each is not so very hard to describe. If, however, one tries to imagine all these things happening at once, and if one knows that the life of a city cannot be apprehended when all that is happening is sorted out into convenient categories, then some kind of focus must be found which does some kind of justice to at least the major separate activities and which also brings them together into some kind of unified "life." We believe this can be done with the life of a man or of a country; these are the major tasks of biographers and his-

torians. But very seldom does anyone try to tell the history of a city, even during a relatively short period, in this way.

The method involved is of necessity imperfect. One must not only identify those people or facts or events which seem the most important, but one must also recognize that the past from which these came and the future toward which they were tending can be described in a single essay only very briefly. The crisis with which I am concerned here is Seattle's experience during the war and its aftermath, the General Strike of 1919. Even to begin to try to bring these into focus is to be forced back in time to events in Seattle before the war and out in space to the national and international scene. Of necessity everything begins to connect with everything else: the war with prohibition; prohibition with labor and labor unions; labor unions with radicalism; and all these with local circumstances which make the general experience of the country unique in each of its provincial manifestations.

To try to weave all these together into a coherent account means that no one element in the story can be handled as it might be if one were considering it alone. The biographer of Woodrow Wilson, the historian of American labor, the experience of various Seattle newspapers, the memory of Anna Louise Strong—all these must be drawn from and made part of the story even as one recognizes that one is thereby not doing full justice to any one. The potential rewards, however, for the historian of a city are very great, if he sees his task well. Instead of seeing everything primarily in relation to itself, one can begin to see, by relating various things within a city, a good deal about each individual item that might otherwise be missed. The war did not happen separately from prohibition, and the I.W.W. did not happen separately from either, and all these happened in individual places. The historian of a city uses the place as his unit of consideration and tries to see how everything else fits. Thus, though no separate element is done full justice, each can begin to be seen differently from the way we saw them before the city historian began his "reading."

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It is not easy to talk about a national war in the context of a city, yet it is impossible to talk well about Seattle in 1914-1919 without reference to World War I. We have long known that this war was a European disaster perhaps unequalled in history; it is only more recently that we have seen how it was a disaster for the United States as well. It is now accepted as a fact, though only one among many, that the radicals in this country were right: "What the Spanish War began," wrote one, "the World War accomplished. America became the world's banker, and ceased to be the world's pioneer."¹ That is what happened, though it is not clear that even those most instrumental in effecting the change in America's position were aware at the time that they were doing so. Between 1914 and 1917 America was gradually and reluctantly pulled

into the war, and this gradual pulling, as opposed to a sudden and decisive entry, effected profoundly the way the people thought about themselves.

In 1914 President Wilson wanted nothing so much as to be able to concentrate on domestic and progressive politics and reform, and public opinion was generally ignorant of the warring Europeans; if Americans expressed much of an opinion about the war, it was that this country was above such things. What neither the United States nor the European countries had counted on was the effect of a vastly increased industrial capacity, developed since the Napoleonic wars, on the nature of war itself. When it began to dawn on the British and the French just how much they had committed themselves to in the way of men and munitions, they realized that they had to turn to America for money and supplies. The United States proclaimed its neutrality, and behind that policy lay a real desire to be peaceful, but neutrality did not remain possible for long. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, reflecting the public mood of the Midwest and Far West, resisted the efforts of eastern bankers to loan money to the Allies, but Bryan was out of place in Washington, where Wilson, Undersecretary Robert Lansing, Colonel House and many others were convinced that America could stay neutral while eastern businesses and banks supported the Allies. This conviction was of course unrealistic, because the moment American ships entered the war zone Germany either had to attack them with submarines or else watch herself be defeated slowly by the decisive weight of American industrial and financial might. During 1914 and 1915 neither the flow of men and munitions nor the amount of American shipping was enough to warrant direct belligerency by the Germans. But after the terrible summer campaigns of 1916 both Allied demand for more American help and staggering German losses forced the Germans to see that a United States supplying the Allies unmolested and a United States at war with Germany were sufficiently the same thing to warrant all-out submarine warfare; it seemed to them a reasonable, if desperate, remedy. When the Germans began their U-Boat attacks, Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a Declaration of War.

The trouble was that the United States could not simply argue that it was going to war because its ships were being attacked in the war zone, because to do that would raise the question of why the American ships had to be in the war zone in the first place. Instead Wilson had to argue that we were as high-minded in going to war as we had been in staying out. So we were to fight "the war to end war," which could only mean that we intended to put the Europeans in their place once and for all; we would "make the world safe for democracy," which meant that not only would we put the Europeans in their place but would dictate their political systems for them as well. In other words, in order to justify what it intended to do, the United States had to ignore a good deal of what it had done, and to distort a good many of the facts of its own and

the surrounding world. As we will see, partly for local reasons and partly because it was inevitably drawn into the national experience, Seattle was beginning to do exactly the same thing.

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During the winter of 1917, when the United States was being told to prepare itself for war (even before President Wilson, who had been re-elected because "he had kept us out of war," had his second inaugural), there were two big items in the news in Seattle: the trial of the mayor, Hiram Gill, on grounds of conspiring with a bootlegger, Logan Billingsley, and the trial of Tom Tracy, one of seventy-six Wobblies who had been charged with murder after the shoot-out known as "the Everett Massacre" the previous November. Fortunately these two trials can tell us a great deal about Seattle on the verge of war, and what happened to the local press as it handled these trials in the context of the coming war.

