

# Red Threads of Revolution Always Underway: Stolen Land, General Strike, and the Time of the Seventh Fire

By Yates McKee

***It's possible to make a new history. Be the ancestor your descendants would be proud of.***

—Winona LaDuke

IN UNION weaves together the career-long engagements by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds and Keith Christensen with the ethics, politics, and poetics of place-based commemoration. Beyond simply including hitherto unsung Native workers in an updated historical record of the 1934 Minneapolis Truckers' Strike, the project facilitates a counter-memorial remediation of that event, at once radicalizing, expanding, and decentering what we think of as labor history and class struggle in the face of both ever-intensifying contradictions of twenty-first century racial capitalism and the frontline movements fighting to overturn it. IN UNION is especially resonant in the context of so-called Minnesota, which has been the epicenter of two earth-shaking insurgencies in recent years: the Black-led George Floyd uprising against police terror in Minneapolis, and the Indigenous-led direct actions against the Line 3 oil pipeline at numerous sites along the pipeline route in Northern Minnesota. Neither of these events were driven by unions, but they brought thousands of people into collective action to temporarily shut down the infrastructures of the carceral state and fossil capital, cultivating bonds of solidarity and communities of care that have outlived the original events themselves.

IN UNION has three components: a set of handmade banners devoted to the memory of three Native unionists; the present publication, which acts as a mode d'emploi for the banners; and an exhibition at Open Source Gallery in Brooklyn, located on the ancestral territory of the Leni Lenape, and situated just a few miles from what was once known as Little Caughnawaga, a now-gentrified Brooklyn neighborhood that was for much of the twentieth century home to generations of unionized Mohawk migrants who played a crucial role in

constructing the skyline of New York City.

Together, these components make up a prismatic counter-memorial apparatus in which the artistic conveyance of historical knowledge is inseparable from the forming and reorienting of relations in the present. IN UNION thus takes on an "organizing function," as Walter Benjamin called it in "The Author as Producer." Originally presented at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in 1934—the same year as the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike—Benjamin's paper notes the ways in which capitalist-culture industries accommodate themselves to even the most radical of content, set off against the background of growing alliances between the owners of industry and fascism. "Rather than asking, 'What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time,' I would like to ask, 'What is its position in them?'" This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of the time." Operating outside the channels of the mainstream art system and its dependence on climate-destroying oligarchs like Blackrock CEO Larry Fink (a longtime board member at MoMA, for instance), IN UNION exemplifies the development of "literary relations of production" between contemporary art and frontline social movements.

Working with the material qualities, poetic potentials, and historical resonance of the banner as a medium, IN UNION foregrounds the intersection of histories that are not often seen in conjunction, beyond those who have lived it directly or studied it in depth: the history of urban proletarian struggles by wage workers, on the one hand, and the reclaiming of Indigenous sovereignty of colonized lands, waters, and air, on the other. As we learn from IN UNION, these histories of labor struggle and land restoration need to be understood not only as parallel tracks, but as deeply entwined and charged with both contradictions and possibilities.

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*Yates McKee is an art historian and author of *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*.*

The historical remediation undertaken by this project is both unsettling and restorative. It is unsettling insofar as it redresses blind spots that mark hitherto existing histories of the 1934 strike; it is restorative in that, in the process of redressing those blindspots, it proposes new modes of engagement, relations, and solidarity between struggles, places, and people. In the process of weaving these strands together, IN UNION creates a kind of relational geography of memory triangulated between at least three sites in the occupied territories of the so-called United States: Minnesota, Oklahoma/Kansas, and New York City.

Land acknowledgments have become an increasingly familiar genre of communication by settler cultural institutions in recent years. These are often combined with a recognition (as we read in the foreword to this publication) that acknowledgments per se are not only insufficient on their own, but can serve as alibis for delaying change if treated as an end, rather than a beginning of deep transformation on the part of institutions and settler society more broadly, with the imperative of Land Back at its core.

The intensifying pressure flows from both large-scale Indigenous mobilizations against extractivism like Standing Rock and Line 3, as well as the Indigenous generations of scholars, artists, and community advocates using a diversity of tactics to challenge the authority of settler cultural institutions, from protests at massive structures like the American Museum of Natural History to the smaller-scale example of Yale Union in Portland, Oregon which in 2020 transferred its building and land to the Center for Native Arts and Cultures.

For three decades, the work of Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds has been a crucial touchstone for these developments, starting with his now career-spanning *Native Hosts*. The first iteration of the project was the installation of six official-seeming place-signs around the edges of City Hall in Lower Manhattan: on each, the script of the collective toponym "New York" is literally flipped backwards, and paired with an acknowledgment of the ancestral Indigenous territories on which the metropolis is built: "New York [backward]: Today Your Host is Shinnecock," for example. The reverse-signage of

*Native Hosts* is seismic in its psychic and material implications for settler society, yet oblique in its evocation of localized colonial violence.

