



Women's Shoe Strike in Toronto 1882

In Commemoration of
International Women's
Day and the 150th
Anniversary of Labour
Council



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Toronto Workers History Project

Toronto's first major strike by woman workers which lead to the first female Labour Council delegate(s) the following year

1882 WOMEN'S STRIKE

Toronto's first major strike by female workers began on April 3rd, 1882. Women working in boot and shoe factories were protesting low wages and poor working conditions. They sang out their stance:

We won't sew on a button,
Nor make a button hole;
We won't stitch up a shoetop,
All ready for the sole,
Until the price is raised a peg,
On all the shops' pay roles.

These women worked at five different factories, and numbered around 250. At the first of their daily mass meetings they formed a committee to negotiate with the factory owners. This committee was comprised of one delegate from each shop floor and male supporters, including a city Alderman.

The labour movement gave unprecedented support to the strike. Unions donated money and resources, but in the largest act of solidarity, male shoemakers decided to go out on strike in support of the women. Nine days after the women left the factories the men joined them, pledging to stay out until the women returned to work.

The employers were vehemently against women forming unions. Even while they negotiated with the women's union, they refused to acknowledge that it even existed. Eventually the employers offered a deal. At a mass meeting they announced they would welcome all workers back to their shops. While the women would start back at the old wages, they pledged to implement a new uniform bill of wages as soon as possible.

Once the employers had left, and after a few deputations, all men were cleared from the hall. Now the women got down to discussing the offer. The contentious meeting lasted five hours. Many women did not believe the employers would keep their word. When a vote was finally held, one third voted against the offer and two thirds voted to accept it. After 21 days the strike was over. The women returned to work on April 24th.

The factory owners did not keep their word: it took 11 (I think 3 but maybe 2) more strikes before the uniform bill of wages was finally implemented in February 1884. Their first strike was not a clear victory, but it was an important turning point for the labour movement.

In the past unions had been the realm of skilled workers trying to protect their interests, not just against their employers, but also against less skilled workers. As more and more factories began relying on machines, skilled labourers were put on a similar plane as unskilled workers. In this case, the more highly skilled male shoemakers saw that it was in their best interest to stand beside their sisters and joined the women's strike.

The labour movement's "soon embraced artisans and labourers, Orange and Green, Methodists and Freethinkers, Tories and Grits, men and women, and even black and white. For a few critical years, the cultural divisiveness of race, sex, creed, ethnicity, and partisan politics was largely overcome..." writes historian Greg Kasley.

The women's shoe and boot makers strike was an important step towards ushering in this new era. It is an era we should be inspired by and learn from.



Source: Toronto Workers' History Society
London: 1987 (1982) by Greg Kasley. The book
is now available for sale at the Toronto
Workers' History Society. The book is available
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- Began on April 3, 1882 and lasted 3 weeks
- Women in the boot and shoe factories protested for union recognition, uniform wages and wage advances
- The women worked at five different factories and numbered approximately 250
- The Labour Council passed a resolution supporting equal pay for equal work during the strike
- Held daily mass meetings in a hall at Victoria and Shuter Streets
- In solidarity, male shoemakers joined the women 9 days after and stayed out on strike until the women were returned to work
- The strike was not a clear victory as it took 2 more strikes and 2 more years before the uniform bill of wages was finally implemented

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April 4 Day 1 Strike

- Union formed 3 months before
- "It is not generally known that the union had formed"
- \$3 per week female wages
- \$6 per week male wages
- Bill of Wages was drawn up
- Wanted answer by noon next day
- Meeting in evening at Shuter and Victoria
- "They entered quickly and with a business like and determined air about them"

LABOUR TROUBLES.

Plea for Women's Rights by Female Operators.

Meeting, Speeches, and Resolutions by the Girls.

The Women and the Carpenters on a Strike.

The Railway Men Demanding an Increase.

WILL THE EMPLOYERS YIELD?

April 4 Day 1

Strike

continued...