The most interesting of the local newspapers for our purposes is the Seattle *Star*, an afternoon Scripps tabloid that had grown in the previous ten years from the city's "third" and "class-conscious" paper (behind the staid and respectable *Post-Intelligencer* and the middle class, would-be respectable, often hysterical *Times*) to become Seattle's most popular paper; the *Star* had a circulation of about 67,000 in 1917, impressive for a paper which did not publish on Sunday in a city of about 300,000. It had grown from a sheet of six to eight pages, most of them filled with features syndicated by the Scripps chain, to something like a genuine newspaper of as many as twenty pages, with a good many of the stories written by local people. Its editorial policy was progressive in tone. It had supported all campaigns for municipal ownership of the natural monopolies, it was in favor of prohibition, it was pro-labor without being really anti-business, and it tended, as tabloids will, to encourage its readers to take sides without ever really trying to educate them. Its audience, one presumes, was primarily that segment of the working class which was becoming, or trying to become, more settled, more respectable, more oriented to the newly-popular movie houses than to the older but now disreputable saloons. Back in 1913 the *Star* had supported the Dry and reform candidate, George Cotterill, for mayor, though it did not strongly oppose Hiram Gill, who was a staunch Wet and who claimed also to be for reform. By 1917, however, after the state of Washington had voted itself first anti-saloon and then anti-drink, the *Star* was as staunchly opposed to the mayor as were the older and more respectable papers. During the winter of 1917 it moved back and forth in its banners from hooting at the mayor, whose credentials as a reforming Dry it had never quite believed, to shrieking at the people to get ready for the noble and just war that America was about to enter.

What makes the *Star* interesting is not just that it was shifting its political bearings towards super-patriotism but that it still showed some of its older and more responsible bearings now and then. Thus, though it

began on February 7 to carry **STAND BY THE PRESIDENT** across the top of its editorial page, and though on the 13th its only headline read **PREPARE**, it could still denounce legislation offered in the City Council that made flag ceremonials mandatory on all public occasions. Thus, though it could enter eagerly into the Mad Hatter logic of "War between the United States and Germany would spell peace for the world," it could report the trial of the Wobblies charged with murder during the Everett Massacre fairly well and always dispassionately. But in March, when the mayor, Gill, went on trial, it had to report that story, the Wobbly story, and the war news all at once, and it began to lose its head, apparently basing its layout on the principle "the last shall be first": the Wobbly trial was relegated to the back pages, the war news took second place, and the booze scandal trial dominated. The Gill trial was the kind of farce that is almost inevitable when a cause like Prohibition grips the people, and unfortunately the *Star* couldn't even admit it was a farce without seeming to favor mayor Gill and liquor. For a week the bootlegger, Logan Billingsley, bathed himself in confessions: he did sell booze, he had been wanted for murder back in Oklahoma though he wasn't guilty, he had bribed Gill and the Chief of Police to gain official support for his bootlegging. The *Star* reported all this gleefully, and didn't act for a minute as though Gill could get out of this one. There was even the added implication of guilt because George Vanderveer, Billingsley's lawyer and allegedly in on the conspiracy, was at that moment defending the Wobblies in the Everett trial. However, it didn't take Gill's lawyer very long to topple the whole story: Billingsley was trying to frame Gill, was trying to bribe witnesses, was giving \$1000 to the fire-eating prohibitionist minister, Rev. Mark Mathews, to open a vice campaign against Gill. It took the jury only a few hours to find Gill not guilty, and the *Star*, which had acted right up to the point of the verdict as though of course Gill was guilty, had to drop the case as though it had never happened, and switch suddenly from booze to war. Fortunately for the paper Wilson asked Congress to declare war just two days after the Gill verdict and the *Star* could begin to whoop it up: "Today, in this land of ours, there are only two classes of people. One class consists of Americans. These will stand solidly behind President Wilson. All others are TRAITORS."

On the same day, April 4, George Vanderveer was opening his defense of Tom Tracy in the Wobbly case, and all the papers almost ignored it. The *Star* was not yet so hysterical that it was going to make the same mistake here that it did with Gill; it put the story on the back pages, did not denounce all Wobblies as traitors, and remained detached whenever it did run a story on the trial in ensuing days. But that this was not only the longest criminal trial to date in King County but also one of the most exciting and most important was something none of the major papers could realize or would countenance. What even the *Star* could not hide was that the Wobblies, though clearly *not* "standing behind the Presi-

dent," were going to win, and that the sheriff of Snohomish County and his deputies, who clearly *were* "standing behind the President," had been responsible for a good deal of bloodshed, a great number of beatings and at least half a dozen deaths. The story of the Everett Massacre need not be told here; Norman Clark's history of Everett, *Mill Town* (Seattle, 1970) is the fullest account, though almost all histories of the I.W.W. include some telling of the tale. What we learn from the *Star* is that Vanderveer produced many witnesses about whom no bias could be alleged and who said that deputies on the dock in Everett had taken potshots at unarmed men who had jumped off the *Verona* after the ship had docked and the deputies had opened fire. But the *Star* felt it could not report the following, which came out as the prosecutor was trying to shake a defense witness. The prosecutor tried to get the witness to say there were cartridges and weapons aboard the *Verona* after it had left Everett and returned to Seattle. He got nowhere.

Prosecutor: Didn't you pick up anything at all from the deck?

Witness: I picked up an eye. A man's eye.²

After a number of such incidents, it was no longer surprising that Tracy and the Wobblies were quickly acquitted, and by a jury carefully picked to exclude any who felt any ideological sympathy for the I.W.W. cause.

