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# The British General Strike

Tom Brown

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1942

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No Syndicalist movement existed in Britain in 1926 although until the end of the Great War a small propagandist movement had lived vigorously. Unfortunately this movement had been eclipsed by the Russian Revolution or engulfed by trade union work. Nevertheless the General Strike propaganda of the old Syndicalist groups had had a much greater effect than was ever expected of it. The idea of the General Strike appealed to the imagination and conscience of the British worker.

the Labour Party and was still repeating his old opposition to the General Strike.

“I don’t like General Strikes...I am terribly cold-blooded about the matter.” “With the discussion of General Strikes and Bolshevism and all that kind of thing I have nothing to do at all.” - Ramsay MacDonald, House of Commons, May 3rd, 1926.

## WE SHALL RISE AGAIN

The Communist Party had never yet aspired to being anything more than the vague left-wing of the Labour Party and trade unions. The crises of 1925 and 1926 found them without any alternative policy to that of the labour leaders. On the second day of the Strike the Communist Party issued a manifesto repeating the M.F.G.B. slogan “Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day,” and adding a self-contradictory call to “Nationalise the Mines without Compensation, under Workers’ Control,” and the formation of a Labour Government. That is a Government of MacDonald, Snowden, Clynes and Thomas! The miners must wait until the next General Election for that! To all of these slogans the C.P. added the slogan it had used from the beginning of the crisis – “All power to the General Council.” A stupid parody of the slogan of the October Revolution “All power to the Soviets”. “All power” to Thomas, Clynes and Bevin. They already had too much power—the power to betray the miners.

There existed at this time a trade union opposition known as the Minority Movement, a thinly disguised Communist body. Shortly before the strike it, in the usual Communist fashion, claimed to have an affiliated membership of 1,000,000. Being a Communist organisation it was forced to trail behind the C.P. and during the Strike, in which it played no part, it even ceased to hold meetings. A few years later it perished miserably.

IN THE SPRING of 1925 storm clouds gathered over the British coalfields. The coming struggle was the chief conversational topic in the grim mining villages. Germany was re-entering the international trade war as a competitor of Britain. The German miners’ wages had been slashed, the industry rationalised by the aid of Anglo-American capital investment, and German currency stabilised by the Dawes plan. Already faced by this keen competitor, the British coal export trade was embarrassed by the Government’s return to the Gold Standard.

It was soon obvious that the mine-owners would meet the new international situation by cutting wages, and on June 30th, 1925 they served notice to terminate the national agreement, proposing ending the minimum wage, heavy wage cuts and district, instead of national agreements. The Miners’ Federation of Great Britain replied by putting their case before the Trades Union Congress Central Council at a joint meeting on July 10th. The General Council pledged the trade unions to full support of the miners and, setting up a Special Committee, met the executives of all the railway and transport unions who agreed upon an embargo on moving coal. The unions quickly acted by issuing “Official Instructions ‘0 all Railway and Transport Workers”:

“Wagons containing coal must not be attached to any train after midnight on Friday, July 31st, and after this time wagons of coal must not be supplied to any industrial or commercial concerns . . . Coal Exports: All tippers and trimmers will cease work at the end of the second shift on July 31st. Coal Imports: On no account may import coal be handled from July 31st. ... All men engaged in delivering coal to commercial and industrial concerns. will cease Friday night, July 31st.”

A specially summoned conference of trade union executive committees gave unanimous support to the instructions.

Unprepared for such resistance, the Cabinet, which had fiercely backed the coal-owners, hastily met and the Prime Minister (Baldwin) summoned the leaders of miners and owners to Downing

Street. On the morning of Friday; July 31st, the Government announced the granting of a subsidy to the coal industry amounting to about £25,000,000 and extending over nine months. The wage cuts and other demands of the owners were postponed until April, 1926. July 31st, 1925 became known as "Red Friday."

## INTERLUDE IN BATTLE

It was obvious to all that the nine months' grace was merely a time of preparation for the ruling class 'and this thought was expressed in the report of the Special Committee of the T.U.C. "It felt that its task had not been completed, and with the consent of the General Council proposed to remain in being, and to apply itself to the task of devising ways and means of consolidating the resistance of the trade union movement should the attack be renewed."