- From hereonin, the "women" were known as the "Girls"
- Mr. Gilbran represented the Girls (business agent)
- Labour Council would render them "active and pecuniary aid". This was met with great enthusiasm
- One employer said he would deal with his own Girls but not an association
- Vote to go on strike

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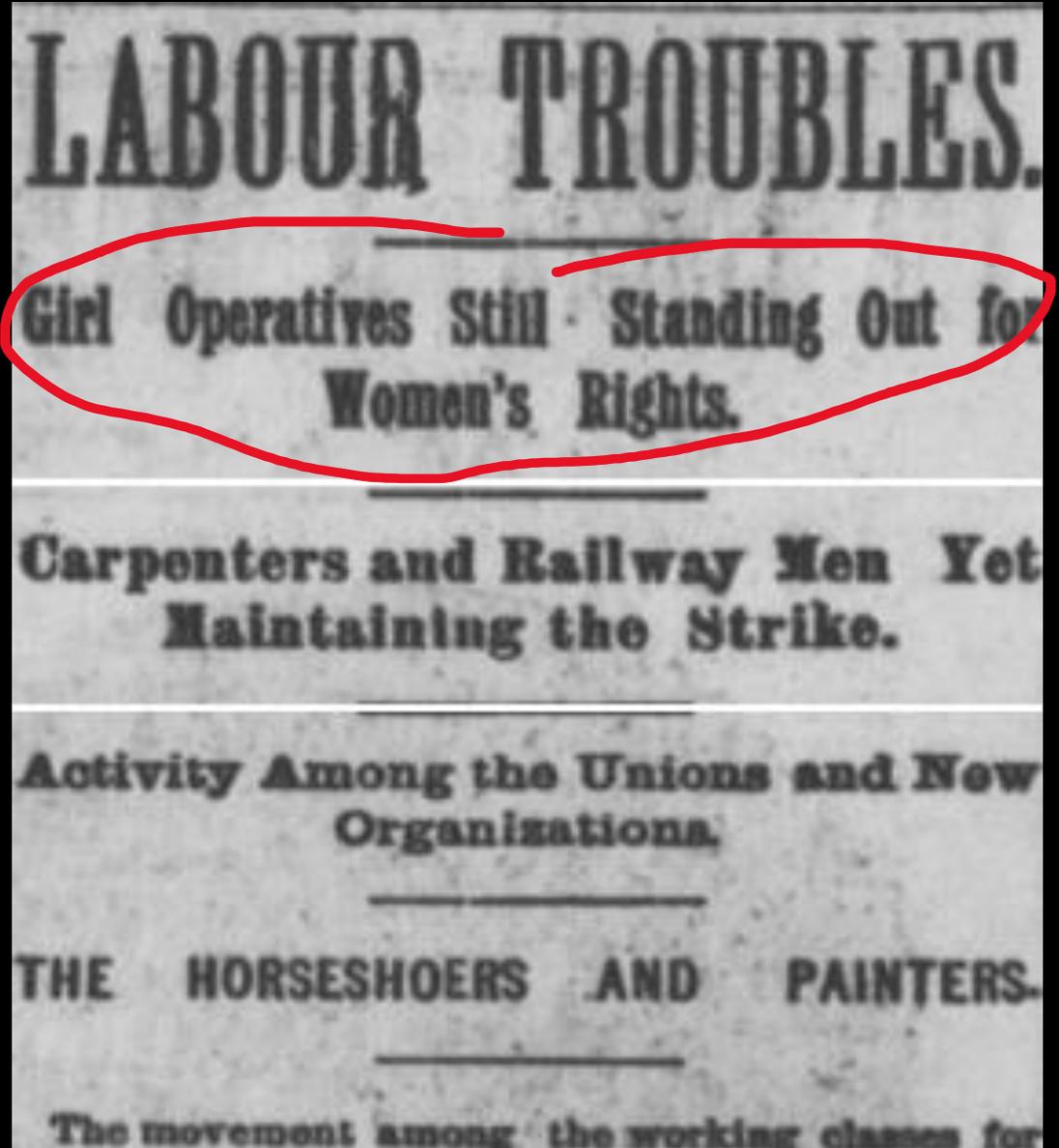
The Women and the Carpenters on a Strike.

The Railway Men Demanding an Increase.

WILL THE EMPLOYERS YIELD?

April 5 Day 2 Strike

- No response to the strikers demands
- A deputation comprised of Alderman Peter Pyman, 2 other men, Mr. Giblin and a number of the striking girls visited different employers



April 6 Day 3 Strike

- 250 women attend meeting
- Employer representative reported that a response was being prepared
- Mr. Moore, President of the Carpenters Union, provided advice to the strikers and how they should move on such matters

LABOUR TROUBLES.

The Strikers Awaiting the Employers' Capitulation.

