

# 1919: La Canadiense and Barcelona general strike



A short history of the Barcelona general strike of 1919 which began after the sacking of eight workers, and ended up as one of the most successful working class actions in history.

**The strike forced the introduction of the world's first 8-hour working day law and large pay increases.**

In February of 1919, eight workers from the maintenance department of a Canadian financed hydroelectric plant in Barcelona colloquially known as 'La Canadiense' were laid off for political reasons. These layoffs were to spark the most successful strike action in Spanish labour history. The strike, led by the anarcho-syndicalist union, the [Confederación Nacional del Trabajo \(CNT\)](#) led to a city-wide general strike in Barcelona, involving more than 100,000 workers and became the most successful action in Spanish labour history, forcing the Spanish government to pass the eight hour day law, the first government in the world to do so.

By 1919, membership of the CNT had swelled to about 755,000 (as declared at the unions Madrid conference of that year), far ahead of its socialist rival union, the Union General de Trabajadores (UGT), whose membership was about 208,000 at that time. Roughly speaking, about 10% of the active Spanish adult population was a member of the CNT in 1919.

After the initial layoffs by the bosses at La Canadiense in early February, 140 workers walked out on February 5th and three days later were joined by the vast majority of plant employees. Workers at another Barcelona plant were staging a sit-in in support of their comrades and about a week later, on February 17th, 80% of workers in the textile industry walked out, as well as striking in support of the laid off workers at La Canadiense, the textile workers demanded a recognition of their union, and a recognition by the authorities of the eight hour day. Soon after, the majority of other electrical workers in the city declared themselves of strike, also demanding a wage increase. On February 21st, a citywide general strike of power workers was called, leading to the closure of 70% of firms in Catalonia.

Fearing the growing power of the working class in Barcelona and the economic stagnation the strike was bringing, the Captain-General declared martial law in the city. The Madrid

authorities then declared a state of emergency, and in an attempt to break the strike, called up all workers to the army. This call, of course, was ignored by the strikers, and the print workers even refused to print any information about the call-up, or for that matter, anything that reflected negatively on the strikers - enacting "red censorship". Following this, the railway and tram workers also declared themselves on strike.

Under the state of martial law in the city, almost all CNT officials were arrested alongside 3,000 strikers. However, the authorities in Barcelona were panicking and the economic situation in Catalonia was becoming too desperate for concessions not to be made to the workers. On the 15th and 16th of March, negotiations began between the union and the authorities, Salvador Seguí, the Regional Secretary of the CNT demanded a maximum working day of eight hours, union recognition, the reinstatement of all fired workers and called for a general strike to take place from March 24th, lasting until April 1st.

The authorities quickly conceded to all demands. The CNT also demanded the release of all prisoners, which was agreed to by the government, apart from the release of prisoners who were currently of trial. The workers responded with shouting, "Free everybody!" and threatened that the strike would continue in another three days if the prison gates were not opened.

This did happen, but the members of the strike committee were swiftly arrested and the police effectively stopped the strike gaining the momentum of the first. Soon after, tens of thousands of workers returned to their jobs, and an eight-hour day. Through the incredible solidarity of the Barcelona working class, all demands of the strikers had been met by the authorities, as well as wage increases in some industries.

To this day, the Barcelona general strike of 1919 remains the most successful strike action ever to have taken place for the cause of Spanish labour.