

# The Musical **STRIKE!**

## *\$.25 - The Winnipeg General Strike Lesson Plan*

*By Strike! Composer/Playwright Danny Schur*

Why do we study history? As an artist, I believe that the study of history should enhance our *social empathy*. That is, by understanding the way real people reacted in a given set of circumstances, we are better equipped to deal with the important decisions of our lives and times.

My purpose with this lesson plan is to engage teachers and students *as dramatists* - to analyze history not as dry facts but as *forces of dramatic conflict*. And what can be more dramatic than to use music as our emotional connection to the past? The music from *Strike!* transports us to the mood of the past while triggering an emotional response in the present.

Historians tell us that the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike is one of Canada's formative historic events. I maintain that the strike's continued importance is as an event with universal themes that resonate in the present.

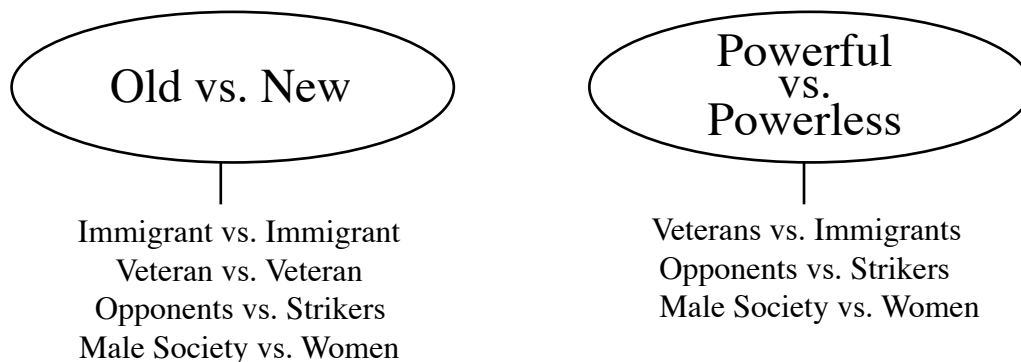
The title of the musical *Strike!* is not a noun; the exclamation mark denotes a verb and the stylized baton exclamation mark is a symbol of the repression of the strike on Bloody Saturday, June 21st, 1919. The point is, the event is a metaphor for the violence that leads to the breakdown of civil society. We can transpose the forces at play during the strike into any current world conflict; open today's newspaper and you see the same forces playing out somewhere. That's why we should study Winnipeg's general strike.

### *The Large Dramatic Forces & Their Offspring*

In drama, and history, two of the biggest forces of opposition are:

- 1) Old versus New (aka Status Quo vs. Change, or Age vs. Youth) and,
- 2) Powerful versus Powerless (aka Rich vs. Poor or Established vs. Newcomers)

In the case of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, these two large dramatic forces gave birth to specific conflicts that drove the drama of the strike, as described in the following diagram:



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### *The \$.25 Connection and The Teachable Concepts*

In my research for *Strike!*, the monetary sum \$.25 appeared over and over. The sum connected so many elements of the conflict that I have come to title this lesson plan \$.25. The beauty is that every teachable concept has a “\$.25 Tidbit” that acts as a connecting tissue to the larger conflicts.

I have identified seven teachable concepts that weave their way through the songs of the musical, sometimes several within one song. The following is a concept by concept description, including the concept’s link to the dramatic conflict and its connection to the songs of the musical.

### *1. Winnipeg’s Place in Canada and the World*

Winnipeg in 1919 was Canada’s third-largest city, surpassed only by Montreal and Toronto. Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton were but specks on the map and everything and everybody that went west, went through Winnipeg. Some of Canada’s richest people lived and built fabulous mansions in Winnipeg. But the massive influx of poor immigrants from Europe suffered unimaginable poverty.

