The Social General Strike

Why 1926 Failed

Tom Brown

1940s

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The repeal of The 1927 Trades Disputes Act by the Labour Parliament makes little difference to the prospect of a General Strike. The Labour leaders believe that, for the present at least, they can better suppress strikes by their control of the trade unions than by Parliament. On the other hand, when the workers are willing to engage the class enemy in a General Strike they will not consult Acts of Parliament to do so. During the 1926 General Strike the strikers did not care two hoots whether the strike was legal or illegal.

Why did the British General Strike of 1926 fail? Not because the workers failed to strike. The number of blacklegs was insignificant. The attempt of the middle-class to scab on the strikers was a poor effort and was rapidly breaking down the machines used. About one per cent, of normal train services were running, but only nine days of that caused chaos on the railways for months afterwards. The breakdown was greater than that caused by the air raids on London in 1940–41 and took much longer to repair. The University students and other middle class scabs could not replace the transport workers and certainly did not intend to replace the miners.

Nor did the strike fail because of a fall in the morale of the workers. The Aggregate of strikers was much greater on the last day of the strike than on the first and the fighting spirit was much tougher.

The Collapse of Leadership

The strike failed only because it was called off by the trade union leaders and the workers had not learned to distrust those leaders sufficiently. Worse still, the most important divisions of strikers were organised in trade unions and they were used to obeying instructions from the officials of those unions. The strike was betrayed by the leadership.

But do not let us fall into the error of believing that the leaders called off the strike because of their own cowardice. The Labour leaders economic interests are those of capitalism and in betraying the strike they were defending the economic interest. The trade union leaders never believed in the strike and only led it in order to prevent it being controlled by the workers; they led it in order to ensure its failure. Scores of quotations from the leaders of the Trades Union Congress could be produced to prove this. We have room for but one.

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

True, the workers were rapidly developing an alternative to the leader principle. The Councils of Action were improvised bodies born of local initiative. Even more significant was the spontaneous and widespread creation of mass picket lines and their unqualified success. But in spite of such a hopeful development the strikers still had the habit of obedience to leaders. It was not, of course, the leaders alone who were defending their capitalist interest inside the Labour movement. The trade unions were not only, through their vast invested funds, shareholders in capitalism-they were part of the social order; as much capitalist institutions as the workhouse or the Houses of Parliament.

To wage a successful General Strike the workers must reject, not only certain leaders, but the leader principle, using to the full their own initiative. They must organise, not in trade unions,

but in syndicalist or revolutionary industrial unions (in Britain the two terms mean the same), and they must change their strategy from that of the General Walk Out Strike to that of the General Stay In Strike.

Stay in Striker

Consider what happens in an orthodox strike, general or particular. The strikers, who had the means of production in their hands one day, on the next hand them over to their class-enemies in a nice tidy working condition and go home. The railmen and bus and lorry drivers hand over the vital means of transport, without which modern capitalism and the State cannot exist. The electrical engineers hand over the power stations; the gas workers the gas producers; Dockers, ware-housemen and food factory workers surrender millions of tons of precious flour, bacon, meat, butter, rice and fruit. Engineers vacate arsenals which might be used to arm Fascists. Then they go home to sit by grates which gradually become fireless or at tables with a lessening loaf or go out on to the streets to be battened upon their defenceless heads.

How much better to stay at work and do your striking there. Naturally, to many workers this will seem a strange idea, they are used to striking by leaving the job, not by staying on it, least of all to continuing at work and striking at the same time. But stay awhile, all fruitful ideas must have sounded startling at first hearing, as startling as the first steam-locomotive to a stage coachman.

Look at it this way. We all depend for our very living upon the machines and those who tend them, the employer even more than we. Not only does he depend upon servants to clean his home and cook his meals, to wash him and dress him and to do everything but chew his food for him, he also far more than we ever shall upon complicated mechanisms, telephones, electric fires, automobiles and so on. There he is vulnerable. Even more vulnerable is his industrial and commercial system and his political institutions.

And behind the machine is a man; he has not yet achieved his dream of Kossum's Universal Robots. That man is the striker-all things are in his hands. Industry is in the workers" hands. They control the trains, the ships and the buses. They run the telephone exchanges and the power stations. They warehouse and prepare the food, clothing, shoes and myriad commodities which make life possible. In the Social General Strike the workers decide to cut off these supplies from the employing class and to supply them in full-for the first time in history-to the working class.