Even after the trial was over, and "forgotten" as the Gill case had been, the *Star* still was not free to envisage a country united in its loathing of German militarism and its support of the President; the evidence that people in Seattle were divided kept cropping up. The *Star* could flatly assert that support for the war was so strong that all the soldiers the country needed could be drawn from enlistments, but when that proved palpably false it was forced to support the country's first conscription law and to shout SEDITION! when Socialists Hulet Wells and Sam Sadler were arrested for opposing the law. It could proclaim in a headline that Seattle's businessmen were all for conscripting profits as well as men, but had to admit in the ensuing story that the businessmen it interviewed were saying that of course they wanted to support the war effort but that they would strongly oppose anything so radical as an excess profits tax. The *Star* could announce that all rank-and-file working men, unlike the Wobblies and the Socialists, were solidly behind the war, but it could not avoid reporting strike after strike, in the lumber camps, in the shipyards, in the packing plants, in the offices of the telephone company. It found Wells and Sadler guilty before their trial began, but then had to report that the judge threw out three of the five charges and that the jury was hung on the other two. It could print a page of a textbook called *Im Vaterland* that was used in Seattle's schools and insist that it be withdrawn, then had to say that the school board members found little wrong with the book, though continued pressure from the *Star* did force the board to withdraw it "temporarily in the interest of preserving tran-

quility." What all these stories show is that the vestige of all that had been rather good about the *Star* kept forcing it to contradict itself.

Through the summer of 1917, the radicals had consistently been challenged and equally consistently had been able to demonstrate the folly and even the perfidy of their challengers. News of the Everett Massacre and the trial did a great deal to help the I.W.W. gather support throughout the Northwest, and it was also beginning to shift its program from agitation and reform to something more revolutionary, though the Wobblies almost never advocated anything as wild as the opposition claimed. As the country's industrial might was trying to mobilize fully, the existence of the Wobblies became more and more an outrage to the respectable. On November 15, fourteen Wobblies were arrested in a bunkhouse at Camp Lewis, just south of Tacoma; the "incriminating evidence" the *Star* said was found consisted of nothing more than "newspaper clippings, private and confidential correspondence, and extracts from radical publications." Two days later a headline ran "BARE GERMAN PLOT AT CAMP LEWIS," which of course was not true, as the story showed: "The officials here have been working for months to connect German spies with vice conditions in Seattle . . . and secret service agents have spent weeks gathering evidence to show that the I.W.W. is inspired by German capital." So there was no plot, only an effort to prove one. But all this clowning, by the government as well as the *Star*, was concealing something grimmer. On December 10 a lawyer who needed one of the Wobblies arrested at Camp Lewis in another case found his man in jail and asked him with what he had been charged. With nothing, it turned out. The men were simply being incarcerated, the German plot and the private and confidential correspondence presumably having come to about what one would have expected. The lawyer got all fourteen out on a habeas corpus writ, but it is not fun to contemplate what would have happened to the men had the lawyer not come along.

Then there was Anna Louise Strong, who became the arch-traitor for the respectable because she had deserted not only her country, but her class. She had come to Seattle with her father in 1912; he was minister of the Queen Anne Congregational Church; she was a social worker; she had a doctorate from the University of Chicago; she had written a number of books, including an expansion of her dissertation, *The Psychology of Prayer*. In 1913 the two had gone to Japan to study working conditions there; they returned to Seattle in 1915, and shortly thereafter Anna Strong ran for the School Board. Her credentials were both respectable and progressive, and she was herself young, vigorous and attractive. She won easily. But the job proved merely onerous, because if the "interests" she had dedicated herself to fighting were being served by the endless awarding of contracts for rewiring or a new playground, she had no way to find out, and the whole scale of the operations seemed too petty to matter. Slowly she found herself moving, in effect, down off old, estab-

lished, respectable Queen Anne Hill into lower downtown, the haunt of the more radical. She testified at both Wells-Sadler sedition trials. She reported the story of the Everett Massacre for the New York *Evening Post*. She sat beside Louise Olivereau, a self-confessed anarchist, while she was being tried and convicted for distributing anti-conscription literature. She wrote stories for the only radical paper in Seattle, the *Daily Call*.

Predictably, petitions began to be circulated demanding Anna Strong's recall from the School Board. "Yet at first they got so few signatures that the recall languished and almost died. A friend of mine was passing the recall headquarters on a prominent thoroughfare and was asked by a woman who had stopped to observe the placards: 'What are they recalling her for? What has she done?' . . . 'She's against the war,' said my friend. . . . 'My God, who isn't,' grunted the woman, and moved on."³ But that was only after the first Wells-Sadler trial. After she appeared in court with Louise Olivereau and after the *Im Vaterland* incident (though she had finally voted to withdraw the textbook), the petitions began filling up, and by late in 1917 enough had been collected to force an election, which would be held along with the regular municipal election in March of 1918.

Anna Strong should not have had a chance. All her old supporters, the various woman's clubs, temperance leagues, PTAs, the Municipal League, had deserted her; the three major newspapers were solidly opposed: "It is sufficient for loyal Americans to know that she is an unyielding pacifist," said the *Star*, "With connections of that kind, her place as a public official is inconsistent with American aims and purposes." The *Star*, it will be noted, was discovering what the *Seattle Times* had discovered earlier: when in doubt, use the word "American" as a bludgeon. The *Union Record* printed the names and addresses of those who had circulated petitions for Miss Strong's recall, and at a glance it looks as though the whole city was against her. But a second glance reveals that the majority of the addresses in the *Union Record* list are in what were then outlying residential areas, places where the *Star* reading, old-line working class or middle class people were moving. From First Hill, Queen Anne Hill, Capitol Hill, Washington Park, Madrona and Mt. Baker Park, from those areas closer to the center of the city where people of considerable wealth lived, there was little activity, proving (as could be proved in a number of other ways, incidentally) that the affluent had retired from all such struggles. Nor from those working class districts that still showed their working class loyalties came support for the recall. What we seem to find, then, is that the gradual movement of Anna Louise Strong to the left was most obviously an outrage to those patriotic and newly established people who could see in her an implicit threat to their recently acquired status, and these people received solid, though usually not very vocal opposition from the more securely established.