**\$.25 Tidbit:** Some of the poorest workers in Winnipeg made only \$.25/day - 25% of what was needed to survive.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Here the drama has not yet given rise to a strike-specific conflict, but the large force of “Old vs. New” is clear. Shiny new Winnipeg with its new ways, new ideas and new people believes itself superior to the old ways of Europe and Eastern Canada.

**Song: CD Track #1 (*Winnipeg’s Giddy*) Page: 5**

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is up-tempo and jazzy in its optimism. The young, brash city believes its future to be very bright. The booster lyrics proclaim:

*Winnipeg’s giddy / It’s 1919 / There ain’t been a city with Winnipeg’s gleam / The seems are a-burstin’ / There’s growth everywhere / The Prairies are thirstin’ for Winnipeg’s wares / Flags are unfurled / Bring on the world / Winnipeg’s giddy in 1919*

But even the poorest immigrants had reason to hope, because most were young and optimistic, unlike their forebearers.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Immigrant vs. Immigrant

**Song: CD Track #13 (*Better Days*) Page: 52**

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The introduction of the song is dreamy, and naive in its youthful idealism:

*Better the days / More modern the ways / The past is so hazy / The future so clearly shaped / Out with the old and “hello” to the very new / We can all look forward to better days*

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### **2. Inflation**

In simple terms, inflation is when our money can't buy as much as it used to. In Winnipeg in 1919, annual inflation was 80%. Prices shot up so fast, people were literally starving. Demands for higher wages were made.

**\$.25 Tidbit:** In 1914, a pail cost \$.25 but by 1919, that same pail cost \$2.50. The reason: Vulcan Iron Works, a Winnipeg pail manufacturer, converted their pail factory to the manufacturing of shells for the war. The law of supply and demand dictates that, the fewer pails there are, the more each pail will cost.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Opponents vs. Strikers

**Song: CD Track #7 (*Fifty Dollars*) Pages: 28 & 31**

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is a lament, representing the bitter plight of the poorest paid immigrants and their scant chance of increased wages. When the workers muster up the guts to ask for a wage increase, (Pg. 31) the mood turns solemnly hopeful:

(Pg. 28) *Fifty dollars / Fifty dollars / Fifty dollars / In a half a year*

(Pg. 31) *Sixty dollars now that would be something / Sixty dollars now that would just be the day / That would pay a living wage / We just want / Sixty dollars / Sixty dollars / Sixty dollars / For the half a year*

### **3. War's Effect on Society**

The study of history tends to focus on battles and casualties. But the First World War's effect on the home front between 1914 and 1919 was an overwhelming influence on the General Strike. Months before the strike, returning veterans rioted, demanding jobs they felt immigrants had stolen from them. The strike turned violent when veterans held a demonstration to protest the government's arrest of strike leaders.

**\$.25 Tidbit:** Soldiers in the British army risked life and limb for a paltry \$.25/day.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Veterans vs. Immigrants.

**Song: CD Track #1 (*Winnipeg's Giddy*) Page: 6**

**Mood of the Song/Era:** Optimism turns to anger as returning soldiers demand jobs:

*We stuck out our necks like some miserable drecks and we fought tooth and nail 'til the Krauts hid their tail / Then we up and come home and our jobs have all flown to those damn immigrants / Where is the sense? / You tell me*

The most violent clash of the General Strike resulted from a split in how veterans felt about the strike. Those that supported the strike felt a common bond with the poorest of the immigrants, many of whom were considered the enemy during the war. But many veterans who opposed the strike became baton-carrying special police after the police force was fired.

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**Dramatic Conflict:** Veterans vs. Veterans

**Song:** CD Track #15 (*O'Reilly's Song*) Page: 60

**Mood of the Song/Era:** Solemn resignation overtakes the veteran who discovers he has something in common with the former enemy:

*Red was the blood of the men I've slain / Brown was the mud in the trenches where they lay / And black is the heart when the truth of war's made plain / Death has a way of making every man the same*

### **4. Immigration & Zenophobia**

Canada was very much a colony of Britain in 1919 and Winnipeg was a colonial outpost. The English language, and the culture of the empire, were the enforced preference. An ugly distaste for foreigners before 1914 turned into a fear and loathing during the war. By virtue of their land of birth, 30,000 of Winnipeg's 130,000 were forced to be card-carrying "Enemy Aliens." Thousands had property confiscated and were detained in 26 prisoner of war camps across Canada.

