

The Origins of the Seattle General Strike of 1919

The Timber Beast

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Seattle in 1919 was an island in a still immeasurable sea of timber. The Pacific coastal forests were estimated to contain nearly two-thirds of the timber in the country, and the Washington State forests accounted for the largest part of these. Washington had the greatest concentration of softwood trees in the world.¹

Forests blanketed the lower slopes of the Cascades, the southern and western sides of the Olympic Mountains, and the uplands in the southwestern corner of the state. On the coast itself, moss-laden cedars anchored the earth's last-standing temperate rain forests. The region's prevailing northwesterly winds swept in from the Pacific to meet first the coastal ranges, then the Cascades. Together they wrung rain from moisture-laden air down upon a unique region. This is the wettest area of the country, and the great conifer forests thrived in it. The climate's year-round precipitation, including during the summer's warm months, coastal fog, and cloudy skies favored the conifers. Their ability to withstand late-summer drought and occasional winter freezes gave them an advantage over deciduous trees.

Western Washington's forests were, and are still, dominated by Douglas firs. Commercially, they are the most valuable. These massive trees could reach a height of 380 feet and a girth of 16 feet. They were just one of a dozen giant conifers in the lush, ancient forests of Sitka spruce, western hemlock, western red cedar, and yews that might contain thousand-year-old trees. Thirteen species surpassed heights of two hundred feet. Cool summers, the dense canopy of the forest, and limited undergrowth created gardens of ferns and flowers. There was an abundance of wildlife – deer, Roosevelt elk, black bear, wolves, plus countless smaller

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creatures and dozens of species of birds. This ecosystem was sustained in part by the massive salmon runs. Salmon fed the animals, fertilized the land, and was the lifeblood of the indigenous peoples.

The people – Makah, Suquamish, Puyallup – coexisted with the forest. They did not live in it; it was too dense to encourage everyday travel. Instead, they lived in permanent villages along the shore, often where rivers met the Sound or the sea. They carved cedar logs into canoes and totem poles. They split cedar for the planks of their longhouses. Women pounded cedar bark into rope, mats, baskets, and garments. These people led rich lives; there were few places where life was as easy, encouraging extensive arts and crafts, and allowing for ceremonies and celebrations. The rivers teemed with fish and the tidelands were a cornucopia of sustenance. The people did, however, collect berries and herbs in the forests. They hunted there and sometimes sought solitude for reflection and prayer. There might be clearings, but it was limited. They were not farmers.

When the white settlers came there to farm, they encountered obstacles. Clearing, the first necessity, was a challenge. The great trees had to be felled, which was difficult enough and left behind massive stumps, nearly impossible to remove. The soil itself was thin; what there was, was sandy, gravelly, and acidic. Cultivators made instead for the Willamette Valley in Oregon or sought out river bottoms, though these were relatively few, and the limited flatland in the region often lay beneath steep mountain slopes in narrow valleys always subject to seasonal flooding.

In the 1880s, the new railroads brought many thousands to the Washington Territory, but the majority were not seeking farms. Rather, they sought work, finding it for better or worse in the burgeoning extractive industries. They became miners, fieldhands, and, above all, loggers, the men who would strip first the shores of the Sound, then the river valleys, and finally the foothills of the great mountain ranges – the Cascades and the Olympics – of their ancient forests. The West was transformed by settlers: the farmers and the pre-proletariats. They were, however, just the hired hands of others, the eastern, often European financiers who orchestrated the invasion of telegraph lines and railroads, tools of choice in the scramble for the riches of the West. They tied this new economy to an expanding global market, thereby linking it also to crises, competition, and global booms and busts, and making it dependent on the government.