Alas! Little, if any, preparation for the inevitable struggle was made by the T.U.C. or the affiliated unions. Not so the Government. Speaking of Red Friday, Winston Churchill, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, said, "We therefore decided to postpone the crisis in the hope of averting it, or, if not of averting it, of coping effectually with it when the time comes."

A strike breaking organisation known as O.M.S. (Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies) was created. Blacklegs were trained to drive locomotives in the private railways of large factories at week-ends and potential scabs instructed in the operation of telephones and telegraphy. The country was placed on a war footing by dividing it into ten areas, each under a Civil Commissioner, and a civil service organisation was set up in each of these areas. Great numbers of special constables were enrolled and mobile squads of police organised. Every possible preparation was made and the Commissioners and their officers stood ready for the signal.

control and hamstringing it. In any case, what treachery lacked cowardice made up.

"It must not be forgotten that apart from the rights and wrongs of the calling of a General Strike, there would in any case, with the miners' lockout, have been widespread unofficial fighting in all parts of the country, which would have produced anarchy in the movement." - Ernest Bevin in *The Record*.

"What I dreaded about this strike more than anything else was this: if by any chance it should have got out of the hands of those who would be able to exercise some control, every sane man knows what would have happened. I thank God it never did." - J. H. Thomas in the House of Commons, May 13th, 1926.

"Every day that the strike proceeded the control and the authority of that dispute was passing out of the hands of responsible Executives into the hands of men who had no authority, no control, and was wrecking the movement," - Charles Dukes (N.U.G. & M.W.): Report 1927 Conference of Executives.

"I have never disguised that in a challenge to the Constitution, God help us unless the Constitution won." - J. H. Thomas, House of Commons, May 3rd, 1926.

"I have never favoured the principle of a General Strike." - J. H. Thomas at Hammersmith, May 9th, 1926.

"No General Strike was ever planned or seriously contemplated as an act of Trade Union policy. I told my own union in April, that such a stroke would be a national disaster. We were against the stoppage not in favour of it." - J. R. Clynes; *Memoirs*.

The Independent Labour Party at that time was anything rather than independent and was still affiliated to the Labour Party, a majority of Labour M.P.s and ex-cabinet ministers being members of the I.L.P. The attitude of the I.L.P. was essentially that of the Labour Party; its leaders Snowden and McDonald had years before opposed the General Strike in their long disputes with the Syndicalists. In 1926 McDonald was still the leader of the I.L.P. as well as

when, driven by hunger, they accepted defeat. Wages were cut, the working day was increased from seven to eight hours and district agreements replaced the national agreement.

## POST MORTEM

It is now our task to examine the various social bodies and forces at work in the Strike and from a study of their relationship find lessons valuable to the workers in their struggle against the employing class. The Government and the Employers—The old revolutionary statement that “the State is but the executive committee of the ruling class” was well justified by the events of 1926. From the beginning to the end of the struggle the “Constitution” was on the side of the mine-owners. All the old social-democratic nonsense of the State being above classes was cruelly pushed aside by the employers and their government. Although the Conservative Party was in power, the Liberal Party was whole-heartedly behind the coalowners: In times of strike the Popular Front sham of “progressive” Liberalism is flung away and the Liberal coalowner is at one with his Tory brother coalowner. The Popular Front can wait until the next General Election.

A fairly large Fascist movement existed in 1926 in the form of the British Fascisti. Forgotten were the “social message” and “workers’ charter” of Fascism. The Fascists joined the O.M.S. and drove lorries or unloaded ships as did the other blacklegs.

The role of the leaders of the T.U.C. and the Labour Party was particularly despicable for they had always been opposed to the General Strike and never at any time had they withdrawn their opposition to it. By leading a struggle to which they were opposed they played the part of agents-provocateur. It seems that the labour leaders believed that a struggle in defence of the miners was inevitable and that it was better to initiate the fight in order to con-

In the meantime a Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, presided over by Sir Herbert Samuel, presented its report.- The report was vague and woolly on the subject of re-organisation of the industry, but very definite in demanding wage reductions and the lengthening of the working day.

As the renewal of the battle became more certain the miners rallied around the slogan “Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day, no district agreements,” and behind the leadership of the inexhaustible A. J. Cook attempted to arouse the labour movement.