More searingly specific in its commemorative intervention was the 1990 project *Building Minnesota*, which consisted of forty identically formatted metal signs installed in a row along the banks of the Mississippi River in the so-called Grain District of downtown Minneapolis. Each sign was dedicated to the singular name and memory of the thirty-eight Lakota warriors executed by order of Abraham Lincoln following the so-called Dakota War of 1862, along with two others executed in 1865 by Andrew Johnson.

In a photograph of the installation, we see the artist himself contemplating a sign that reads: "HONOR/Ma-ka'ta I-na'-zin/One Who Stands on the Earth/DEATH

BY HANGING, DEC 26, 1862, MANKATO, MN."

Looming behind the scene is the monumental Tenth Avenue Bridge, just one element in the dense assemblage of settler-colonial urban infrastructure encrusted along and across the Mississippi River. As Heap of Birds writes in a statement addressing the site-specificity of the installation, "This is a proud 'historical' district of the city of Minneapolis and the state of Minnesota that houses the grain and flour mills, canals, and facilities to ship out the fruits of American progress."

"It was the potential disruption of American commerce that cost the Dakota people their lives," the artist continues, insisting that audiences approach the environments and landscapes of the modern capitalist metropolis as a vast crime-scene, throwing into relief that foundational process of genocide, displacement, and extractivism that have made cities like Minneapolis, territories like Minnesota, and indeed the entirety of the United States' territorial empire possible.

This foundational violence commemorated by *Building Minnesota* was preemptively announced in the Minnesota state flag, officialized five years before the Dakota War in 1857 and continuing to be displayed to this day. It shows a Native warrior riding horseback into the western sunset as a settler ploughs along the banks of the Mississippi. The scene is replete with St. Anthony



Indigenous People's Day/Anti-Columbus Day Tour, American Museum of Natural History, NYC, October 14, 2019. Artwork courtesy of MTL+.

Falls, a name imposed by French missionaries in 1680 on the Mississippi River site known to the Dakota as Owámniyomni (lit. whirlpool). Situated less than a mile from the place where *Building Minnesota* was installed, the water falls in the nineteenth century would be mechanically engineered into a driving power source for what would become corporate behemoths like Pillsbury and General Mills.

Developed in close consultation with Dakota elders, *Building Minnesota* was a profound intervention into the white mythologies of official Minnesota history, while at the same time creating a space of prayer, ancestral reconnection, and healing for local Indigenous communities. But beyond “official” history-from-above, *Building Minnesota* also has unsettling ramifications for left-leaning histories that proffer inspiring histories of working-class agency and political advancement.

The liberal end of the progressive ideological spectrum in Minnesota largely assimilates working-class history into the electoral politics of the Democratic Farm Labor party (DFL), which began as a socialist-adjacent entity in the 1920s and now functions as a slightly left-of-center counterbalance to neoliberal corporate Democrats. The radical pole, on the other hand, looks to working-class history not to bolster a reformist agenda for the present, but rather to recover and rekindle the otherwise forgotten sparks of insurrectionary action and imagination that point beyond themselves into the present and future. This brings us to the crux of the current IN UNION project: the 1934 Minneapolis Truckers’ Strike.

Building on his decades-long engagement with the arts of radical labor history—including his participation in the legendary Pathfinder mural, led by IN UNION contributor Mike Alewitz—Keith Christensen’s recent work has been devoted to both sustaining and reactivating the memories of the 1934 strike, while developing intergenerational conversations and relationships in the process. *Game Turn: Learning from the Minneapolis Truckers’ Strike of 1934* (2017) is multilayered work of archival research and contemporary commemoration. Recalling the



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Building Minnesota*, installation on the Mississippi River, 1990.

psychogeographic countercartographies of the Situationists, *Game Turn* is a powerful retelling and resource of the strike, and brings it into living history through the format of the game and block-by-block sense of the strike as it unfolded throughout the core of the city. In the book we find a compelling assemblage of historical testimony, archival photographs, historical signage, and a stirring transcript

by a worker-historian enjoining young people of the early 2000’s to remember the dead and honor the martyrs.