Timber was at the center of this economy, but it was years before the railroads became the prime shippers of it. Rough timber first left on coastal schooners, often those leaving from Seattle's deepwater, sheltered Elliott Bay. The railroads revolutionized transportation. They also cleared a path for speculators, land agents, bankers – men seeking

wealth, by fair means or foul. They came from the banks and offices in New York, Boston, and St. Paul, and included the point men for the greatest "Interests" of the era: the railroad men, James J. Hill and Edward Harriman; the banker J. P. Morgan; the world's richest man, John D. Rockefeller; and the lumber baron Frederick Weyerhaeuser. In 1900, two out of three workers in Washington State toiled in its woods, in the lands of the Lumber Trust. The Trust, according to Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer James Rowan, was "the ruling power, [which controls] not only the industry, but the local, and sometimes the State machinery of government, with its powerful and corrupt influences." It was "industrial feudalism...in its worst form."²

The Seattle settler Henry Yesler built the city's first lumber mill in 1853. It was steam-powered and sat just above Elliott Bay, cementing Seattle's relationship to its waterfront. But the transformation of a local, near subsistence economy based on milling into a massive industry was driven not by the early settlers. Rather, it was the work of that new class of men, the robber barons, individuals of great wealth, ambitious in extreme, and utterly ruthless when they needed to be. Rockefeller personally underwrote the industry that would transform these forests forever, turning this last frontier into an industrial colony. These men sensed their chances instantly, and each in his way rushed to seize the resources and the key positions of the industrial society being hastily assembled. They established themselves as "lords of 'empires' in iron, railroads and oil, to be held naturally for private gain, and once held, defended them to the last breath of financial life against all comers."³

The party of Abraham Lincoln initiated the massive transfer of power to the new captains of industry in an emerging large-scale capitalism. By the 1850s, timber was already an essential component in the development of large-scale industry. Timber too had its "conquistadores," every bit as avaricious as California's. By the end of the century, half a dozen men owned the Northwest's forests. "Great central lumber companies like the Weyerhaeusers'," wrote the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, "moved to the Pacific Northwest, where they secured imperial forests." Power in the West came with land, and Congress stage-managed the allotting of this land, the people's land. It got rid of the land as fast as it could. In 1862, the Homestead Act made available millions of acres and signaled the distribution of the public domain, which was then held by the federal government, amounting to fully half the present area of the United States. The nation's natural treasures were sacrificed to unparalleled exploitation, most notably by the railroads and the mining interests but also by the lumber barons. Timber was wanted in the mines, along the railroads, and in the new towns.

Congress sold the land, granted it, donated it, acquiesced to trespass, and then watched as it was stolen. The land was privatized on a massive scale. The wealthy were always favored, and the auctions invariably enriched the well-to-do. "Intrigue, fraud, bribery, corruption, legal chicanery, violence and murder were freely used by these 'respectable' and 'patriotic' gentlemen," wrote Rowan.⁴ The lumber barons looted the government land and Indian reservations of their timber.⁵ There were the settlers, of course, the farmers and ranchers who fueled the myth of the winning of the West. Some succeeded, many did not. The government would never develop a systematic way to evaluate claims under the Homestead Acts. The land offices relied on witnesses to show that a claimant had lived on the land for the required time and had made the required improvements. In practice, however, witnesses were often bribed and collusion with land agents and speculators was virtually universal, with the pursuit of private gain prevailing. Mythology aside, speculation and monopolization were the norm, while the benefits mainly went to enriching the railroads.

In 1898, Congress set aside "Forest Reserves," 150 million acres as National Forests, yet much of this too would fall into the hands of the lumbermen, the government selling to the highest bidders. It was estimated that Weyerhaeuser and other timber companies in the Pacific Northwest had acquired control of about four million acres of this prime timber. In 1914, the U.S. Board of Corporations reported that "whereas three-quarters of the standing timber was publicly owned in 1870, now four-fifths were privately owned, primarily in the Pacific Northwest and California." The government's forest "guards," that is, its Forest Service, would become the lumbermen's handmaidens.