In April the coalowners announced that unless the miners accepted the employers’ demands a lockout would take place on May 1st. On April 20th King George V proclaimed a “State of Emergency” and the special constabulary were mobilised. Hyde Park became a military camp, troops in full war kit paraded the streets and tanks and armoured cars rumbled into Newcastle, Liverpool, Birmingham and all the industrial cities. Warships were sent up the Thames, the Tyne, the Humber and the Clyde.

## ON THE FIRST OF MAY

The executives of the trade unions were called to a conference of the T.U.C. on April 29th. The conference continued to sit during the following day (Friday) while the T.U.C. leaders trotted to and fro between the conference hall and Downing Street, begging Baldwin to find a way out. Said J. H. Thomas: “I suppose my usual critics will say that Thomas was almost grovelling, and it is true...I never begged and pleaded like I begged and pleaded all to-day.”

Saturday, May 1st, 1926 — May Day — one million miners were locked out. The T.U.C. conference assembled at forenoon in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, and received the General Strike Memorandum of the General Council. A tense pause and the roll call began, union by union. For once in a score of years a trade union conference expressed the mood of the workers. For

the General Strike—3,653,527; against—49,911; unable to reply in time—319,000. The executives rose and sang the “Red Flag” and left the gloomy old hall for the sunshine of the streets, to mingle with the greatest May Day demonstration London had ever seen. Strange though it seems, the T.U.C. leaders immediately resumed their begging perambulations to Downing Street. While still trying to avert the strike they were suddenly horrified to learn the fight had already started. Late on Sunday night, May 2nd, the leaders of the miners and the T.U.C. were meeting the full Cabinet at Downing Street when the news of the first skirmish reached them. The Daily Mail was about to appear with a particularly vicious anti-strike article. The type had already been set and moulded, the machines set up and the proof copies run off. When the machinists read the bitter words of editorial hatred of the workers the machines stopped, the Natsopa chapel met and quickly decided to tell the management to delete the leader if they wanted their paper. All other departments met and decided to back the machine room. Monday, May 3rd and no Daily Mail appeared.

## UNWILLING TO WAR

When Baldwin heard the news he jumped up from the table and ended the negotiations. The T.U.C. leaders still grovelled to avoid the fight. Said one of the most prominent of them:

“With other union leaders, I sought an interview with the Prime Minister and his colleagues in a lastminute effort to show that the compositors’ strike was isolated and unofficial, without our approval, and to plead, almost on our knees, for a less cruel arbitrament than he was forcing upon us—an open fight between the workers and the Cabinet. But the Cabinet had left No. 10, and the place was deserted save by a single sleepy attendant.” — Memoirs of J. R. Clynes.

Returning to the miner’s leaders the General Council presented these unofficial and private conversations as terms of settlement, speaking airily of guarantees.

“Mr. Pugh was continually pressed and questioned by Mr, Herbert Smith (the M.F.G.B. president), myself, and my colleagues as to what the guarantees mentioned were, and who had given them. We got no answer.” - A. J. Cook: The Nine Days.

The miners’ leaders contemptuously rejected the shuttlings of the General Council and expressed their determination to carry on the fight. The Council deputation then went to 10 Downing Street and Pugh, addressing Baldwin, said:

“We are here to-day, sir, to say that this General Strike is to be terminated forthwith in order that negotiations may proceed.” - Wednesday, May 12th, 1926.

Once again workers looked at one another with bitter eyes and said “We are betrayed!”

Immediately the police terror was renewed. The number of arrests increased after the strikes, and baton charges continued. On the night of Wednesday, May 12th a meeting of dockers was being held outside Poplar Town Hall when a lorry full of police drove through the crowd scattering injured people to each side. Father Groser, the Vicar, held up a crucifix and told the police the meeting was peaceful. He too was batoned. The same night a vanload of police was driven to the headquarters of the Poplar branch of the National Union of Railwaymen. Without warning the police charged into the building and batoned all within reach.