The election of 1918 is not easy to decipher, though clearly the

patriots and good citizens won by a narrower margin than was expected. For mayor the leading candidate was Ole Hanson, a simple-minded former real estate operator, and in the primary the remaining vote was fragmented, the winner being a nondescript man named James Bradford, whom labor found itself supporting without much enthusiasm. That race, and Anna Strong's recall, were the big issues. Ole Hanson saw the Way, the Truth and the Light: "My opponent is supported by every I.W.W., by every anti-government agitator, by every pro-German, and by every near-I.W.W. labor leader in the city." The *Star* saw much in this rhetorical ploy: "Treason cannot be tolerated, and if we in Seattle are truly American, it will not be. Let not seditionists and NEAR-SEDITIONISTS gain the least foothold." It was worse, it would seem, to be almost a traitor, like Anna Strong, than to be the real thing. True traitors, like Louise Olivereau, professed no loyalty to America and Americanism, and they could be easily handled by arrest and conviction. But Anna Strong professed great love and loyalty to America, she was fighting to save the country from mania, and because she had done nothing with which she could be formally charged, she was more dangerous than a confessed traitor. She could not be called a bum, or a deportable foreigner, a bomb-thrower, or a Wobbly, so the only way to suppress her was in to insist that "The Real Issue is AMERICANISM" and not truth, justice and the American way, in all of which Anna Strong believed.

Ole Hanson won easily, and by all rights Anna Louise Strong should have been repudiated, banished. "But, though no word of our side was printed for three months by any newspaper except the *Seattle Daily Call*, yet when the votes were counted, the good citizens who had expected a ten to one victory over a 'handful of traitors,' won by only two thousand votes in a total of eighty-five thousand. They actually lost the city council to the 'reds' who had intelligently prepared a whole slate, while the patriots had emotionally concentrated on the recall and the mayor. The patriots were momentarily crushed into silence; they were actually worried."⁴ Anna Strong is either misremembering or willfully embroidering the facts here, but most of what she says is true. Her side of the story could only be found in the *Call*, which never had a circulation of more than 15,000, and the good citizens obviously did expect to defeat her easily. But 85,000 is the number of registered voters in Seattle in 1918, not the number who actually voted, and the margin of her defeat was larger than she says: 27,157 for recall, and 21,824 against. Nor were the councilmen elected very red, though they were vigorously anti-establishment. Still, Anna Strong was right in believing that there were splits in the citizenry which could not be resolved by appeals to Americanism or by the fear of traitors and near-traitors. "Instead of the time honored division between the 'progressives' and the 'interests' in which the progressives won most of the offices while the interests remained unscathed

in the industries, a bitter battle ensued between 'good citizens' and the 'reds.'"⁵

What Anna Strong did not seem to realize was that she was describing a city getting deeper and deeper into trouble. What she saw as the "time honored division" between the progressives and the "interests" really had not existed in Seattle more than fifteen or twenty years earlier. Seattle had fought hard to obtain municipal ownership of its natural monopolies, and if it did not win every fight, it did gain municipal water, electric, and sewer systems that were models for their age. Between 1900 and 1915, mostly due to the impetus of the wealthy, Seattle had acquired a first rate boulevard and park system, though at that time it was one that could be enjoyed mostly by those rich enough to afford an automobile. In the same period most of the regrading of the downtown area had taken place. What had happened, however, was that the huge economic growth experienced at that time was simply too stunning for many people to realize that forces were being unleashed which should have been controlled. The wealthy began to retire to their lovely estates and roads and to let Seattle become an increasingly simple city economically. The progressives, in their turn, allowed themselves to become preoccupied with moral matters like prohibition, gambling and sexual habits, and to let the "interests" take whatever was left to be grabbed: the Great Northern Railroad came to Seattle on its own terms and the huge piers on Harbor Island were allowed to be developed privately without public control but with the help of public funds. It was the sort of division that needed only the impetus of the war to become a genuine class war, with the affluent standing idly aside, the middle class becoming pious and chauvinistic and the left becoming the repository for old-line progressives as well as the many new radicals created by the rapacity of the war machine. It was a fight in which, invariably, both sides would lose, because each was finding more ways to distrust and distort the other. On the one side, drinking or supporting Wobblies or not buying Liberty Bonds was becoming treason, while on the other buying a car and moving to the suburbs and reading the *Star* and being unwilling to strike became immoral, selling out. Seattle was simultaneously becoming more radical, and known as a radical city, *and* becoming more bourgeois, graduating its working class into the middle class: it was becoming a city where people were aware of class and status distinctions and afraid of people not "of one's own kind."

Of course it is much easier to be sympathetic to the radicals, partly because we know their stories so much better. A man who found the war useful in gaining some kind of economic security and who used that security as a means of performing all those middle class rites he had always wanted to perform, like buying a house, sending his children to good schools, living a reasonably sober and godly life: such a man stands little chance of being remembered clearly precisely because we have to imagine him; he himself is nameless and faceless. But Anna Louise Strong, and

Hulet Wells and Sam Sadler, who had a grand rabble-rousing wife Kate, and George Vanderveer who gave up his respectability to become counsel for the damned, and Thorwald Mauritzen who made the *Daily Call* a success after starting with only \$500 and hope—all these people have come down to us, gaudy and wonderful. Furthermore, in many ways the radicals' wartime critique of their city and country now seems much the best, because they were much more alert and probably more intelligent than the man who was gaining his small measure of economic security and who wanted only to enjoy it. Inevitably, as the historian of Seattle moves through the war years, he finds his sympathies increasingly moving leftward, though he must always seek to imagine and understand those who did not so move.