Anna Louise Strong became one of Seattle's most powerful voices opposing the lumber barons and the financiers who stood behind them, calling them the "great titans, railway kings and lumber barons [who] seized the public's wealth."⁶ Strong was a mountaineer. She traveled from Seattle to the high glaciers of Mt. Rainier and was witness to the clearcuts, burned-over river valleys, and fishless streams that lay along the path. The IWW historian Walker Smith shared her concerns, writing, "The forest lands of the nation are being denuded," and the result, he predicted, would be floods and droughts.⁷ "Where a logging company operates," Smith wrote, the rule is that "it takes all the timber on the tract," then the brush and refuse is burned, leaving lunar landscapes and the horror of naturalists. Such destruction was not of concern, however, to Theodore Roosevelt, who claimed to be a naturalist, nor to Gifford Pinchot, his chief of the U.S. Forest Service, himself a lumber tycoon's

heir. Both were crude utilitarians through and through, something never lost on preservationists and aesthetes, who detected collusion with the lumbermen. Roosevelt survives in myth. Pinchot is memorialized in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in southwest Washington. Yet Pinchot is also remembered for saying, "Wilderness is waste."

The volume of timber taken from these forests and the sheer destructiveness of the loggers' onslaught is astonishing. Why this seemingly unquenchable appetite? One reason was that in a new nation bursting at its seams, the forests of the East, from Maine through the Great Lakes, were exhausted. No sense of sustainability seems to have existed, no thought given to renewal. The timber barons, like locusts moving westward, left behind ruined lands and a legacy of waste and devastation by fire. In 1900, there were eighty million acres of charred and decimated stump lands east of the Mississippi and a long history of logging. In 1871, the Peshtigo fire killed 1,500 people and burned 1.28 million acres in northeastern Wisconsin. Ten years later, the eastern Michigan "thumb" was burned in a fire claiming 160 lives. Then, in 1885, nearly all of the Wisconsin Valley was swept by fire.

Vast areas of the Great Lakes region – some fifty million acres stretching from Lake Huron in the east to the Red River in the west in Minnesota – had been laid bare through the clearcutting techniques of the highly mechanized and efficient lumber industry. Efficient perhaps, wasteful certainly. Saws that made wide kerfs (slits left by saws), the cutting of trees to leave high stumps, and felling for roads and tracks all took their toll. Only the best trees would be taken; the rest were left to rot or burn. Sometimes the burning was intentional, sometimes a result of hot, dry summers. Fire was the curse of the forests – fire that fed on the slash, the mass of debris that piled feet-deep on the forest floor after the timber was taken out. Flames probably consumed about as much timber every year as reached the mill.⁸ Summertime smoke could suffocate western Washington. "The smoke from these fires," wrote an English tourist in 1883, "for weeks and for months troubles the air and obscures the landscape."⁹

The exploitation of land and people followed the "Interests" west. They reproduced the East's squalor in the pristine Puget Sound coves and inlets and in the literally hundreds of logging camps. These were built along the shore, in the low hills of the southwest of the state, and sometimes in the high valleys that sat beneath Washington's great line of volcanoes – St. Helens, Adams, Rainier, Glacier, and Baker. This volcanic arc separated western Washington from the hot, dry "short log" pineland of the East. Everywhere, the mills became sites of heavy industry, belching smoke and fire while the great saws screamed. Then, too, came instant slums, the

shacks and bunkhouses of the workers. A study conducted during the First World War found that half the logging camps in the Northwest lacked adequate bunks or showers and a third were without toilet facilities. It was a “sad travesty,” reported Rexford Tugwell, the economist who would later join Franklin Roosevelt’s brain trust after a tour of the region.¹⁰

Two Maine lumbermen, William Talbot and Andrew Pope, came to San Francisco in the aftermath of the Gold Rush seeking fortune in the western woods before migrating north to Washington where they built a mill at Port Ludlow on the Olympic Peninsula. Soon there were mills at Seabec, Madison, Blakely, and Port Gamble (with its imitation New England village). These were all on the Sound, accessible to the new West Coast lumber schooners, ships designed with shallow drafts to cross coastal bars and navigate the tiny ports where these mills were found. The first mill towns were temporary habitations; these outposts lasted only as long as the trees did.