GRAND TRUNK MEN REFUSE AN ADVANCE OF FIVE CENTS.

General Movement for Organization Among the Trades.

THE GIRLS STILL IRRECONCILABLE.

The Demands of United States Work-

April 8 Day 5 Strike

- Mr. Armstrong of the Typographical Union, among others, addressed the Girls
- Mr. Armstrong advised the Girls to stand firm and would be supported by all the trade unions in the city
- Executive reported on satisfactory discussions with the employers
- Terms not final until sanctioned by the rest of the strikers

LABOUR TROUBLES.

Monster Meeting under the
Carpenters' Auspices.

Strikers Still Refuse to Yield
to the Bosses.

Resolutions of Sympathy by the
Trades and Labour Council.

The Girls Waiting for their Em-
ployers to Speak.

TRADESMEN GOING TO BUFFALO.

April 10 Day 7 Strike

- Another meeting scheduled for 2pm at Shuter and Victoria meeting hall

LABOUR TROUBLES.

Both Employer and Labourer
Still Obstinate.

MASS MEETINGS BY CARPENTERS AND
RAILWAY MEN.

A Determination to Bide the
Issue Out.

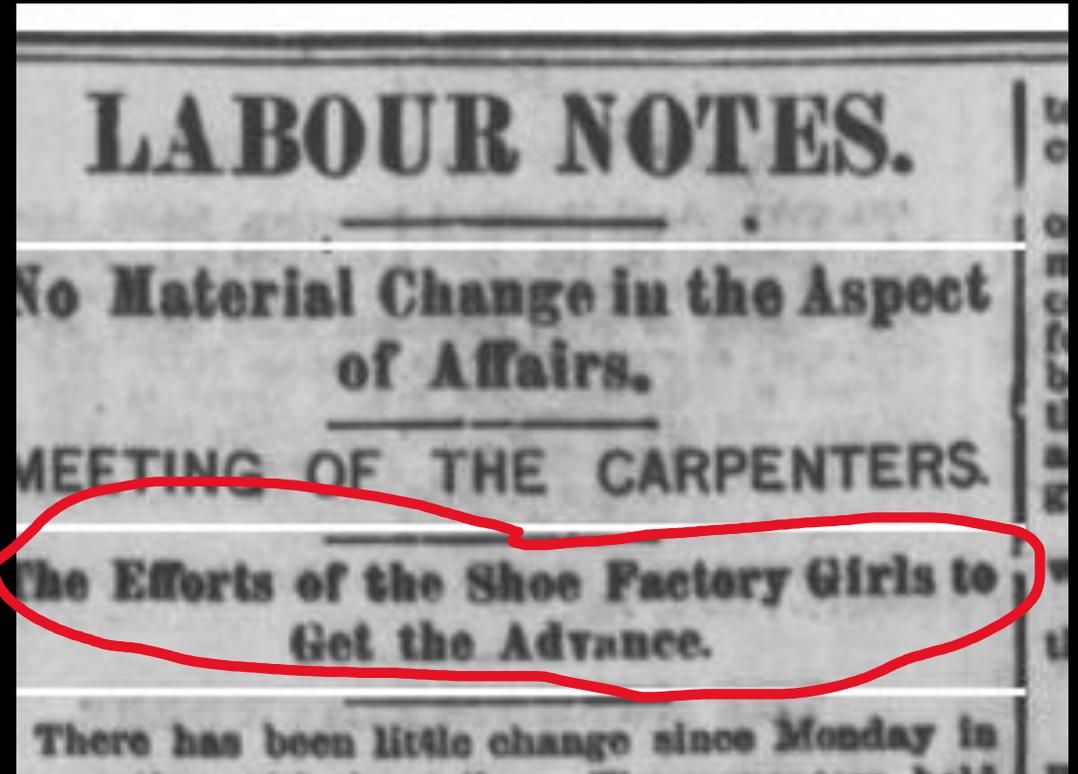
STRICTER MEASURES, IF NECESSARY, TO
BE ADOPTED.

The Girls Awaiting a
Reply.