Luckily for the historian, careful study of the rise of radicalism in Seattle and the Northwest does reveal more than ways of being sympathetic. The movement itself was almost inevitable: some people were moving westward, restlessly and angrily, and they ended up in Seattle because it was the last frontier. Others were in nearby logging camps that did not even offer the few amenities available in grubby mill and mining towns farther east. Others were coming because Seattle had had a booming and reasonably progressive past not long before—in John Dos Passos' *The 42nd Parallel* one man urges another in a lumber camp to move west to Seattle where, he has heard, they have great free night schools. Others were coming to Seattle in some way defeated—they had tried to stump farm on logged-off land and kept seeing the wilderness return, or had tried to dry farm east of the Cascades where the soil exhausted its moisture in a year or two, or had tried to establish a Utopian colony somewhere in the isolated parts of Puget Sound—and were choosing the sharp edge of radicalism rather than the dull one of bourgeois assimilation.

The war, really, only sorted out more quickly the way people already were going. You could get a job in the shipyards in Seattle to avoid the logging camps or the draft, and you might find in the steady work and good wages only worse reminders of the wickedness of capitalism and capitalistic warfare. Or you might take the same job and find in it a means of escaping economic uncertainty and of joining the middle class. You could join a union, the better to radicalize it or the better to seek higher wages and lower hours. Both the job and the union could be proof that indeed the American system worked, and both could be seen as proof that it did not. It might seem the Wobblies were right and that the owners only offered pie in the sky bye and bye. Or it might seem that it really was the radicals who offered the pie. In any event, the war pushed everything closer to the surface, closer to a point where tensions could be resolved only in dangerous ways. The shipowners and lumber barons were in a hurry because the huge profits would not last forever, and so they were more amenable to labor's demands; the prohibitionists

were in a hurry because suddenly the whole country seemed eager to go dry; the patriots were in a hurry because soldiers were dying in France and the world had to be made safe for democracy; the Wobblies were in a hurry because their numbers were growing faster than their wildest prewar dreams and they felt they had to strike while the iron was hot; the would-be bourgeois and the wealthier arrivistes were in a hurry because such a chance might not last forever. If the historian feels more sympathy for the radicals than any other group, he must not forget that they too were caught up in something quite unreal, in that people were becoming less able genuinely to comprehend the world around them, and in something decisive, in that when Seattle emerged from this experience it would be a different place. One sympathizes with the radicals precisely because they could best understand and predict the very hysteria that was overtaking the city, but they too were its victims.

In one sense, Seattle was too young to resist. It had come to its affluence and large population all within the previous twenty years, and the habits and patterns of life were unsettled, especially compared to those in older cities farther east. But in another sense Seattle was just a little bit too old to resist. By the time war was declared there had been a stiffening of the economic joints in the previous two decades, and economic activity had become increasingly the domain of a rather small number of people who had become rich quickly and who of course began to treat the world around them as their own; their interest becomes the opposite of civic-minded. In 1880 and 1890 anything that was done to help Seattle generally would help these people, but in 1910 these people had their money and had grown indifferent to Seattle generally. By the time the war came the impulse towards economic diversity, towards municipal ownership of the natural monopolies, had faded; Seattle was too old to resist the crisis of the struggle which the war had brought sooner than would have otherwise happened.

These two perspectives—Seattle was too young, Seattle was too old—need not be resolved. The first is the more distant and long-ranged, the view that would seem natural to anyone who knows about the older cities of the world. When one begins to become aware of the centuries-long history of London or Rome or Peking, when one sees how much a city can rise and fall and recover in the course of hundreds of years, one sees no reason why Seattle, founded in 1851 and still a frontier city in many ways, should have been strong or independent enough to create its own destiny. The “interests” grabbed what they could, the city became a center of radicalism, the city could not resist the frenzy of the war—of course, says the historian of older cities and longer-lived worlds, of course. The second perspective, on the other hand, is one that can seem attractive only to the local historian because he is more aware of changes that come year by year and decade by decade. If Seattle was too young to do other than become victim to forces that were dominating cities and regions far older

than it was, nonetheless, says the local historian, it had had a good deal more power to resist such forces in 1897 or 1907 than it did in 1917. Urban populism in Seattle had been a varied and exciting experience around the turn of the century, and that populism had been both dependent upon and instrumental in creating a varied and exciting economy. But gradually the arteries were beginning to harden—the moneyed people were withdrawing, the middle-class was becoming class-conscious, the workers were beginning to see everyone else as their potential enemy, populism was splintering off into Prohibition, unionism and radicalism—so that the city, instead of being able to look to itself to find means of solving its problems and locating its opportunities, was beginning to distrust itself and hedge its bets in ways that made it a potential victim of the more pervasive blindness throughout the country caused by the war. Seen this way, Seattle was not too young but too old to resist.

In the fall of 1918 Seattle and America were besieged by rumors of armistice and of the Bolshevik revolution. Then there was the influenza epidemic, which hit Seattle especially hard—the mortality rate from the flu rose to 252 per hundred thousand. Labor was becoming restless, especially as rumors of uprisings in all the belligerent countries began to be received. The war was almost over, yet nothing had improved with the prospect of peace. On election day the people of Washington were to vote on a referendum on the 1917 bone-dry law, but the total vote was barely two-fifths of what it had been two years earlier. The Drys won, two to one, but it did not seem to matter. Thus, though the Armistice caused wild rejoicing, it brought no peace or harmony. Mostly it only signaled to the capitalists that it was time to withdraw and retrench and to the labor unions that they had better work fast to consolidate their wartime gains.

