

Ballad To Vote “Yes” Always for the Winnipeg General Strike!

George Elliott Clarke

Volume 84, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066536ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2019.0031>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Clarke, G. (2019). Ballad: To Vote “Yes” Always for the Winnipeg General Strike!
Labour / Le Travail, 84, 17–23. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2019.0031>

POETRY / POÉSIE

Ballad: To Vote "Yes" Always
for the Winnipeg General Strike!

George Elliott Clarke

**Prologue; or An Introduction to (Bourgeois)
Political Economy**

Gussied-up moneybags, penny-pinching
Misers and gimlet-eyed moneylenders,
The pin-stripe suit vampires, and happy-hour
Cannibals, the well-dressed and sulky prudes,

The scumbag Molochs, plumped-up parasites,
Plutocrats whose bureaucracy renders
Democracy bankrupt *Kleptocracy*—
Where workers are monetized (sweat's worth gold,

But sweat seldom overpowers gold, seldom
Outweighs the treasured, troy-ounce brick of gold);
Where workers hoard ale and bosses hoard gold;
Where landlords hound renters to cough up coins,

And won't be buffalo'd, can't be appeased;
Where VIP's sphincters fart excuses—
Such muck to mull over, so-so mouthfuls,
As personages talk trash and write garbage,

Spit out bullshit and write up filth, and ink
A shady vocabulary, pre-emptive
Propaganda (a.k.a. *Censorship*),
Malarkey sarcastic as meat-eaters

Denouncing vegetables; all to brand
Toilers as insufficient citizens,
Inefficient subjects, yet optimal
Troops, cops, who preserve *Private Property*,

For “God Saves the King”; but the poor are poor
Cos they fail to work and/or fail to save:
Such is the policy analyses
Of broadsheets and the tabloids’ headline news—

The blood-red blues of the Yellow Press—just
A lot of dirt; to back war profiteers
Who count corpses; to back conspirators
Fixing bread prices behind boardrooms’ oak doors;

To back Acts that frame *Labour* as boss-ruled
Employees, as ready cannon-fodder,
As consumers; and to back the preachers
Who tell the poor the Word of God is bread

Enough, to feast on prayers, become well-fed
On thou-shalt-nots, well-versed in black-robed cant—
That lyrical, Latinate patina,
Bamboozling, sidelining, maligning,

Casting the downtrodden as slobs, crooks, drunks,
Addicts, hoboes, having only themselves
To blame, being so unfrienable,
Being so unlettered, who need accept

Insistently sour lectures, th’animalish,
Crude grunts of lawyerly gangsters, those who
Parade as legislators, and whose laws
Foster prejudices, invent outlaws....

Each perceptibly a bottom-feeder—
 Big cigars in the big mouths in big heads—
 The bastoods, lispng poisonously, next
 Adding claptrap, just buttered up bullshit—

Cant's pure pollution, noxious, toxic plumes—
 Whatever obscures or overshadows
 Incomprehensive pay cheques and budgets,
 Incomprehensible *Austerity*,

Reprehensible scandals, boondoggles—
 The supply-and-demand of meatless soup,
 And saltless gruel, of wine gone vinegar,
 So that drones chew fried cabbage, boiled cabbage,

Roots, chestnuts, beans, fibrous rubbish, porridge,
 Fried potatoes, boiled potatoes, naught else!
 And—as "junk"—bunk in ziggurats of rats,
 In cells, in trenches, in hospital wards....

But what else can be expected under
Capital's robber-baron rule, wherein
 Fiends constitute the State, and institute
 Destitution? These wheeler-dealers tout

Prostitution, *laissez-faire* predators,
 Debauched, sewage-stuffed brains, assholes and schmucks
 (All as durable as hard, cold, Old Cash)
 As blue-blood, blue-chip *Establishment*. Well,

The bourgeois *State* is the workers' prison,
 Pitting the well-heeled gainst the *sans-culottes*,
 The bare-assed, whose toggery is ripped rags.
 Here *Capital* pens the laws and cuts the cheques

For politicians; and proletarian
 Efforts to better their lives, to evolve
 Beyond the struggle to breathe and eat, seem
 Tantamount to touching off *Civil War*.

Winnipeg: The Strike, May-June 1919

Revolutionary, she's always been—
Winnipeg, the Prairies gilt capitol;
Thus, the Gold Lad capping her province's
Parliament mirrors Paris's Bastille

Statuary, the proud symbol of folks
Evolved insurrectionary, who claimed
Liberté, Égalité, Charity—
Which is also what Louis-Riel's Métis

Sought in Winnipeg, when, to win *Freedom*,
They rebelled—ructioned—so unstoppably
Versus John A. Macdonald, they founded
Manitoba. True: Their next Rebellion

Got put down and Riel got hanged, but no one
Could deny the Paris Commune brought home—
The example that 1870
Set for the Prairie Paris: The Bastille,