It appears from enquiries made on Saturday that there is very little change in the attitude of the strikers, while no concessions have as yet been

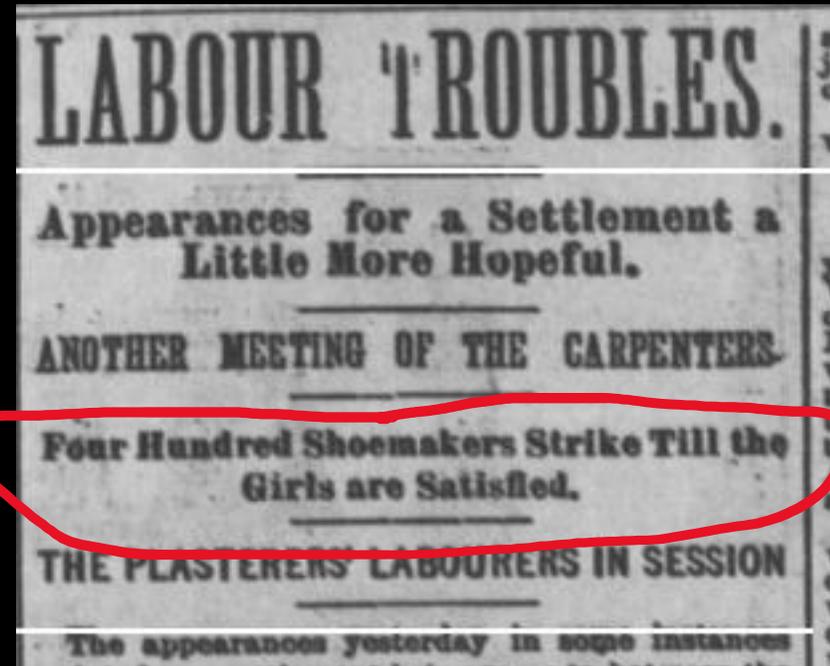
April 12 Day 9 Strike

- A motion was passed that the men would stay out until the women got a settlement
- "The defeat of the girls meant the defeat of the shoemakers as well"
- The men had received 3 increases to the women's 0 increases
- Received \$50 donation by shoemakers
- The girls asked for arbitration
- VP of Labour Council complimented the women because they "behaved like men"
- Other women's shoemakers in Hamilton and elsewhere inquired about forming a union too; Corset makers also made inquiries



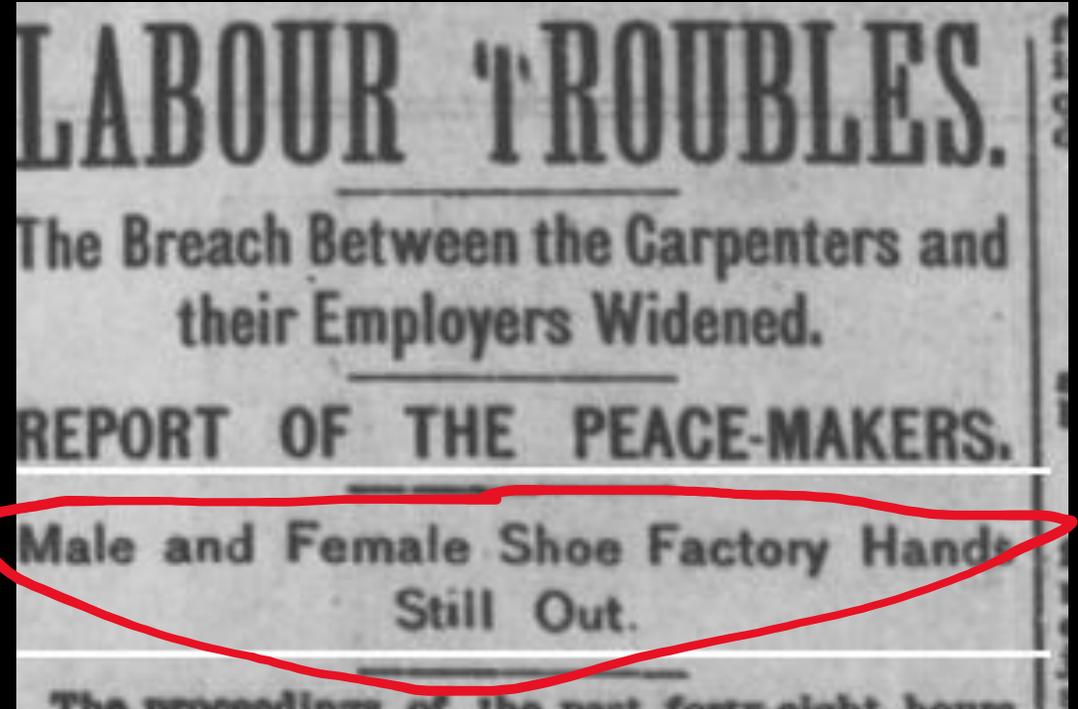
April 13 Day 10 Strike

- Support of \$3.50 for each striker
- "The striking female operatives keep in the best of spirits and judging from their meetings, a visitor would not imagine that a struggle for higher wages was in progress"