In his book on the Seattle General Strike, Robert L. Friedheim offers a careful analysis of the make-up of labor unions and conditions at the end of the war, and here only a short sketch can be offered. The war had given impetus to the Wobblies to try to revolutionize the old craft union A.F.L. system into their One Big Union, and, as we have seen, it caused many working class people to take on characteristics of the middle class. These labels are never accurate, and it must be added that many leaders of the Seattle Central Labor Council, by no means a back-sliding group, were home-owning and God-fearing, not only themselves sober but also Prohibitionist. By comparison with the Wobblies, men like Harry Ault, who edited the *Union Record*, and James Duncan, president of the Machinists and chairman of the Central Labor Council, who also taught Sunday School, seem trustworthy for what they were, but stodgy. By comparison with their A.F.L. counterparts elsewhere in the country, however, Ault and Duncan were flaming radicals. Ault's paper was the only labor paper in the country, and after the *Daily Call* folded, it was in its pages that the radicals had their only hope of gaining a hearing. Duncan twice cast the only vote in the national A.F.L. conventions against the re-elec-

tion of Samuel Gompers as president. Both Ault and Duncan agreed with the Wobblies that there should be some kind of industrial unionism, disagreeing mostly over methods.

The hope and strength of Ault, Duncan, and the other labor leaders lay in a very strong local labor organization, one that could, they thought, bring together the hundreds of smaller unions into one united front against any Seattle employer or group of employers. Their weakness, which they didn't seem to recognize fully, lay in the fact that much of their strength was a result of wartime shipbuilding. The Metal Trades Council, which was a major power in the shipyards, had been tough and successful in getting the shipbuilders to pay very high wages, and the major builder, Skinner and Eddy, was willing to go even higher than the others in order to keep a constant supply of workers. This led to complaints in the name of equity from Charles Piez of the federal Emergency Fleet Corporation, but he had been silenced by the Metal Trades Council's agreeing not to strike during wartime. At the time of the Armistice, the unions were trying to get all the builders to raise wages to the level of those paid by Skinner and Eddy. At this point they were free to strike to get what they wanted, but they were also vulnerable simply because the government and the shipbuilders could afford such a strike and indeed might even welcome it as a means of getting a lot of suddenly unwanted workers out of town.

The incident that set the almost inevitable conflict in motion involved a misdelivered telegram. Piez had wired the Seattle shipbuilders that if they gave in to union demands the government would cut off their steel allotment. He sent it to the employer group known as the Metal Trades Association but the messenger delivered it to the Metal Trades Council, and so the unions learned that though Piez had given them an apparently free hand to negotiate if they waited until after the war, he had in fact double-crossed them by blackmailing the shipbuilders. At this point endless speculations became possible, and people have gone on speculating ever since. Maybe the telegram was not misdelivered, and if it was there could be a variety of explanations as to why the shipbuilders wanted the unions to know what the government was up to. But because a good many of the conjectures are almost equally reasonable, there is little point in going into them all. Whatever had happened, on the morning of January 21, 1919, 35,000 workers struck the shipyards.

Under more normal conditions that might have been that. The shipyard-owners would make no move to negotiate because they had no reason to do so; the unions would suffer a heavy blow and would have had then to decide whether to give in. A good many business people did not care much because it seemed to them, despite wild stories about a postwar shipping boom, that shipbuilding was not a major part of Seattle's economy. But January, 1919 was not at all a normal time, even though all that the various parties expected to happen did in fact happen. The idea

of a general strike was not familiar to many people in Seattle; even the Wobblies and those who had done their Marxist homework did not know about general strikes as a means of bringing the employing class to its knees. Rather, Seattle labor leaders thought first in terms of what was called a sympathy strike, and behind that idea was the feeling that a show of force would be helpful. But the more the union leaders became convinced that the government, or the shipbuilders, or the newspapers or employers in general, had become scared of labor power in Seattle and were out to crush it, the more the idea of a general strike seemed attractive. Conversely, the more anyone tried to say just what such a strike would gain, the more people got confused or apprehensive; to lash out against a common enemy is always a better way to gain adherents than to state a series of clearly-defined goals. Thus, when David Skinner, who had been thought friendly to labor because he paid high wages, sent a wire to Charles Piez saying that most workers were against the strike and that the trouble lay with "the radical leaders whose real desire was to disrupt the whole organization of society," he provided just the kind of target that a mass movement needs to organize. Help was offered by the local and national press which kept insisting that the rank-and-file did not want to strike. However, when the largest union local in the world, the Boilermakers' 104, held a meeting, they voted unanimously in favor of the shipyard strike and thereby gave great impetus to unite all Seattle labor in a more general strike.

The Boilermakers voted on January 26. The next day a meeting was called to sound out opinion, and by the time the leaders met a number of unions, including some of the more conservative ones like the roofers, the cooks and the hotel maids, had already met and had declared themselves in favor of a general strike. Some unions of course opposed any breach of contract because it violated the very principles on which the unions had been organized, but soon these unions found themselves surrounded. At the meeting on the 27th it was agreed that if a majority of the unions voted by February 2 to have a general strike, a mass meeting would be held to decide what to do. Friedheim describes what happened next: "Even before the committees could effectively organize themselves, five more Seattle unions reported that their members had voted to strike: the Structural Iron Workers, the Newsboys, the engineers in the gas plant and the public schools, Carpenters' local 1335, and Barbers' Local 195. . . . Night after night, as locals held their meetings, votes for a general strike continued to roll in."⁶ The very names of the unions show that this was not a simple class matter decided by large numbers of factory hands. These unions had been in existence almost as long as the A.F.L. itself, and the members of the smaller unions had no obvious reason to ally themselves with the large industrial unions like the Boilermakers, to say nothing of the I.W.W. After the Carpenters and the Barbers came the Jewelers, the Housepainters, the Auto Truck Drivers and the smaller

draymen unions. By the 29th only the Gas Workers and the Federal Employees were opposed. This does not mean that every member of every union supported the general strike, but it is amazing that of 101 unions in Seattle the majority of all but two were in favor.