The Rebellions, The Commune, all foretold,
Or foreshadowed, credibly, Winnipeg's
General Strike, the *Class War* dividing
Crescentwood mansions and North End hovels,

The Grain Exchange and Vulcan Iron facing
Down plebes wanting One Big Union (no more
Waffling about Wobblies) and enough dough
To raise enough daily bread; and the *State*

To not side with dollars always; to not
Be swayed by the leaden, g-force of gold,
Or gold gone ferocious, gone to lead shot;
And to grant the "returned men"—the veterans—

Reprieve from Empire's flag-waving jackals—
Their suspect accretion of *War Booty*—
(And who just shipped 5,000 Canuck troops—
Against their will—to far Vladivostock

To stop The Bolshevik Revolution;
To shoot down Lenin and prop up the Czar!)
Winnipeg's workers want to overturn
The norm: The underbelly starved and sucked

By the overhead, the underdog whipped
By the overseer. That's what's ballyhooded!
No more are syndicates vindicated!
Thus Winnipeg's work-force now strikes against

The pirates' Reich, to strike down their thieving!
To strike down a Gothic Dystopia!
Suddenly, the telephones lose perfume:
The Hello girls are warbling "Nyet!" Plugs pulled!

Milk carts and bread carts retire their horses
Until the Strike Committee lets em clop
Foodstuffs from door-to-door to sustain homes
Because half of household addresses house

A striker. Now, firefighters light cigarettes;
Streetcar drivers ride bikes; mailmen sing out
Messages, cry news; cooks desert kitchens;
Waiters toss away their aprons; barbers

Set down their clippers; railway men stay home.
Suddenly, there's no post, no telegrams;
No streetcars, no taxis, no newspapers:
30,000 Winnipeggers refuse toil!

Here's the Paris Commune reborn (prelude
To Paris in May 1968):
It's a prairie-fire-style revolt that sparks
Mirror flare-ups across the Dominion.

Who can tamp em down? Who can stamp em out?
It is cinematic pyrotechnics!
(The people—united—are a wildfire!
The masses—ignited—are a firestorm!)

For a week or so, maybe two, the workers
Wield *Power*, are farmers, are doctors, are cops,
Are teachers, are artists, are clerks, are free—
To dream, to imagine *Utopia*.

Now cometh Andrews into *History*—
Plus his Citizens Committee of One
Thousand—a plague of tycoons and grifters
Who fired city cops who refused to fire

On strikers. Instead, goons—frank thugs—got badged
As “special constables,” gangbangers bought
To bash heads with baseball bats, bring on drums,
Bugles, brandish guns, bring on bloodshed, yells.

Lewis machine-guns got shipped in, sights set,
Propped up all over, and even aimed out
The opera house—in case strikers won’t yield.
Andrews’ yellow-bellied, jaundiced, Yellow

Press spews dank, dingy lies, slimes the strikers
As Bolsheviks. Andrews warns Ottawa
That Winnipeg nurses now a Canuck
Soviet. Is Regina next? Or ports—

Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, or
Vancouver? What city’s safe from *Contagion*?
When workers cease to be “loyal subjects” —
Subjugated to Crown and Cross and coin—

What lot of aristocrats doesn’t risk
Becoming a lot of suicides leaping
From skyscrapers—or *Fraud* convicts rotting
In jail? That’s what’s at stake! So Andrews must

Cartoon the strike leaders as “seditious
Conspirators,” who must be, with gusto,
Handcuffed and speedily deported. Where?
Britain! Where Marx refuses to play dead....

As vicious as are Andrews’ anti-strike
Measures (notably The War Measures Act),
The Strike Leaders corrode—canker—their base
By spewing vitriol against “aliens”:

Spitting spleen and spite versus that diverse
Exodus outta Europe, that shipped Jew,
German, Ukrainian, Pole, and Briton,
To Winnipeg, thus “imperilling” vets’ jobs,

Became divisive vilification
Serving Andrews well, who condemned the Strike
Leaders themselves as "alien scum," needing
To be kicked out quick, kicked back to England.

Soon his *de facto*, provisional State
(Whose only good was fertile defecate)—
Saw ten Strike Leaders cuffed and charged and caged,
While *Federales* marched guns through the streets.

Thus, when strikers assembled to protest
Mass arrests, the North West Mounted Police
Rampaged, trampled, struck, as if Medieval
Inquisitors, or as if pursuing

Riel—forerunner radical—his ghost
Risen incarnate at Saint-Boniface.
And coppers slew two strikers right stone-dead.
(Right stone-dead, two strikers, the cops shot down.)

Plus bullied and clobbered and shackled some
Dozens, so that the Strike—stymied—stalled, stilled.
But *Diplomacy* must fail against *Death*:
To have won would have meant non-stop ruction....

Wisdom is perpetual *Consciousness*
Of *History*, so *History's* always
In the present-tense and the first-person.
So *History* demands that we extend

The General Strike—if Utopia
Be true *Equality* of citizens;
Once we strike down the bankers' *State*;
Once we complete what Winnipeg began.