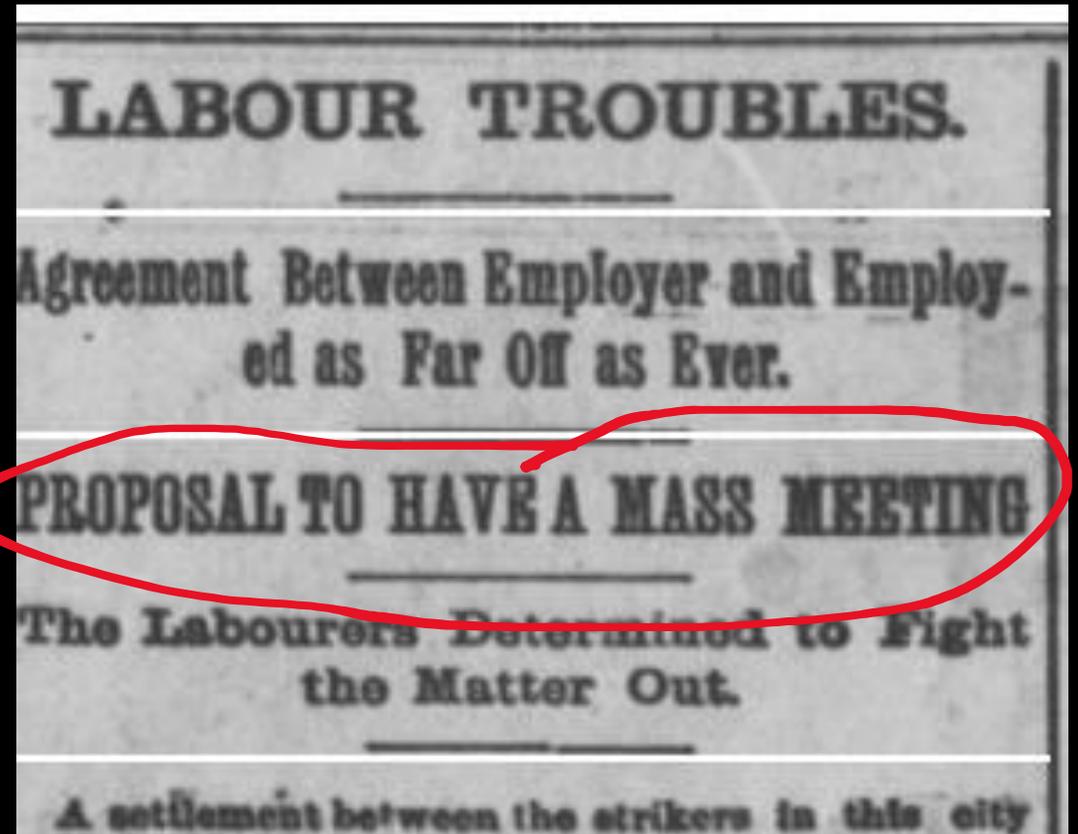
April 14 Day 11 Strike

- Non-unionized machine operators walk off the job in support of the Girls
- 45 new union members for the women
- Vote to continue the strike
- Mr. Cooper, an employer at the meeting, "warned the Girls against being controlled by men like those who were leading them".
- Buffalo employers offer employment at \$6 per week
- Shoemaker strikes happen in London and Kingston