**\$.25 Tidbit:** Immigrants detained in the prison camps were paid \$.25/day - the same amount soldiers were paid to be on the front lines. The soldiers' perception that the enemy had safe employment back in Canada made veterans livid when they returned to unemployment in Winnipeg.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Veterans vs. Immigrants

**Song:** CD Track #2 (*The Immigrants' Song*) Page: 10

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is a slow dirge, with simmering anger beneath the lyrics. But the lyric ends with proud defiance:

*An immigrant is all they see / An alien / The enemy / An immigrant yes I may be but damn them all they can't take all my dignity*

Spanish Influenza, which killed over 30,000,000 (almost three times as much as in the war), travelled to Canada in 1918-19 with the returning soldiers. The immigrant population lived in the closest quarters and was decimated by the flu, causing an ugly blame game between the immigrants and veterans.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Veterans vs. Immigrants

**Song:** CD Track #1 (*Winnipeg's Giddy*) Page: 7

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is perky and upbeat, but bravado hides a growing fear between immigrants and veterans:

*We left what was home for some promise of gold / Now we slave night and day in the jobs that don't pay / And our fam'lies we lose to that dread Spanish Flu from those damn veterans / Where is the sense? You tell me!*

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The Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 brought about the violent overthrow of the Russian monarchy. Adding to the drudgery of a poverty-stricken life for some immigrants, was the further indignity of being labeled “Bolshevik revolutionaries” by the veterans. But many immigrants feared the revolution as well, having left family in Ukraine and Russia.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Veterans vs. Immigrants

**Song:** CD Track #7 (*Fifty Dollars*) **Page:** 29

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is slow and sad, and the mood of the lyrics, resigned:

*Immigration / Cancellation / Of all the hopes and dreams that I did see when / I was still a man with wife and children who would / Fill my world with love because it / Mattered not how much my love in dollars brought / But now they run from Bolsheviks ‘cause all that I can make is / Eighty dollars / Eighty dollars / Eighty dollars / In a half a year*

The federal government used deportation as a much-feared tool to keep the immigrant population in check. Later in the strike, the government amended the law such that even British citizens could be deported without trial.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Opponents vs. Strikers

**Song:** CD Track #6 (*Plight of the Working Class*) **Page:** 27

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song has a certain pomp that reflects the attitudes of the colonial politicians in power. But the business-as-usual tone hides sinister designs:

*And if this thing’s to simmer down / I could use your heft / Deporting Bol-she immigrants is the only option left / The right of the ruling class / Demands that the gov’rn-ment act / To spare society the pain / The right of the ruling class / Is to put down the working class / Before revolution wins the day*

Deportation became so common-place and arbitrary, that immigrants developed a black-humoured acceptance of their lot.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Opponents vs. Strikers

**Song:** CD Track #13 (*Better Days*) **Page:** 54

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is up-tempo and seemingly happy, as immigrants joke about deportation:

*If he breathes / Deport him / If he bleeds / Deport him / Can’t speak with ease? / Deporting’s a breeze / No good spleen / Deport him / Ends with “ski” / Deport him / Garlic-smelling meals? / Deport him with his peels / Deport me someone please*

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### **5. Unionism & The General Strike**

Getting together with fellow employees and making demands of your employer as a group was barely tolerated in 1919. Losing your job or pension, or serving time in jail, were the price to be paid for many worker benefits (like an eight-hour day) that we take for granted. At the least, uppity workers were branded “radicals.”

