

It was a bad year for strikes. Thousands of workers took part in illegal strikes, and governments across the country threatened them with fines and jail sentences. Business complained bitterly about the impact on competition and profits, and leading newspapers across the country agreed. Their editorials insisted that "strike leaders have allowed the intoxication of power to go to their heads" and that "strikes by government officials and the employees of municipal authorities should be prohibited by law."

A prominent government representative declared bluntly about one strike, "There is absolutely no reason that hardship should be imposed upon the whole community, just because three employers and their employees were unable to agree."

I'm talking about 1919. It was the year of the Winnipeg General Strike, and we lost more time to strikes and lockouts that year than any other in Canadian history.

- Mark Leier, *National Post*, 6 September [Labour Day] 1999



J.S. Woodsworth

J.S. Woodsworth was a pacifist* and minister who had been involved in missionary work in the North End of Winnipeg. He was aware of the poverty and injustice that existed in many cities of Canada at that time, especially among immigrants who worked in industries and factories under extremely poor conditions.

Woodsworth became involved in the Winnipeg General Strike and, on June 12th, 1919, he wrote the following:

The general public has not been innocent. It has been guilty of the greatest sin: the sin of indifference. Thousands have suffered through the years under the industrial system. The general public have not realized. It did not touch them. They blamed the strikers. Why not blame the employers, whose arrogant determination has provoked the strike? Why not, rather, quit the unprofitable business of trying to place the blame and attempt to discover and remove causes that have produced the strike.

On June 21st, when groups of strikers overturned and burned a streetcar, the RCMP charged down Portage Avenue, and military troops cleared the streets with baseball bats. They killed one striker and injured many. People called it "Bloody Saturday." Woodsworth called this action "Kaiserism" [referring to the military rule and dictatorship in Germany], and reported: **Strike Unbroken**. He was arrested, and then released with charges that would never be heard. He continued to work actively and successfully for social justice and change in Canada.

*Pacifist: Someone opposed to war and violence.