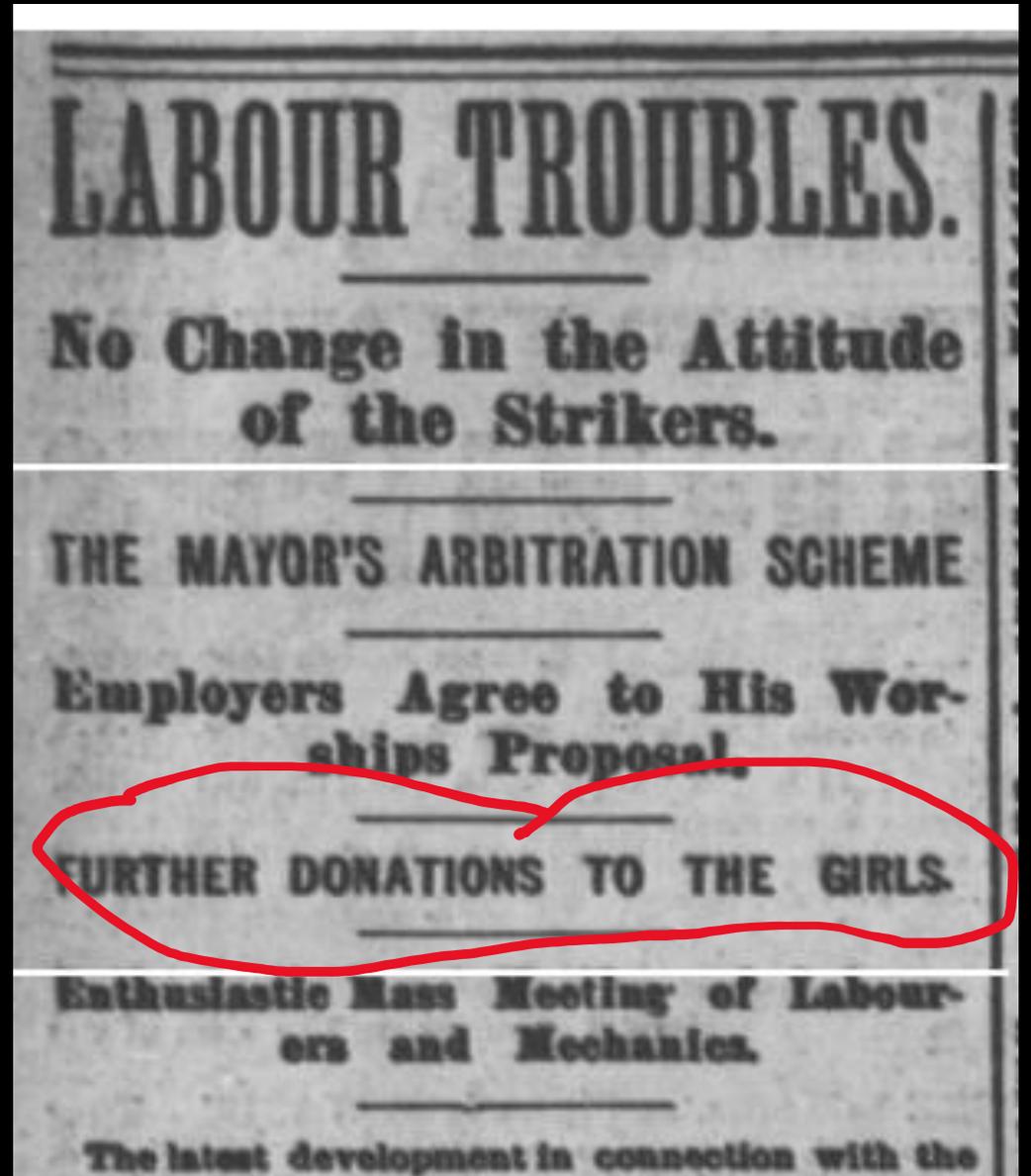
April 15 Day 12 Strike

- Mayor W.B. McMurrich agrees to bring the issue forward to the general public to get their opinion
- Mayor also wants to call another meeting to involve the businessmen of the city to hear and support his call for arbitration