When the strikers returned to their places of work the following day hundreds of thousands of them were met by victimisation, demands for nonunionism, wage reductions or dismissals. The railwaymen were the chief victims and spontaneously renewed the strike. The threat of a new General Strike without the leaders curbed the viciousness of the employers’ attack, yet even then thousands of men were victimised. «In sullen anger the workers returned and the miners were left to fight alone until November

called upon the Government to seek an armistice. The Archbishop of Canterbury, after consulting the leaders of the churches, appealed for the calling off of the strike, the withdrawal of the miners' lock-out notices and the renewal of the coal subsidy until a settlement was found. The anxiety was not limited to City Councillors and parsons:

"J. H. Thomas, representing the railwaymen, found, early in the Strike, that his duties took him to Buckingham Palace. King George asked him a number of questions, and expressed his sympathy for the miners. At the end of the talk, His Majesty, who was gravely disturbed, remarked, it is said: 'Well, Thomas, if the worst happens, I suppose all this—' (with a gesture indicating his surroundings) '—will vanish?'

Fortunately for Britain and the world, it did not come to the worst. The Trades Unions saw to that." - J. R. Clynes; Memoirs.

## THIRTY PIECES

But the Government was undisturbed; it knew its agents in the Trades Union movement. All during the Strike the General Council was seeking anything which looked like a way out. In the course of their seeking they met Sir Abe Bailey and Sir Herbert Samuel at the former's house. Samuel proposed terms of settlement which included wage cuts and some vague re-organisation of the mining industry. That was sufficient for the General Council who pretended that the proposals were, somehow, coming from the Government. Sir Herbert Samuel was quite clear about this, saying, "I have been acting entirely on my own initiative, have received no authority from the Government, and can give no assurances on their behalf."

The Government, through the Minister of Labour, Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, declared that no terms would be considered or negotiations opened, the strikers must surrender unconditionally.

Think of it—a general repudiating his soldiers on the eve of battle and condemning them for being ready to fight!

In the House of Commons the grovelling went on, but the Government knew the cowardice of the labour leaders and refused to allow them a way out. Baldwin knew the T.U.C. and Labour Party leaders hated and feared the General Strike.

"He (Baldwin) turned on us and quoted an article written some time before by Ramsay MacDonald in *The New Leader*: '

'All my life I have been opposed to the sympathetic strike. It has no practical value; it has one certain result—a blinding reaction. Liberty is far more easily destroyed by those who abuse it than by those who oppose it.'

'I agree with every word of that', commented Baldwin to the hushed and crowded house." - Memoirs: Clynes.

So Baldwin led the employers to battle with an L.L.P. text inscribed on their banners. Midnight, Monday, May 3rd, 1926, the General Strike was on.

## Lions Led by Rats

BRITAIN AWOKE on the morning-of Tuesday, May 3rd, to find the General Strike in being. The railways were still and silent, buses and trams had disappeared, no newspaper was on sale. Unfortunately the strike was not really general. Indeed the T.U.C. wished it to be known as the National Strike instead of the old syndicalist name. The General Council, apparently on the initiative of Bevin, decided to divide the workers' forces into two sections, front line and reserves. The front line composed of the printing trades, railmen, busmen, tramwaymen and other road transport workers and dockers were called out from midnight May 3rd. The "reserve line" of engineering and shipyard workers, iron and steel and chemical workers, the textile industry and the building trade were not called out until the last day of the strike, after the strike had been called

off. This division of the unions' forces is a particularly stupid case of the attempted application of military rules to a social conflict.

The result of the division was to isolate the strikers in certain towns where they formed a minority. Let us consider the example of Coventry, a very compact town devoted entirely to engineering. Such a town does not depend on road transport proportionately as much as London does. Nor is Coventry a railway centre. So, in Coventry the strike was limited to the railmen, a small body of busmen and a few printers. The case of Coventry was repeated in hundreds of other towns given over to, engineering, textiles and chemicals; the strikers were to be small bodies of trade-unionists separated from the mass of their fellow-workers.

"Fortunately the workers thought differently. Again we shall take the case of Coventry as being typical of the whole country. The workers of the Armstrong-Whitworth Aircraft Co, trudged gloomily from Coventry to the aerodrome on Whitley Common. Arriving there they found the hangars guarded by the military. The first arrivals refused to enter while the place was under military control and when their numbers increased a decision to join the strike was made. Returning to Coventry the strikers besieged the district offices of the A.E.U. and sent small parties to the auto factories to inform their fellow engineers. The aircraft workers successfully demanded a district aggregate meeting of A.E.U, members and the meeting decided to close the engineering shops of the city on the 6th of May. Much the same was happening in many parts of the country. The workers were making the strike general.

