

The Newsboy Strike of 1899:

A Pathway To Other Strikes

Spenser Kramer

Junior Division

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Thesis

The newsboy strike of 1899 was an important turning point for the labor movement. It was the first large scale successful strike by an organized group of kids. It demonstrated that mass organization of a group of people could be effective in fighting unfair working conditions. The conflict of the newsboy strike, and the resulting compromise, paved the way for future large scale strikes as a strategy for workers to stand up for themselves.

Before the Strike

The newsboys were a group of boys ranging in age from 10 to 17 who bought newspapers directly from the newspaper publishers, and sold the papers by hawking the papers in various locations such as street corners.¹ Before the strike, the papers were \$0.50 for 100 papers, and the publishers did not buy back unsold papers. This made the newsboys calculate how many papers to buy, because they did not want unsold papers at the end. If the newsboys had unsold papers, they would lose some of their profit.² To sell unsold papers, that they could not sell during the day, the newsboys also had to work into the night, sometimes until midnight.

There were many different ways the newsboys could sell their papers to maximize their profit. For example, they could sell papers at a trolley station. When people bought their papers around the time a trolley came, the newsboys would pretend to fumble for change to buy time. Then, when the customer got on the trolley, the newsboys would run at just the right speed to not quite reach them with the change. In this way, they would maximize their profit by keeping their

¹ Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. *Kids on Strike!* Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1999

² Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

change.³ The newsboys would also jump onto a moving streetcar, and hawk papers down the aisle. Unfortunately, this led to bad injuries such as the loss of limb if they fell off. Despite their bad fortune, those injured boys often used it to their advantage and preyed on the customer's sympathy, guilting them into buying two papers instead of one. When the newsboys noticed that the customer was hurried they used a third strategy by faking to fumble for change in the hopes that the customer would just leave. Finally, when a newsboy noticed the customer was not paying attention, he would purposely give the person inadequate change. As a newsboy named Philip Marcus said, "Nine times out of ten, he sticks the pennies in his pocket without looking at them, and that's the doge."⁴

The newsboys made enough to survive, even though they slept in makeshift shelters and occasionally abandoned houses. Before the publishers released the papers, the newsboys played dice and gambled. In the morning, the newsboys would go to the newspaper headquarters and buy their papers for the day.⁵

The Cause of the Strike

On July 19th 1899, the owners of the *New York World* and the *Journal* decided they wanted to get more profit from their papers.⁶ They did not want to raise the price of the papers for the customers, because they would likely lose customers.⁷ They decided instead to raise the price for the newsboys from fifty to sixty cents for one hundred papers. Suddenly, the newsboys then

³ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

⁴ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

⁵ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

⁶ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

⁷ Per my understanding and by Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

could not afford to purchase the papers. When this happened the newsboys were forced to organize a strike.⁸

The Start of the Strike

At first the newsboys were led by Kid Blink. Kid Blink had only one eye and was small for his age. He came up with the idea to boycott the newspapers and try to prevent others from buying the papers, essentially, a strike.^{9,10,11} The newsboys started the strike on July 20. On July 22, Kid Blink and some other newsboys waited outside the *Journal* of William Hearst, the owner.

When he arrived, Kid Blink walked up to him and said: “We're the strikers, Mr. Hearst.”

Mr. Hearst then said, “Well, boys, what can I do for you?”

“We want one hundred papers for fifty cents.”¹²

Hearst invited Kid Blink and the others into his office and they discussed the matter. Hearst told them he would give them an answer on July 24th. However, on July 24th the newsboys discovered that the owners had hired several hundred men and bigger boys to sell the papers.

The Middle of the Strike

The newsboys retaliated by attacking the newsstands and delivery trucks. They would grab the whole supply of papers and rip them up. Mobs of newsboys also beat up the men who were

⁸ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

⁹ Newsboys Act and Talk.” *New York Times*, 25 July 1899. Proquest

¹⁰ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

¹¹ *The Sun* [New York], 25 July 1899. *Chronicling america*

¹² Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

selling the papers.¹³ Every man who was selling the newspapers, no matter how old, would get beat up by the newsboys.