Anna Louise Strong's account of the next few days is not the fullest, but it is the best:

The General Strike Committee, composed of more than three hundred delegates from one hundred and ten unions, met all day Sunday, February 2, 1919. They faced and disregarded the national officers of craft unions, who were telegraphing orders from the East. They met the threats of the Seattle Health Department to jail drivers of garbage wagons if garbage was not removed, by agreeing to permit the collection of "wet garbage only" on special permit under the strikers' control. They rejected as strike slogan the motto "We have nothing to lose but our chains and a whole world to gain" in favor of "Together We Win." For they reasoned that they had a great deal to lose—jobs at good wages with which they were buying silk shirts, pianos and homes. They wanted solidarity but not class war. Then so little did they realize the problems before them that they fixed the strike for the following Thursday at 10 A.M. and adjourned to meet on Thursday evening after the strike should have started, meantime referring any new problems that might arise to a rather hastily elected "Committee of Fifteen."⁷

Anna Strong's jibe at the lunchpail unions with their pianos and pink shirts is a nice if perhaps unfair touch, but her sense of the naivete of the whole venture is what is most pointed and appealing, because she does not seek to exclude herself from the group. She was a middle class aristocrat, a theoretician and enthusiast, not a worker, but she genuinely sought no more than to give a voice to the workers.

One reason Anna Strong is so wonderful is that she really tried to say, both then and later, what it was the workers were doing. Two days before the strike, she wrote in an editorial for the *Union Record*: "We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by labor in this country, a move that will lead—No One Knows Where! We do not need hysteria! We need the iron march of labor!"⁸ She saw even then that any attempt to say where the whole thing was going could only lead to the loss of this or that element among the workers. Then, looking back, she says: "Later, when I was arrested, this editorial was one of the counts against me. Its very vagueness saved me. 'No one knows where'—the prosecution claimed this threatened anarchy. The defense retorted that it merely admitted the fact that the future is unknown. Neither gave the real essence of those words. They appealed to the faith of the pioneer in inevitable progress; they stirred the passion of the march to the undiscovered West. Yet they carefully evaded battle."⁹ The idea of an undiscovered West in 1919 seems preposterous until one remembers that fifty

years later people are still coming to Seattle for reasons not unlike those Anna Strong mentions. In the same way the slogans "No One Knows Where" and "Together We Win," precisely because they do appeal to something like "the faith of the pioneer in inevitable progress," need to be taken seriously in any assessment of what was really happening. As politics such slogans are shams, but it is important to see the strike as more than politics, just as it is important to see the idea of the 1919 undiscovered West as not being preposterous.

It happened. At 10 A.M. Thursday, February 6, the city stopped. Foodlines were set up, and essential services were performed, all at the direction of the Committee of Fifteen. But nothing else, and the silence that resulted apparently surprised a great many people. Workers had been urged to stay home, so they did. The streets were left to children and dogs, and even they found little to do because everything else was silent. As an initial show of peaceful force the strike could not have been more successful. But that was as far as anyone had planned. The Wobblies had said that after the strike proved successful the working men would somehow just assume control of the city's manufacture and services. Others felt that an initial show of strength was enough. Most of the workers seem not have known what they wanted or expected. Certainly the Committee of Fifteen, with the power of the city in its hands, did not plan, and the *Union Record* said almost nothing about the future.

As a result, when the other side moved, the strikers could do little except say that they would or would not cooperate. Mayor Ole Hanson slowly began to see he could make his name as a patriotic strike-buster. The rest of the country seemed alarmed; Anna Louise Strong's editorial was interpreted by the good citizens of the city and country as a revolutionary document, and if it was, and if the strikers were revolutionaries, then they had to be crushed, not talked to. The National Guard was ordered out, and Hanson claimed immediately that that had stemmed the revolutionary tide. He then threatened to declare martial law. The labor leaders told him all these moves were fraudulent, designed only to misrepresent the situation to outsiders. They pointed out that the number of arrests in Seattle on the first two days of the strike had dropped to two-thirds the normal level. But Hanson was clearly under pressure to do something, so he ignored such facts and sent a formal notice on the evening of Friday, the 7th, to the Committee of Fifteen: "I hereby notify you that unless the sympathy strike is called off by 8 o'clock tomorrow morning, February 8, 1919, I will take advantage of the protection offered this city by the national government and operate all the essential services." This notice probably secured Hanson the support of business people in Seattle and of good citizens everywhere, but labor's response was defiant. No matter how anxious many union men were to get back and to see if their jobs were still there, they weren't going to be ordered back.

On Saturday afternoon the Committee of Fifteen offered the 300-man

General Strike Committee a resolution declaring the strike a success and asking the men to go back to work as of Saturday midnight, but the moment the leaders began consulting the rank and file they encountered opposition to the resolution, and no one went back to work that night. But this was to be the last show of strength. No one worked Sunday anyway, and by Monday cracks were showing in the solid front of labor, enough so that the Committee of Fifteen knew that continuing the strike could only serve to create factions within the labor movement. On Monday the Committee urged everyone to stay off the job until Tuesday, and to go back to work then. Those at work already on Monday stayed on the job, but everyone did go back on Tuesday. The strike was over.

Many people at the time had to see the strike as a failure, and Robert Friedheim, in writing the only full treatment of the strike thirty-five years later, agreed with them. The men had gained nothing, and Ole Hanson made the rounds of the lecture circuit as an expert in crushing Reds. Anna Louise Strong wrote: "Shall one blame the yellow leaders who sabotaged the strike and wished to end it? Such a charge is easy to make—and true. But it is more to the point to ask why it happened that as soon as any worker was made a leader he wanted to end that strike. . . . The strike could produce no leaders willing to keep it going. All of us were red in the ranks and yellow as leaders. For we lacked all intention of real battle; we expected to drift into power. We loved the emotion of a better world coming, but all of our leaders and not a few of the rank and file had much to lose in the old world."¹⁰ Anna Strong was never a great writer, but she had a rightness of instinct that makes her testimony invaluable.