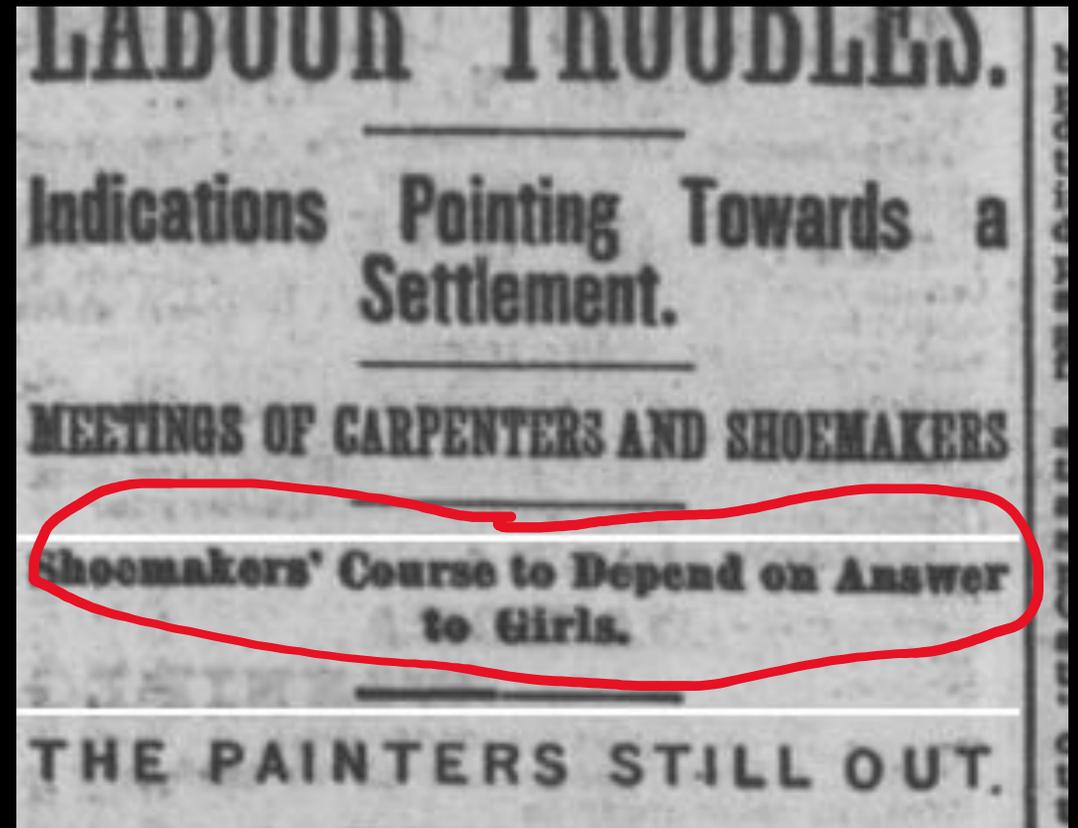
April 17 Day 14 Strike

- First mention of the Lady President who on behalf of the Girls thanked their supporters
- Reverend Mr. Lewis of Grace Church spoke at the meeting about the strikers health being undermined by hard work and long hours



April 20 Day 17 Strike

- The employer offers to take the Girls back with no union but will prepare a wage settlement



April 22 Day 19

Strike

- The Girls agree to the increase in wages and want it in 2 weeks
- The Employer does not put it in writing
- Agreed that no strikers will lose their jobs upon return to work
- The Girls passed a resolution that they would not forgo the union
- The strikers vote to end the strike but one third vote against the settlement
- The settlement though considered an improvement was not a great one
- The men vote separately to return to work on Monday

LABOUR TROUBLES.

The Outlook on Saturday Not More Hopeful.

THE CARPENTERS AND PAINTERS MEET.

The Shoe Factory Operatives in Council on Saturday.

There was no change for the better on Saturday in connection with the strikers. The carpenters and

April 25 Day 22 Strike

- The male and female shoemakers return to work on Monday

LABOUR TROUBLES.

A Well Attended Meeting of the Striking Carpenters.

ADDRESSES BY CLERGYMEN.

Another Effort to Be Made to Get Arbitration.

PAINTERS AND PLASTERERS' LABOURERS STILL OUT.

The Shoe Factory Operatives, Male and Female, Back to Work.

A largely attended meeting of the striking carpen-

TOR.—FACTORIES

PATERSON, JOHN, shoe factory, Paterson Place, e. side, s. of Shuter St.; looking s.e.

1878?

Lithograph by Rolph, Smith & Co., in Illustrated historical atlas of the county of York, Toronto, Miles & Co., 1878 (cop.2), p.12, top.

204 x 306mm.

Inscribed in the stone l.m.: JOHN PATERSON. & CO'S SHOE FACTORY, PATTERSON PLACE, SYDENHAM ST. TORONTO.

