

# General Strike

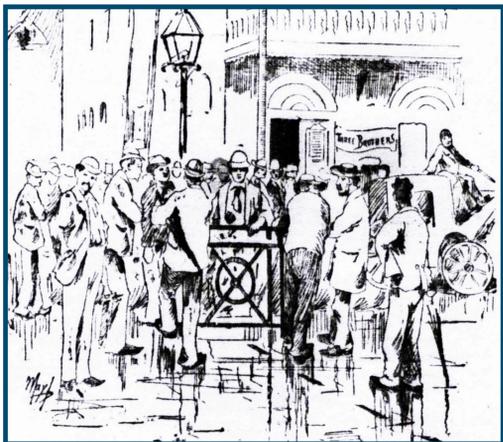
# 1892

**1880s' New Orleans was a bustling port with a city behind it; the docks employed roughly 13,000 men in a mix of skilled and unskilled labor that underpinned the entire local economy.**

Dockworkers had been a fragmented and racially divided workforce through the 1870s' economic depression, but by the end of that decade a wave of union organizing had emerged. A series of successful strikes during 1880 led the unions to organize an inclusive coordinating body, the Cotton Men's Executive Council.

The next year the Council orchestrated the first strike of unionized dockworkers in New Orleans. At a rally during the strike, police officers fired wildly into a crowd on the levee, killing a black union teamster. The working-class riverfront neighborhoods rose up against the police, prompting Mayor Joseph Shakspeare to call on the governor to put the militia on alert and employers to sit down to negotiations. By 1886, the Council had boycotted firms that employed non-union men at wages below union scale, and successfully struck for enforcement of a 50/50 racial split in hiring and greater control over working conditions.

In May 1892, New Orleans' streetcar drivers struck, winning a shorter workday and critically, a contract that guaranteed a closed shop, an arrangement in which union membership is a prerequisite for employment. The American Federation of Labor, eager to build on this success, launched an organizing campaign that would charter thirty new unions in the city in less than six months. In October, the Triple Alliance of the Teamsters, Scalesmen and Packers unions went out on strike, their demands centered on gaining a closed shop, though a ten-hour workday and overtime pay were secondary stipulations.



Drawing of the General Strike Headquarters: Three Brothers' Saloon.  
Source: New Orleans Historical

The New Orleans Board of Trade, in a cynical effort to split the Alliance, offered contracts to the all-white Scalesmen and Packers unions, but refused to negotiate with the interracial Teamsters. The tactic failed, as the scalesmen and packers voted for solidarity and the Workingmen's Amalgamated Council called for a general strike. For four days beginning November 8, all forty-two American Federation of Labor locals in New Orleans, along with sixteen independent locals, struck. The scale of the strike was debilitating for a city built on trade, as over 25,000 union members and their families stayed home or took to the streets. Streetcars and food deliveries ceased, electricity and gas utilities shut down, and New Orleans ground to a halt as everyone from newspaper typesetters to musicians joined the strikers.

## Sources

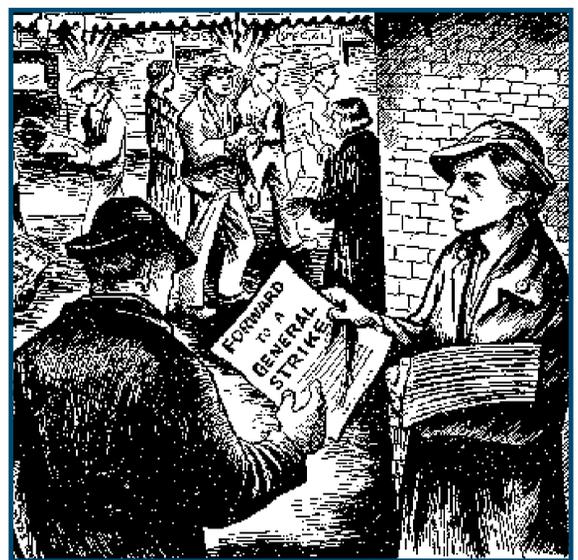
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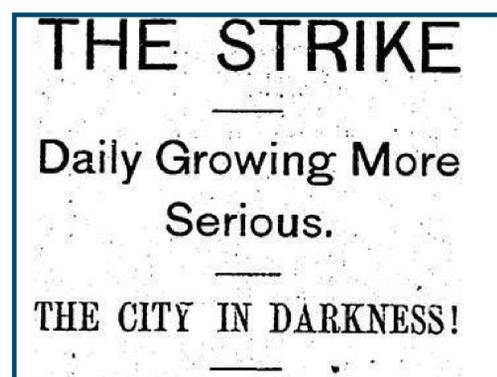
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In response to pressure from the business community and press, Mayor Fitzpatrick declared martial law, but refused to offer police to protect scabs. Frustrated, the Board of Trade appealed to Governor Murphy Foster to send in the state militia, pointing to inflammatory and virulently racist coverage in the New Orleans press. Arriving on November 10, and finding New Orleans exceptionally quiet, the state militia withdrew the next day. On November 12, the Board of Trade agreed to the Alliance's demands for a ten-hour day, overtime pay and adjusted wage scales, but the Board won an open shop and the right for employers to deal with employees as individuals, hiring and firing at will, a right they promptly exercised by blacklisting strike leaders and activists.



Drawing of organizers leafletting for the General Strike.  
Source: Today in Labor History

The general strike left a conflicted legacy; it established New Orleans as "one of the best organized cities in the south" but that status was short lived as the panic of 1893 and ensuing depression undermined organized labor while riots in 1894-95 shattered interracial cooperation. The strike also prompted the first application of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act against labor; forty-four union leaders were indicted for conspiracy to restrain trade. Ultimately, it set the stage for victory of the less militant of competing visions for a labor movement, favoring bread and butter wage gains as opposed to the advancement of the working class as a whole.



Newspaper clipping from November 11, 1892, announcing the General Strike. Source: The Advocate.