I have said earlier that as political slogans "Together We Win" and "No One Knows Where" were shams, as Ole Hanson proved rather quickly; after all, had they not been, had the strikers really known what they wanted to win, it would have been Hanson's bluff that would have been called. But it is not simply as politics that the slogans or the strike must be seen. When Anna Strong says the strikers were red in the ranks and yellow as leaders, she is reminding us that men like James Duncan and Harry Ault did not feel dispossessed and in need of revolution. They had a stake both in their labor movement, and, equally important, in Seattle. Seattle was not only where they had come to power, not only where they had seen labor become stronger than anywhere else in the country, but where they lived, their home. That did not abate their rage against the interests of Hanson or David Skinner, but it shaped their vision of what they had, and therefore of what they might lose. Ault, Duncan, Anna Louise Strong and all the others had gained their power during the unusual conditions of the war. Ault had worked for years to edit a labor daily, and he had gained his dream because the war had given him the possibility of a large circulation and of business people having to come to his paper to advertise. A revolution could have cost

Ault everything he had gained, and as a result he was cautious. The war had produced, for the working man, visible villains in the form of employers making huge profits, and it had given him a way of dealing with those villains and of appearing to beat them. But the more the working man won, the more he could lose, the more Seattle was where he had settled, the more cautious he became as a leader. As I have said earlier, Seattle was becoming during the period both more radical and more bourgeois, and nothing shows this more than the success and failure of the General Strike.

For success it was. The strikers were wonderful: practical, decent, idealistic, scrupulously democratic, able to take the energies of a great variety of people and, for a moment at least, to harmonize them. In that moment the self-seeking that a fragmented craft union system builds into itself, the anger and disillusion that were the war's major results, the natural pettiness of human beings, all were abrogated. But by its very nature it was a local success, and for that reason it was quickly over, because by its localness it expressed the tie of many people to their place. As Friedheim puts it: "The strike had been a failure, and they all knew it. In the days ahead they were to learn that it was worse than a failure—it was a disaster."¹¹ To say this, however, implies that the strike might have been a different kind of success from the success it was and that the subsequent fragmentation of the labor movement would not have happened had the strike not happened. Both implications are false. The war gave the radicals and the labor movement false hopes just as it was giving many of them homes in Seattle. Anna Louise Strong says that the heyday of the Central Labor Council was in the period when people coming in from elsewhere made great speeches. But the longer those speakers stayed the less revolutionary they became, and when the wartime boom was over they also became less powerful.

It must be remembered, too, that it was not only the war that had led labor to believe that this city was a place whose continued growth was assured. In the decade before the war Seattle was booming, though it is easy to see now that it was a boom based more on earlier economic diversity and stability than on anything happening during that decade to insure further growth. Money was becoming more concentrated, and as it did it became more cautious, more content in collecting the blue chips that could be extracted from lumber and the railroads. The economy of Seattle was in much worse shape in 1914 than could have been seen at the time by any but the most perceptive, and when, on top of that, the war gave the area another huge boost, laboring people were misled into thinking that Seattle had unlimited possibilities for everyone.

So the General Strike really is a demonstration of the kind of hold the past can have on people. Even the Wobblies took the wild wartime demands for productivity as a sign that the workers were coming into their own. But even as the war was going on the I.W.W. was being decimated

by the execution or conviction of its greatest leaders, and the movement was not great enough to be able to afford such losses. Labor generally had to begin to find out all over again what its resources were, and in the ensuing years it was forced to learn that what Seattle's crisis had obscured was that the prewar and wartime booms were not creating conditions for further growth. In many ways the depression began here not in 1929, but in 1919.

In that year one famous man visited Seattle, and another who had not yet achieved fame returned to Seattle after having done a hitch in the Navy. The visitor was Woodrow Wilson, making his whirlwind tour of the country in an effort to gain mass support for the League of Nations, coming to Seattle not long before he was paralyzed by a stroke on the train between Pueblo and Wichita. John Dos Passos gives a small picture of Wilson's reception in Seattle: "In Seattle the wobblies whose leaders were in jail, in Seattle the wobblies whose leaders had been lynched, who'd been shot down like dogs, in Seattle the wobblies lined four blocks as Wilson passed, stood silent with their arms folded, staring at the great liberal as he was hurried past in his car, huddled in his overcoat, haggard with fatigue, one side of his face twitching. The men in overalls, the workingstiffs let him pass in silence after all the other blocks of hand-clapping and patriotic cheers."¹² Resolute, righteous, in most respects right, faces turned to the past, the Wobblies died, crushed as much by peace as by war. That was one Seattle in 1919.

The other was the Seattle seen by Dave Beck when he came home from the Navy, and he saw anarchy, idealism, disillusion: "Beck thought the strike had been wrong, criminally wrong; it had been impetuous, it had been pointless; it brought disrepute to Labor and had won nothing. He was disgusted with the idealists who had dreamed it up. He would no longer answer when the Wobblies greeted him as a 'fellow worker.'¹³ Resolute, righteous, in some respects right, face turned to the future, Dave Beck went back to driving truck, soliciting business for his boss, organizing the laundry teamsters. That was another Seattle in 1919, a city cut smaller, defeated, grim, unaware of what had happened and so of where to go, ready for the ministrations of Dave Beck.

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footnotes

1. Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds* (New York, 1935), 47.
2. Lowell Hawley and Ralph Potts, *Counsel for the Damned* (Philadelphia, 1953), 205.
3. Strong, *I Change Worlds*, 63.
4. *Ibid.*, 66.
5. *Ibid.*, 65.
6. Robert L. Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike* (Seattle, 1964), 86-87.
7. Strong, *I Change Worlds*, 75-76.
8. *Ibid.*, 79.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 81-82.
11. Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike*, 146.
12. John Dos Passos, *1919* (New York, 1932), 249-250.
13. Murray Morgan, *Skid Road* (New York, 1951), 223.