Acc: Z 13-12a

REFRO: T 10892

a. Toronto—Old Toronto—Regent Park

A. 1878

1. TOR.—STREETS—PATERSON PLACE

2. TOR.—STREETS—SHUTER ST.

3. TOR.—SPORTS—CHILDREN'S

4. TOR.—TRANSPORT—CART

I. Rolph, Smith & Co.

II. Miles & Co.

III. Illustrated historical atlas of the county of York.



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The Employer

- 5 factories involved in strike
- Illustration of the Patterson Shoe Factory located on Shuter Street
- Advertising for the J.D. King & Co shoe manufacturer



Press of the Day

- Globe & Mail April 1882 available thru TPL digital format
- Recurring column called "Labour Troubles"
- Covered news in Toronto but separate section for the rest of Canada and the US
- April 11 Editorial on "Troubles in Toronto"
- April 29 Editorial "On Strikes"
- Supports arbitration to settle strikes as everyone loses in a strike

Billiards & Refreshment Rooms all mediums of advertising
of merchants &c. who advertise in the Telegram
Moved & Secd We do now adjourn (Carried)
(Carried)

Toronto

Trades & Labor Council Meeting held June 15th/83 T. Moor
President in the Chair

Roll call of Officers Mr. Murphy Treasurer was absent.

Credentials was read from the Female Boot & Shoe Fitters
Association appointing Miss Swain, Miss Grogan and Miss Wilson.
The Mounders Andrew Malene & The United Labourers, Thos. Hallam,
Edw. Broom & H. McDonald

Minutes of last meeting was read and on Motion they were
approved as read (Carried)

The Organisation Committee reported having visited the Plumbers
and thought they would be in organisation again by our next
meeting.
Moved & Secd. This report be received (Carried)

Legislative Committee reported having met and considered the
questions submitted to them from the last meeting and had
written all information in their possession to D. D. Hay
immigration commissioner to Great Britain on the question
of inducing mechanics to come to an already overstocked
market
Moved & Secd. This report be received (Carried)

The Demonstration Committee reported progress they had met
several times and had sent out to other towns invitations
to attend our Demonstration and had received answers that
deputations of the Trades would attend (Carried)
Moved & Secd. This report be received

Roll of Delegates was called & quite a number found absent
several Bodies not represented at all

Communications was read one from the Ontario Trade & Benevolent
Association agreeing to our previous resolution upon the
Telegram. One from Oshawa from Knights of Labor asking for
deputation of Trades to their coming Demonstration in that
Town. One from the Mayors Office in forming us that the
Exhibition Grounds was granted for our use on the 21st of
July, and one from Mr. Parsons a Trustee relating to a Bill
of expenses presented by him some time ago and of which he
had not received payment

Moved & Secd. This corrispondance be received and the a/c of

First Female Delegate(s) join Labour Council in 1883

- From the Female Boot & Shoe Fitters Association
- Miss Swain, Miss Grogan and Miss Wilson
- From the 1881 Census of Canada: 2 Swain sisters, Margaret 27, and Sophrenia 23, were listed as working in a shoe factory and lived with their 59 yr old West Indian father and their Irish mother; Lizzie Grogan was 21 and was listed as a shoemaker who lived with her younger brother who was also listed as a shoemaker and her widowed mother; and though there were 602 Wilson's listed in the Census, it is likely that the third delegate was either Elizabeth 21 or Jennie 26 who were both listed as factory hands.



85 Years

1968

Doris Archer, President, Office and Professional
Employees Union, Local 343 (COPE)

First Woman Elected to **Labour Council** Executive

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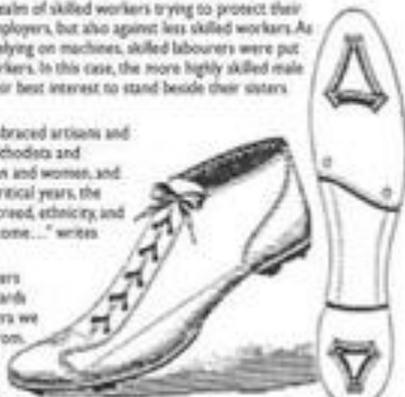
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Missing Plaque Project

- Started in 2002 by Tim Groves
- 10 x 16 inch paper posters erected at historical sites that Groves thinks have been neglected by official sources
- His first poster commemorated the Christie Pitts Riots
- He created 15 missing plaques: Bathhouse Raids, William Berczy, Christie Pitts Riots, Asylum Wall, Halloween Riot, Lost Chinatown, Revenue Rez, A Memorial to the Rebels, Teiaiaagon, The Ward, Streetcar Strike, Women's Shoe Strike, The Wonscotonach River, the Yonge Street Riot and Free Speech Battles
- An official plaque was finally installed for the Christie Pitts Riot in 2008