The newsboys did compromise some in their violent strategy by being chivalrous. When there were women running newspaper stands and selling the boycotted papers the newsboys would not attack them. Some of the women even walked into the middle of a mob of newsboys and asked them if they wanted to buy a paper and they did not get attacked.

The police were called, but they always seemed to arrive right after the newsboys were finished ripping up the newspapers. As a reporter at the time said, “The police did not seem eager to catch the boys.”¹⁴ This could be because the newsboys had formed a union which the police admired. A second reason was that the police were stretched thin on the streets due to being directly hired to guard some of the paper stands by the publishers. At those stands, the boys did get driven away.

That evening, on July 24, the newsboys held a mass meeting at New Irving Hall. There were five thousand newsboys at the meeting: three thousand outside, and two thousand inside. They gathered there to discuss the way things were going and to develop a strategy. Kid Blink’s major plan was to put on a huge demonstrative parade.^{15,16}

The parade never happened because it was postponed again and again by Kid Blink and Dave Simmons, who had joined him in leadership. Rumours started to circulate that the leaders had been bought off by the newspapers.¹⁷

¹³Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

¹⁴ Hoose, Phillip M. *We Were There, Too!: Young People in U.S. History*

¹⁵ “Newsboys Act and Talk.” *New York Times*

¹⁶ *The Sun* [New York]. 25 July, 1899

¹⁷ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

The End of the Strike

On July 28th, the papers released an advertisement to hire men to sell papers. The papers also said that they were not going to capitulate to the newsboys' demands. Meanwhile, the newsboys could not find their leaders. The newsies continued the strike. Later that day, a large group of newsboys discovered that Dave Simmons and several other boys were bought off and were selling papers.^{18,19}

The newsboys swarmed the turncoats. The police arrived but the boys kept on fighting. The police were overwhelmed.²⁰ During this, the newsboys spotted Kid Blink in a new suit and with papers in his hand. The newsboys, furious, ran at Kid Blink, who first tried to reason with them but then ran off when he recognized the danger. When Kid Blink turned the corner two policemen arrested him, thinking that he was leading the mob of newsboys.²¹ This probably saved him from getting beat up by the newsboys.

Between the start of the strike on July 20 and the chaos that followed, Hearst's paper was losing significant profits. Finally, on August 2, the affected papers conceded defeat. They reached a compromise with the newsboys that the papers would remain at sixty cents for one hundred, but the newspapers would buy back unsold papers.^{22,23}

¹⁸ Hoose, Phillip M. *We Were There, Too!*

¹⁹ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

²⁰ Freedman, Russell, and Lewis Wickes Hine. *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade against Child Labor*

²¹ Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

²² Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!*

²³ Hoose, Phillip M. *We Were There, Too!*

Kid Blink

Kid Blink, whose real name was Louis Ballatt, had indeed been bought off by the newspapers, selling the papers while being paid by the publisher. He was guessed to be 13 or 14 years old at the time. While there is not much information on Kid Blink's circumstances, he likely grew up without much and used his wit and street smarts to get by. In a way, Kid Blink made his own compromise of his loyalty for his own survival.

Conclusion

Even though the papers were not reduced back to the original price, the compromise reached significantly benefited the newsboys and improved their financial situation once more. The benefit of the publishers buying back unsold papers was that the newsboys did not have to worry about selling all their papers. The newsboys also got more profit, because they could buy as many papers as they wanted, and so they could sell more papers. This also allowed the newsboys to work less hours, because they would not have unsold papers that they had to sell. This demonstrated that organization of similar workers in cohesive resistance through striking, could be used as a tool to improve working conditions. The newsboys essentially achieved a victory over the two most successful newspapers at the time, the *Journal* and the *World*. This showed that a large scale strike was possible, and gave hope to other strikers in the future. The two strikes inspired by the New York newsboys strike are the newsboy strikes of Butte, Nevada and Louisville, Kentucky. Since that time, striking as a means to improve working conditions has been used in many different industries across the United States. Workers gathering together and striking

in mass demonstration is now a common way for conflicts between management and employees to be addressed and for compromises to be made that are satisfactory to both sides.

Annotated Bibliography

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<https://kevinsgiles.com/extra-gangs-of-newsboys-once-ruled-street-corners-in-uptown-butte-montana/> this website gave me the short summary of the Butte, Nevada strikes