Seattle too had its mills, including the shingle mills of Ballard. But this would change. As the result of the development of its harbor, trade with Asia, the Alaska Gold Rush, and the opening of the Panama Canal, Seattle’s economy diversified. The mill towns, however, remained fiefdoms. The Wobblies (IWW members) called them “company towns.” In a description that might seem more like that of a West Virginia coal mine camp, Rowan wrote: “The entire life of the community revolved around the sawmill. The workers in the sawmills live in company-owned houses or boarded at the company boarding house. They trade at the company store; when they are sick, they go to the company hospital or are treated by the company doctor. When they are dead, they are buried in the company cemetery, and their souls are saved by the company preacher.”¹¹ The larger towns – Tacoma, Aberdeen, Hoquiam, Chehalis, and Centralia – offered more “freedom,” but it was freedom in a savage environment occupied by guards, vigilantes, and small-town gangsters. “Everett on Port Gardner Bay took pride in the designation ‘City of Smokestacks,’” wrote Smith, and it was from these mill towns and forests that “the lumber industry dominated the whole life of the Northwest.”¹² James Hill brought his railroad first to Everett, where he promised that he and Rockefeller would make the town into the Boston of the Pacific Coast. However, the Cascades produced little gold and in 1893 the Great Northern passed Everett by to terminate in Seattle.

Weyerhaeuser was born in Germany; he came to Rock Island, Illinois, where he found work in a sawmill. In 1857, he bought the mill, then began building a confederation of logging and milling operations in the Mississippi Valley. In 1872, he organized the Mississippi River Boom and

Logging Company, handling all the logs milled on the Mississippi. He became the most powerful lumberman in the country even before he moved west. In 1891, Weyerhaeuser settled in St. Paul, Minnesota, next door to his future partner, James J. Hill. The two decided that their futures were in the Pacific Northwest. Weyerhaeuser founded the Sound Lumber Company in 1899. Then, in 1900, he negotiated one of the largest land transactions in U.S. history: 900,000 acres of timber from the Northern Pacific Railroad's land grants at six dollars an acre, "a price estimated then as about ten cents a thousand feet for the wood."¹³ That was the beginning; Weyerhaeuser then organized the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company and proceeded to build the new company's first mill: Mill B in Everett. Then the largest in the world, it produced an amazing seventy million board feet in 1912.

The Weyerhaeuser Company was initially based in Tacoma, then in the suburb of Federal Way, now part of Seattle. The company is one of the largest owners of timberland in the world. It is an international conglomerate; its holdings include seven million acres of land in the United States, much of it in Washington where the "primeval" forests it once logged have been reduced to tree farms, the trees a "crop" on a thirty-year rotation. Weyerhaeuser manager George S. Long apparently coined the term *tree farm* in 1908 while proclaiming that "timber is a crop."¹⁴ Weyerhaeuser also retains logging rights to thirty-five million acres of land in Canada. Now diversified, it leaves behind old mills and deforestation – in addition to deadly contaminants including heavy metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, polychlorinated biphenyls, phenols, and dioxins.

From the start, booms and busts plagued the timber industry. The Northern Pacific's arrival in Tacoma in 1893 did not deliver on its promises. The midwestern markets were still too many miles away. Nevertheless, the railroads brought population growth, the development of new towns, and the expansion of cities. In 1906, the San Francisco earthquake and fire temporarily increased demand for timber and 1912 to 1913 were "good" years but short-lived. The life span of the smallest timber firms was brief; few weathered the hard times. The larger companies grew at the expense of struggling rivals and the result was an industry dominated by a handful of giant corporations, with Weyerhaeuser, "the Trust," at the top of the heap.