Published five years after that book was written, IN UNION could be considered from one angle as a kind of supplemental pendant to *Game Turn*, helping us to both address a blind spot in the original project and to appreciate the stakes of the historical remediation undertaken by IN UNION as a collaboration with Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds. By “supplement,” I do not mean that it simply adds onto or compensates for a lack in the original, leaving the latter more comprehensive or complete in its identity. On the contrary, the supplement here exacerbates the historical questions that go unspoken in the original, opening the entirety of labor history itself to questions informed by contemporary decolonial struggles: As we celebrate the radicalism of the 1934 strike and its ongoing lessons in working-class self organization, what about the land on which the strike unfolded; the people displaced from that land to make way for the factories, streets, and territorial infrastructure that would be so fiercely contested by the strikers; and the ever-expanding reach of the extractivist industries at the core of the Minneapolis economy: agribusiness, mining, and timber? What does it mean for a general strike to unfold on stolen land? When the system is shut down, who or what reclaims the city, and to what ends? Men like Rainbolt and Holstein lived these contradictions, which have taken new forms of expressions in the ninety years separating the 1934 strike and the insurgencies of recent years.

At Amazon warehouses and Starbucks stores, at art museums and college campuses, strike-actions have been on the rise in recent years. Unions obviously

continue to be an essential vehicle of class struggle. But we should remember that organized labor has developed unevenly in the U.S., entangled as it has also been with pro-growth extractivism and empire, from the military contractor employing Heap of Birds’ parents to the unionized workers building the Enbridge pipeline. IN UNION presents the union-form as a two-sided fabric of possibilities and contradictions, in the process honoring the 1934 strikers in their singularity, by name, by portrait, and by biography when possible. While inscribed into the collective imaginary of the strike and the broader world-historical narrative of

proletarian revolution current among Trotskyists at the time, each striker is an irreplaceable archive of stories, connections, and relations, only slivers of which appear in historical documents per se. Heap of Birds’ offering his own singular story in the pages of this book—and threading it through archives of the Minneapolis strikers—enacts a decolonial transformation of materialist history. The artist’s Christmas tale draws forth the resonance between the union’s self-organized communal support-system and Indigenous traditions of mutual aid, highlighting the collective care work of family reproduction beyond the walls of the factory. How, if at all, can *this* union spirit be disarticulated from the engines of capitalist growth to which all workers are hitched in some way or another?

IN UNION honors solidarity as a precious social relation to be found wherever oppressed people rise up in collective defiance of capitalism to defend and care for their friends, families, and communities. Triangulated with the riot and the blockade, this is the true power of the strike as a form of action—a withdrawal of economic compliance from the powers that be, and the re-creation, however incipient or uneven, of alternative structures and spaces of life in common, recovering traditions and prefiguring futures simultaneously.

But we—especially those of us who are settler-descended white people—must be wary of idealizing such movement moments of solidarity, which all too often can involve the suppression of differences and unevenly shared responsibilities for historical and contemporary harms. The restoration of Indigenous land is central to this conversation, with various models and initiatives



Keith Christensen, cards and game tokens from the *Game Turn* project, 2017.

proliferating around the country. A leading example is the Water Protectors Welcome Center in Palisade, Minnesota. Based on a formerly settler-owned property along the Mississippi that was transferred to the Akiing initiative, the center supported actions against the Line 3 Pipeline during the region-wide mobilizations of 2020-2021. With the defeat of the fiercely fought campaign, the protest camp and its attendant physical structures, equipment, and, most important, social relations have been transitioned into an Indigenous-led arts and education center. The center is devoted to sustaining and disseminating the movement culture that

animated the protests, building infrastructure in conjunction with groups like Honor the Earth and teachers like Jim Northrup Jr., who led a series of participatory camps around the harvesting of manoomin (wild rice). Though resonating with numerous visions of post-capitalist solidarity economies the world over from Chiapas, Mexico, to Jackson, Mississippi, the core ethos of this work is the Ojibwe prophecy of the Seventh Fire, and the forms of earth-based technology, art, and survivance developing along with it. As Winona LaDuke puts it, “In our teachings as an Anishinaabe people, where we are now is referred to as the time of the Seventh Fire. It is said that long ago prophets came to our people—the same prophets who instructed us specifically where to go—and they said that at the Time of the Seventh Fire, we as Anishinaabe people would have a choice between two paths. One path, they said, would be well worn, but it would be scorched; the other path, they said, would not be well worn, it would be green.”

“Green” here names a transformation of values and practices deeper than what has been proffered by the Green New Deal, and it militates against the eco-friendly veneer given to Wendigo capitalism by figures like Elon Musk, whose Tesla corporation has heavily invested in a nickel mine just east of Palisade in the town of Tamarack—a likely site of confrontation in the future. Moving forward, let us keep in mind the title of one of Heap of Birds’ monotype-grids, produced in 2019, just as the Red Deal framework was emerging in the aftermath of Standing Rock: “OUR/RED/NATIONS/WERE/ALWAYS/GREEN.”