## **CLASS AGAINST CLASS**

Nor were the workers content to spread the strike—they had to make it effective. Immediately they turned their attention to transport picketing. The stoppage of rail and road transport was almost complete the first day. In London only 40 of the 5,000 buses ran;

## **"We Are Betrayed!"**

AS THE STRIKE developed more workers joined the strikers, the picket lines increased, the tourniquet on the high roads tightened. There was never any slackening of the strike. According to Professor W. H. Crook (*The General Strike* pp.390-6) quoting reports of the Ministry of Transport, 99 per cent. of London Underground workers struck. On the G.W.R. by May 11th only 8.4 per cent. of goods trains ran; on the L.M.S. less than 3 per cent. and on the L.N.E.R. much less than 1 per cent. Railwaymen claim that these figures were exaggerated by running the trains over much shorter distances and so increasing the number of trains, but not the goods carried.

The reply of the Government was to increase the terror. The limits of their own laws were too narrow for them. Thrusting aside the constitution and laws, the Cabinet, no doubt with memories of their Black and Tans, promised immunity to the Armed Forces for any violence they might wish to commit. On May 7th they broadcast this announcement.

"All ranks of the Armed Forces of the Crown are hereby notified that any action which they may find it necessary to take in an honest endeavour to aid the Civil Power will receive, both now and afterwards, the full support of His Majesty's Government."

Nevertheless, the Armed Forces were little used other than as a threatening parade. The chief forces of the Government were the regular police, the Special Constabulary and an extra special body of mounted "specials" recruited from the well-to-do to form Cossack troops. Their chief weapons were wholesale arrests, where the strikers were not too strong, and wild baton charges, often on crowds coming out of theatres' and cinemas. But the strikers stood firm. The two classes confronted one another as over a barricade.

As the strike developed some members of the ruling-class, particularly those running municipalities, showed signs of worry. The Newcastle City Council, with a heavy Conservative majority,

ing under the ban. Local strike committees got around the ban by issuing cyclostyled bulletins. After a few days. the General Council issued the British Worker in reply to Churchill's British Gazette.

In the House of Commons Sir John Simon, speaking as a lawyer, declared the General Strike to be illegal. Much has been made of this since, but at the time it did not have the slightest effect on the strikers. The Government did not limit itself to propaganda. In the Clyde, the Hood (then the world's largest battleship), the Warspite and the Comus threatened the working-class quarters with their guns. Destroyers lay in the harbours of Harwich, Cardiff, Portsmouth and Middlesbrough. The London power stations were manned by naval engine-room ratings, and naval men worked in the London docks. A submarine supplied electric power to the Port of London.

The London docks were besieged by striking dockers and middle-class blacklegs were afraid to go there. The docks were heavily guarded by soldiers in full war-kit and machine guns were mounted everywhere. The Home Secretary met high army and naval officers, "Make your own plans" he said. "Use whatever force you require — I give you carte blanche — but my orders are that the London Docks must be opened at all costs."

Warships took loads of blacklegs down the Thames at night and one hundred food lorries were loaded. Next morning the lorries passed through the East End in convoy guarded by hundreds of police, two battalions of infantry with fixed bayonets, a number of tanks and ten armoured cars.

Every day the strike became more clearly a Struggle between two classes, a fight between the workers and the State. The struggle itself created that clear picture. It was not the result of propaganda as the labour leaders wailed.

"The whole crux of the struggle had been skilfully shifted by propaganda' from a sympathetic protest at the unfair treatment of the miners to a Constitutional struggle between Parliament and Anarchism." (Memoirs: Clynes).

in most towns no attempt was made to run tram or bus services throughout the strike. But quickly the student and middle-class blacklegs appeared on the roads, mainly to drive lorries.

The almost instinctive strategy of the masses was superior to that of their self-esteemed leaders. The workers knew that a modern state depends on centralisation and concentration of power and that centralised power could only be effective by the use of intricate communications, electric power, telephones and telegraphy, railways and road transport. So the strikers and the unemployed formed themselves into mass road and rail pickets.