There were tens of thousands of loggers and mill workers in the Pacific Northwest on the eve of war, the large majority working in the forests of western Washington. They worked ten-hour days, often more, in logging camps and mills. IWW writers insisted that in addition to working loggers, "there were thousands of their fellow workers vainly seeking work," successful only when "those employed happened to lose their

jobs.” Hence, unemployment plagued the industry, in good times and bad. Their overlords, the lumbermen, “were as ruthless and competitive” as any New York City garment manufacturer. They created their own sweatshops in dreary and brutal camps, isolated from the towns, that in any case offered little more than saloons and brothels. In the woods, labor was the chief production cost; competition pressed wages downward and working conditions with them.¹⁵

The timber industry initially relied on human muscle power, the ax, and the handheld saw. There was, however, a slow and steady development of new technologies, including steel cables and the Dolbeer steam donkey, invented by a California lumberman, which greatly increased productivity but was disastrous for the forests. Cable hauling meant extreme clearcutting; it broke young trees and tore up seedlings, leading to logging “deserts.” The method of “high-lead” yarding, developed somewhat later, lifted the logs rather than dragging them. However, the giant logs, now airborne, brought new dangers. Then the railroads came – short lines through rugged terrain connecting the difficult-to-reach interior to the mills. The promise of technology was always double-edged. For the forest, new techniques spelled new horrors. The loggers’ task was to take down every tree within reach. The slash was burned. The flames consumed limbs, bark, other trees, undergrowth, birds and animals, the ferns and flowers, everything that could not escape. Entire ecosystems were destroyed, leaving ridges charred and streams unrecognizable.

Workers in groups felled the trees. It might take a week for a team of six to bring down one very large tree. The use of black powder and dynamite was commonplace. The impact of the fall could make a tree shatter, so a blanket of brush and branches was woven to soften the fall. The thick bark also protected the fallen tree. Once a tree was down, the workers cut the huge logs into sections that were hauled to the mills one section at a time, first by oxen, then by steam engines or rail, and much later by tractors and trucks.

Conditions were dangerous in the hills and equally brutal in the mills. There, men and boys worked on and among giant saws, with their deafening noise and in air that seemed more sawdust than nitrogen and oxygen. Asthma was as common as missing limbs. In camp or mill, the specter of terrifying accidents and gruesome injuries haunted the workers, and death by saws, cables, and falling trees made logging and lumber work five times more lethal than any other sector of Washington industry.¹⁶ Workers were forced to sign agreements absolving their employers of responsibility; the injured were reported to be victims of accidents or their own missteps. When the lumbermen made agreements with the closest hospitals, they deducted costs from the loggers’ paychecks.¹⁷

Much is made of IWW propaganda ridiculing, above all in song, the employers and their supporters: the long-haired preachers, the Salvation Army, the railway and mining bosses, the police, and the jailers. In fact, they were merely responding in kind. The mill owners made no effort to disguise their contempt for the loggers: "timber beasts" to be driven like "cattle." They called Swedes "stupid," and Southern and Eastern European workers were referred to as "blacks" at a time when the outrages of Jim Crow were no secret, not even in this far frontier. Half the workforce was foreign born. Some mill owners in Bellingham hired Japanese workers, others imported "Hindus." One tragic consequence was the Bellingham Riot of 1907, when mobs of "exclusionist" whites attacked East Indian immigrants, while others attacked the Japanese. The intention was to drive them both from the mills and the towns.¹⁸

The first IWW strike in the Northwest was in Portland in 1906 for wage increases and the nine-hour day. The employers retaliated everywhere. Every mill had its detective or team of them; guards were armed with automatic weapons and dogs. The mill at Cosmopolis on Grays Harbor was surrounded by a chain-link fence; the workers called it the "Western Penitentiary." The employers in response swore that "they all want rooms with a bath, and Waldorf-Astoria fare."¹⁹ And, "when people threaten what you have, crush them, any way you can." Nevertheless, wrote George Emmerson, for the Grays Harbor lumberman, there were dangers. "The industry," wrote Emmerson, "was very close to a volcano."²⁰