**\$.25 Tidbit:** Some workers demanded a pay increase of \$.25/day and were denied, precipitating the General Strike.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Opponents vs. Strikers

**Song:** CD Track #4 (*Nothing Radical*) Page: 17

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is catchy waltz with a Klezmer flavour and the message is idealistic:

*We keep fighting for / Shorter working days / Paid-for holidays / Equal work, equal pay and for / Safer working places / Fewer hungry faces / Decent jobs for the taking there is / Nothing radical, no / Nothing radical / Nothing radical about that*

A “general strike” is when many unions go off the job at the same time, effectively shutting down a region. While not illegal in 1919, general strikes were seen as dangerously radical, even revolutionary. Those who opposed the Winnipeg General Strike labelled it an attempt to transfer the Russian Revolution to Canada.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Opponents vs. Strikers

**Song:** CD Track #10 (*Strike!*) Page: 42

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is uptempo and the lyrics - defiant. The workers are overjoyed as they shut down Winnipeg, and list the participating unions in the general strike:

*No telephones / No telegrams / No posties, taxies, barbers, streetcars, metal trades / No kitchen maids / No hired aids / No papers, painters, bakers, waiters / Unionized or otherwise / Temporaries / Full-time labour / They all heed the call and / Strike while the iron’s hot to get what we haven’t got and / Take back the things they took and make right the wrongs and look right / Into their eyes until they blink realizin’ that we won’t give up the fight / No so muster up your might and Strike!*

Opposition to the strike mounted instantly. Federal minister of labour Gideon Robertson refused to meet with representatives of the General Strike Committee, citing their demand for “collective bargaining” - one bargainer for all of the unions in one industry - as unreasonable. Robertson issued a crushing ultimatum which was ignored by the strikers.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Opponents vs. Strikers

**Song:** CD Track #12 (*Ultimatum*) Page: 48

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**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is as fiery and passionate as the impasse in the strike:

*I don't bargain / I won't pardon / I won't recognize collective bargaining as anything but tampering with governing authority / Ultimatum / My words verbatim / Debate them / Mistake them best ye not / Ultimatum / Your jobs / Vacate them / Negate them / Erase them / Pensions gone / Ultimatum / Your hopes / I'll break them / Deflate them / Replacements take your jobs*

Robertson made some grave errors. He fired the police force (which had stayed on the jobs to keep the peace) and replaced it with a special police force (the “Specials”) that was largely comprised of anti-immigrant, anti-strike veterans. Then he arrested the strike leaders, precipitating a protest march by pro-strike veterans. The resulting clash became known as “Bloody Saturday” - June 21st, 1919.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Opponents vs. Strikers

**Song:** CD Track #19 (*Saturday in June*) **Page:** 75

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is a tragic dirge, sung from the perspective of a slain striker/immigrant:

*They weren't supposed to put us down / We were supposed to hold our ground on this Saturday in June / There wasn't supposed to be blood spilled / There wasn't supposed to be any killed on this Saturday in June*

## **6. Women's Rights**

While men were off fighting the Great War, women went to work in factories and offices in unprecedented numbers. The independence and freedoms won during the war contributed to Manitoba women being the first to be granted the vote. But it was not until later that women were deemed “persons” under the law and, with the return of the veterans, many of the advances for women in the workplace were lost. Women were grossly underpaid and, rich or poor, there was no social safety net for those who lost a breadwinner in the war.

**\$.25 Tidbit:** Waitresses were notoriously underpaid at \$.25/day as a base pay. Even with overtime, a waitress could make as little as \$10/month, when \$100 was needed to support a family. Many war widows were forced into prostitution to make ends meet.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Male-dominated society vs. women

**Song:** CD Track #8 (*Better Man*) **Page:** 32

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is a moody ballad that barely hides the disgust of a woman's perspective:

*Here I stand and smile and stew 'til bitter to the bone / I see widows' children starving from the war that's torn the land / But God forbid a woman speaks / She must heed the better man / A better man /*

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*I gave my hand / To a better man / I abandoned plans / My husband shines of decency and so politely hinders me / My role is far beneath the better man*

Even the lowest paid unskilled male immigrant made more than most skilled women workers. Many women worked as telephone operators, a technical position that required advanced skills in English that paid less money than unskilled immigrants in the metal shops.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Male dominated society vs. women.

