



There Once Was a Union Maid

Documentary tells the largely forgotten story of Winnipeg General Strike leader Helen Armstrong

BY DOUG SMITH

The
**GENERAL
STRIKE**

What better day than May Day 2001—with the supper-hour news full of images of British police in riot gear having a go at anti-capitalist demonstrators in London's Oxford Circus—to premiere a movie about a woman who used hat pins to protect herself and others from club-wielding police officers during the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike.

The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong, an hour-long television documentary, tells the story of Helen Armstrong. She was a feminist union organizer whose battles with the authorities on behalf of working women in the early twentieth century won her the name Wild Woman of the West. The movie was written, directed and narrated by Winnipeg filmmaker Paula Kelly (who ought to be known as the Persistent Ms. Kelly for her dogged pursuit of a story that so many would call marginal and certainly unfilmable).

The film premiered as part of the MayWorks festival of working people and the arts on May 1 at the Ukrainian Labour Temple, and aired across the country on WTN's Through Her Eyes series on May 3.

The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong tells two stories.

The first is a testament to a remarkable woman. Armstrong was the daughter of Alf Jury, a Toronto tailor and labour activist in nineteenth-century Toronto. After her marriage to George Armstrong, a radical carpenter, the young couple criss-crossed North America. They lived on the edges of the period's construction boom and at the centre of radical politics wherever they went. Eventually settling in Winnipeg in 1905—at a time when the city was being hailed as the Chicago of the North—Helen soon became the leader of the Women's Labour League. The league broke away from the narrow trade-union approach of organizing skilled male workers alone. Under Armstrong's direction, it helped bring the minimum wage to Manitoba.

When the Winnipeg General Strike commenced on May 15, 1919, Armstrong was at the forefront. The strike saw over half the workers in the city walk off the job to support metal and construction workers. The fight was for the right to bargain, and for a living wage. Armstrong organized kitchens to feed women on strike and harassed strikebreakers. She inspired women to boycott struck establishments and to walk off the job themselves.

Like Woody Guthrie's famous union maid, she never was afraid of the police. Regular arrests did not slow her down, nor did the arrest of her husband. In fact, before she let the police haul George off in the middle of the night, she insisted on phoning the Winnipeg chief of police.

The second story is Paula Kelly's personal account of her search for Helen Armstrong in the official record of Canadian history. As she said at the premiere, there was no sign of this remarkable woman. When she started work on the project, there were only a handful of pictures of Armstrong available. Few people who had any memory of this remarkable woman were still alive. Kelly tracked down a pair of grandchildren, made use of a number of the country's most committed social historians and created a series of re-enactments to capture the spirit of the times and the woman. 🍄

The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong was produced by Buffalo Gal Pictures, Journey Films and Labour Café Productions. Doug Smith is a Winnipeg author and regular contributor to Manitoba Alternatives.

Illustration by tamara rae biebrich