In a highly volatile industry, the employers organized to combat price slumps and overproduction and to control the labor market. The West Coast Lumber Manufacturers' Association became one of the most powerful of these organizations. They insisted that the timber workers were unskilled and, as such, were entitled to as little as possible in return for their work. Above all, they resisted contracts, fixed wage rates, seniority rights, and any form of job security. Preferring men they viewed as "bums" and "hobos," they shamelessly sought out the youngest workers and transients, men who could be hired cheaply and dismissed without cause. The logger W. L. Morgan reported:

I worked in the Northwest lumber camps and am able to tell you about them from personal experience. Ten hours a day, which was our working day, is far too long for men who are employed at...labor which taxed the endurance of the most powerful of men. Besides [that] we walked to and from the job on our own time which stretched the working day to ten or twelve hours. When we got back to camp at night, we were so played out that we had no strength for recreation or study but were overcome with a desire for sleep. We existed like horses or mules. The work on the job was

not only hard but dangerous and we were continually speeded up to the limit of our endurance. For giving our entire strength, our entire lives, as you might say, we were paid a bare subsistence.²¹

Who were the “timber beasts”? They were essentially homeless men, widely despised by the region’s middle class, subject to discrimination when the heaviest rains of winter forced them out of the woods, their worldly belongings in a bindle. Why were they called “beasts”? James Thompson, the IWW’s lumber industry organizer, explained to the Industrial Commission in Washington DC that these workers were thought to live in the forests like “animals.” He testified, however, that they were just working men, mostly young people who “worked hard” but received wages below the “Dead Line.” That, he explained, meant wages for a worker “below the line necessary to keep him alive.” The loggers, Thompson argued, “are being murdered on the installment plan... they breathe bad air in the camps, that ruins their lungs. They eat bad food, that ruins their stomachs. The foul conditions shorten their lives and make their short lives miserable.”²²

The physical hardships associated with the lumber industry, including isolation deep within the rain forests, made working conditions an even more miserable burden than low wages. The work was seasonal and layoffs were common; the completion of one job might mean termination and the search for work elsewhere. When the winter rains brought an end to work in the woods, the state’s loggers fled to the city, not welcome elsewhere. In some years, there might be thousands on Seattle’s streets.²³

Notes

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3. Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons, The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), 52-53.
4. Rowan, *The IWW in the Lumber Industry*, 5.
5. Walker C. Smith, *The Everett Massacre: A History of the Class Struggle in the Timber Industry* (Portland, OR: Gregorius, n.d.), 15.
6. Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American* (Seattle: Seal, 1979), 47.
7. Smith, *The Everett Massacre*, 18.
8. Williams, *Americans & Their Forests*, 232-33.
9. Robert E. Ficken, *The Forested Land: A History of Lumbering in Western Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 125.
10. “The Casual in the Woods,” *The Survey* 44 (July 1920).
11. Rowan, *The IWW in the Lumber Industry*, 7.
12. Smith, *The Everett Massacre*, 13, 23.
13. Norman H. Clark, *Mill Town: A Social History of Everett, Washington, from Its Earliest Beginnings on the Shores of Puget Sound to the Tragic and Infamous Event Known as the Everett Massacre* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970), 59.
14. Williams, *Americans & Their Forests*, 329-30.
15. Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (New York: Quadrangle, 1969), 128.
16. Ficken, *The Forested Land*, 132-33.
17. Ficken, *The Forested Land*, 124-25.
18. Ficken, *The Forested Land*, 135.
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20. Ficken, *The Forested Land*, 135.
21. Rowan, “Why We Struck,” *International Socialist Review* 18, no. 2 (August 1917): 2.
22. *Final Report of the United States Commission on Industrial Relations* (Washington, 1915) V, 4236-37.
23. Strong, Strong Papers, Box 10, Folder 30.