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Poor handling of flu outbreak enabled General Strike: author

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By Joe Paraskevas

WINNIPEG'S failure to contain an influenza pandemic in 1918 established social divisions that set the stage for the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, says the author of a new book.

Politicians and ordinary citizens shouldn't simply relegate the city's struggle with the pandemic to history, Elylt Jones said in an interview.

The lessons in disaster management that the experience underlined remain relevant today.

"I like to think of the pandemic as a lost opportunity," said Jones, a University of Manitoba history professor.

Her book, *Influenza 1918: Disease, Death and Struggle in Winnipeg*, published by the University of Toronto Press, will be released at McNally Robinson Grant Park Tuesday at 7 p. m.

The pandemic, which began near the end of the First World War and lasted into 1919, is believed to have killed about 50 million people around the world. In Winnipeg, the death toll reached almost 1,300 -- mostly working-class people -- and many thousands more became sick.

Winnipeg was the third-largest and most ethnically diverse city in Canada at the time, having absorbed mostly European immigrants in the two decades before the war.

Behind Winnipeg's cultural diversity, however, lay class divisions the pandemic exposed and even triggered, according to Jones's book.

When civic and provincial officials ordered public places such as schools, theatres and billiard halls closed to contain the spread of influenza, they put many people out of work.

Trade and labour councils felt such measures singled out the working class to bear an economic burden through the pandemic.

Jones said politicians and others in charge of managing the disaster failed "to diffuse some of the tension that was in the city and to build real bonds of human solidarity that might have made it a different community and might have minimized the difference between north and south, and between worker and wealthy."

While cities such as Vancouver involved workers and ethnic groups in their efforts to contain the pandemic, Winnipeg didn't, Jones said. In some ways, Winnipeg's separation of influenza sufferers from government decision-makers resembled the inability of the federal government in the United States to cope with hurricane Katrina, when the storm struck Louisiana in 2005, she said.

"It really intensifies people's sense of their vulnerability and their need to rely on one another for survival, not on the state, or not on the business class," Jones said. "They're relying on each other to survive."

Winnipeg's experience of the influenza pandemic yielded a divided city, Jones said. But it also hardened the resolve of the city's working class, unifying workers and sending the city down a path that led to the General Strike in the spring of 1919.

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