The road pickets were particularly effective in the mining areas for the miners did not need to picket their blackleg-proof pits. No student ever went down a mine to scab on a miner; they preferred sitting in the driver's seat of a car with a big policeman each side to stop the bricks. A glance at the map will remind us that the chief communication arteries of Britain run north to south and near the Border are narrowed down by the waist of Britain and the Pennine Chain, so that two slim sets of railways and roads skirt the east and west coasts. One of these, the east, runs through the Northumberland and Durham coalfields, and there took place the most effective picketing of the strike.

Throughout the country buses and lorries were overturned and often petrol bowsers were fired. In some towns huge car parks were formed of blacklegs' vehicles by the pickets and their drivers were often "taken prisoner". On the railways a scattered warfare was carried on and the B.B.C. and the "press" reported damage to points, blackleg platelayers running for their lives, telegraph wires cut and signal boxes successfully attacked. The Flying Scotsman express was derailed by miners at Cramlington, Northumberland. The B.B.C. gave a stirring account of the workers' attack on the central railway station of Middlesbrough. At 9 pm. on Thursday, May 6th, the workers stopped a train at a main line crossing in the middle of the town and then in one spirited charge captured the station and blocked the line with heavy wagons.

We must not suppose that the General Council had the slightest sympathy with such robust action. At the beginning they had urged the workers to stay at home or play games. They even suggested that the workers play football with the police. The miners had ideas how a football match with the police should be run. Such ideas are not approved by the Football Association.

## REVOLUTIONARY BEGINNINGS

The mass pickets gave enormous strength to the transport permit committees. These committees had been formed when the Government refused the T.U.C. offer to carry on food transport along with health services. The purpose of the committees was to check the claims of, and grant permits, to those wishing to transport food or other essentials. In most localities employers ignored the government transport committees and humbly presented their claims to the strikers' permit committees. In Northumberland and Durham the O.M.S. broke down and the government's Regional Commissioner at Newcastle pleaded to the Joint Strike Committee to join him in dual control of the food distribution.

The attack on other forms of communication was gravely hindered by the timidity of the General Council. Post Office, telephone and telegraph workers were never called out. The position of electricity supply workers was very obscure. The G.C. talked of cutting off power but maintaining light. In most cases the electrical workers settled the problem by coming out.

While the workers struck at the communications of the enemy they at the same time organised their own. Thousands of cars and motor-cycles, tens of thousands of cycles stood ready at strike headquarters or sped along the roads, the black and yellow T.U.C. label clearing the road before them.

The strike was organised in each town by a hastily formed Council of Action. In some cases these councils were just the

old trades councils or their executive committees. In other cases entirely new councils were formed by delegates or officials from the district offices of the chief unions. In Northumberland and Durham the local Councils of Action were federated into a regional council covering the important industrial area of the northeast, controlling the two coalfields and the ports and shipyards of the Tyne, Tees and Wear, with the great engineering and chemical works and the north-south traffic routes.

The councils suffered a great deal from lack of daily contact with the masses of strikers and most of the stirring and really effective actions were unorganised and spontaneous.

## THE TERROR BEGINS

The Government's chief weapons were a great display of military force, police terrorism and heavy propaganda. Attempts to run the economy of the country were secondary to these. No newspapers appeared (though most newspaper offices published a few duplicated bulletins) until the government issued the British Gazette. Churchill was chief editor. The paper was published at a great loss. In Durham the paper was distributed by dropping copies from aircraft, a method reminiscent of war. In most localities copies were slipped into the letterboxes of working-class houses at night. The B.B.C, however was the Cabinet's chief propaganda weapon.

The T.U.C. could have overcome any effects of the B.B.C. by holding a thousand or so meetings every day. Those were the days of open-air Labour propaganda and crowds would have quickly assembled. Instead the General Council discouraged meetings. 'In common with my principal colleagues, I avoided speechmaking and advised against massmeetings of strikers or sympathisers.' (Clynes).

Printed propaganda for the strike had been prohibited by the T.U.C. ban on ail printing, even the T.U.C.'s own Daily Herald com-