

A general strike had been born. Stan Weir, blue collar intellectual and participant in the strike, reports:

The union drivers of streetcars, buses, and trucks refused to watch two strikes being broken. By stranding thousands of work-bound people in the heart of the city, they had called the Oakland general strike. It was December 2, 1946. No officials had announced or were leading it. It was just that we were all unable to get to work.

Our block began to organize within the next hour. The same was happening in other blocks we could see across Telegraph Avenue. Bars could stay open if they served only beer and turned up their jukeboxes. The prescription counters inside drugstores were open. Hamburger stands and coffee shops would remain open, but large restaurants were encouraged to close. Dancing in the streets started slowly because there were more men than women standing around. It was in full swing a short while later as women convinced the men that they knew how to dance.**

Reporters and photographers suspected of being from the corporate press were literally beaten off the streets, and the strikers were quick to shut down four major East Bay newspapers (including the Oakland Post-Enquirer and Oakland Tribune). Teamsters refused to deliver the San Francisco dailies. They knew from experience whose side the media is on...*

In reaction to the actions of the workers, the Alameda County Central Labor Council declared a “Work Holiday” to begin the next morning. By the strike’s first “official” day, December 3, over 130,000 workers from 142 American Federal of Labor (AFL) unions joined the strike. But it was the workers’ own sense of solidarity that really started the whole thing.

Stan Weir describes a militant rally:

[a bus-driver and WWII veteran] sang out, “Fall in!” and about a hundred men lined up and he put them through close order drill. Pretty soon there were several hundred going through this close order drill. They marched on City Hall and demanded to see the mayor. He wasn’t in, of course.**



Although the workers started the strike themselves and showed signs of self-organization, their union “leaders” were more conservative. A meeting arranged by the labor leaders was attended by 15,000, with an overflow crowd of 10,000 listening to loudspeakers outside in the rain. Robert Ash of the Labor Council later said that if the crowd had decided to march on city hall, “I think they’d have taken it apart, brick by brick.” Unfortunately it was people like him that prevented that from happening.



The General Strike ended the next day, Thursday December 4, after officially lasting 54 hours. Dave Beck, a bureaucratic Teamster official, had been against it from the beginning, saying that it was “more like a revolution than an industrial dispute.” Behind the scenes he did everything he could to end it. The Labor Council negotiated behind closed doors and ended the strike with the promise from Oakland’s ruling class that they would never again use the police to escort scabs – which they violated less than 24 hours later.

Strikers learned of the strikes’ end from a sound truck sent by the Labor Council. Some clerks at Kahn’s and Hastings’ department stores were brought to tears by the betrayal. Despite the official call to end the strike, many truckers, car-men, machinists, and culinary workers chose to stay on the picket lines with the retail clerks, who had to wait 5 months to finally get a contract.

The officials of the Alameda Central Labor Council did not start the strike, but they negotiated its end. The raw power of the strike lay with the workers, but the labor officials held decision-making power. Stan Weir admits the fact that some workers wanted to lead the strike themselves, but they did little to take leadership into their own hands:

Looking back, I must also note that at no point during the strike did any of us downtown Oakland strikers...express the ideas that were already kicking around among us: “We can lead this strike ourselves.” “Let’s send out a dozen committees from one block to the other blocks to say this out in the open.” “Our leadership will be the representative committees from every central downtown block.”**

The strikers were not organizationally prepared to go against the police, city officials, big business, and the AFL union officials, and still win.