**Song:** CD Track #7 (*Fifty Dollars*) **Page:** 28

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The bitterness of a telephone operator is in full evidence as she recounts that she makes \$50 in six months while unskilled men make \$80 in the same period:

*Repetition / Promotes attrition / Of all the hopes and dreams that I did see when I was but a / Girl with thoughts that some day there could be a world in which it wouldn't matter just how much my worth in dollars made / But now I see the fool I've played 'cause all my work is paid is / Fifty dollars / Fifty dollars / Fifty dollars in a half a year*

### **7. Multiculturalism**

The modern concept of many cultures, languages and races coming together as equals in a Canadian nation was unheard of in 1919. Although Winnipeg was a cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse city compared to most, ugly discrimination was widespread. Immigrants experienced unrelenting pressure to conform to English society. Interfaith marriage was a rare exception, frowned upon or banned.

**\$.25 Tidbit:** Marriage licenses cost \$.25 in 1919 but processing could be declined if the race or religion of the couple was mixed.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Immigrant vs. Immigrant

**Song:** CD Track #8 (*Better Man*) **Page:** 33

**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is a ballad in which a young woman is torn between adherence to her religion and love for a man from a different culture:

*I'm dying just to touch him / But forget such naive plans / A Catholic is forbidden fruit / They tell me find a better man.....Whispered words of mockery won't change my choice of man for me / They can't dictate who'll be my better man*

Multiculturalism began with the increase in intercultural and interfaith marriages. Committed couples braved shunning, excommunication and social ostracization to build the complex web of cultures that became modern Canada.

**Dramatic Conflict:** Immigrant vs. Immigrant

**Song:** CD Track #9 (*Love in a Place Like This*) **Page:** 39



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**Mood of the Song/Era:** The song is a poignant ballad in which a young couple laments the difficulty of an interfaith relationship:

*Noble intentions of fools unaware / Still leave me with scars and a heart that's just scared / They'd make it a shame / Just to mention our names / Can you handle so much pain? / How can there be love? / Love in a place like this? / Who wants to take the risk? / On love in a place like this? / One possible fate surely awaits love in a place like this*

### ***Suggestions for Implementation***

Not all of the teachables are appropriate to all grade levels. While Grade Eleven students will be able to absorb all seven teachables, teachers can be selective in their choices for lower grade levels. The following are some implementation strategies that have demonstrated success.

#### *Primary & Middle Years*

- 1) Sing-alongs to the CD are particularly effective at teaching the history and mood imbedded in the songs.
- 2) Use excerpts of songs (as demonstrated within this lesson plan) as a means of keeping short attention spans engaged.

#### *Senior Years*

- 1) Assign students a read/listen of the entire play prior to class. Once in class, have students “reverse engineer” the events of the General Strike in chronological order. This is a particularly effective means of using drama to teach history.
- 2) Play entire songs and have students identify the multiple dramatic forces at work within each song. *Fifty Dollars*, by way of example, imbeds women’s rights, unionism and immigration/zenophobia.
- 3) Have students prepare scenes or parts of scenes for in-class demonstration (from memory or book in hand). Scenes do not necessarily have to be musical; there are many straight-dialogue scenes that portray any number of the teachables. The more adventurous musical students are encouraged to perform songs in class. Free piano scores and karaoke MP3’s are available by e-mailing Danny Schur at:

dannyschur@hotmail.com.

Further information about upcoming performances and auditions is available at:  
[www.strikemusical.com](http://www.strikemusical.com)