Instead of starving, we eat as we have never feasted before, instead of being clubbed, shot and imprisoned we retain the means of defending our lives.

The employing class will be without petrol, heat, electricity, communication or servant. Such a General Strike has been often called The General Lock Out of the Capitalist Class. Perhaps that is a more appropriate term.

To accomplish such an end, however, the workers must shed the old, outworn methods of trade unionism and adopt those of the Syndicalists and Revolutionary Industrial Unionists. Instead of organising in the branch room of the local Labour Club or the tap room of the " Bed Lion " we must organise on the job; the miners in the pits, the engineers in the factories, the seamen on the ships. Only by organising on the job are we preparing to take over industry. By organising in the trade union local branch we are fitting ourselves for nothing greater than taking over the local dart team.

Let us now consider in greater detail the mode of organisation advocated by Syndicalists for the defence of our class and the taking and holding of industry.

Taking Over

The basis of trade union organisation, as well as its growth and practice, make it unsuited, even dangerous to the taking and running of industry. Trade unions are of three types, trade unions proper, that is craft unions, bastard forms of "industrial unions" and general mass unions.

Craft unions may have been justified in the days of handicraft production when a craftsman produced, almost entirely alone, the commodity of his trade. Today, however, by the development of technics and the subdivision of labour many crafts and occupations are necessary to the production of even a simple commodity. If we walk into an engineering factory, for instance, we find the workers already organised by the capitalist. The patternmakers work in harmony with the moulders who pass their work to the machinists. The machinists' work is dovetailed into that of the fitters. Maybe blacksmiths, plumbers, coppersmiths, joiners, sheetmetal workers, boilermakers and painters join in the production of this one commodity. Clerks, time-keepers, inspectors and draughtsmen too, are necessary to industrial process.

Yet, while all may be under one roof, producing one-type of commodity, say locomotives, these workers may be "organised" into forty unions. Disorganised would he a more apt word. To ask a Syndicalist, " do you believe in trade unionism " is like asking a man if he believes in the penny-farthing bicycle.

However, not all of our engineering workers will be members of craft unions, some will be members of an alleged industrial union, the Amalgamated Engineering Union. The A.E.U. is not a true industrial union for it is organised on the basis of craft not industry, though the craft is given a wider meaning than that of the accepted craft unions. Thus the A.E.U. claims members among marine workers aboard ship, in the chemical industry and scores of other industries and for twenty years has had uneasy relations with the Miners' Federation over its attempts to organise coalmining workers. In any case, the A.E.U. is not organised on the basis of industry, but upon the basis of residence. That is, if you work in East London and lives in West London you will, generally be organised, not where you work, but where your bed is.

Redundant Unionism

Besides the craft and pseudo-industrial unions some of the workers will be organised in at least two " general workers unions ", such as the Transport and General or the Municipal and General. These are general unions which "organise" anybody and everybody, engineers, miners, dockers, busmen, shop assistants, clerks or farm labourers. Anybody and everybody in a vast, amorphous disorderly mass.

None of these three types of unionism meets the needs of labour in the modern age. "What is needed is a union which will organise the workers of one factory in a single industrial union-craftsmen, labourers, clerks, storekeepers and draughtsmen-male and female-young and old. An industrial union not split into residential areas, but organised on the job, built up inside of the factory.

The organisational plan of revolutionary industrial unionism allows, of course, for complete organisational relations with other factories in the industry. Industrial unions are organised in each industry and service, mining, textiles, rail, education, building, health and so on. All industrial unions are federated into One Big Union. It is intended that the One Big Union shall be a world-wide union of all workers with autonomous administrations in each country.

We have here a plan of union organisation which is capable of running successfully a Social General Strike, of taking and holding industry and locking out the employing class. Not for the General Strike alone must we organise scientifically-the everyday needs of the workers cry aloud for an efficient union movement to protect their wage packets. During these wage struggles and the smaller disputes and tussles which take place daily on the job, the revolutionary unionists are all the time studying their jobs, the technics and organisation of industry. When the occasion to strike occurs they are thus fitted to take and hold the undertaking.

How would the Social General Strike method be applied? On the morning of the strike the revolutionary unionists no longer obey the foremen and managers, each person or gang take over their own job. Where liaison, delegates or committees, are needed such have already been organised.

Who'll Pay the Wages?

Who will pay the wages? No one. Money, the most powerful weapon of the capitalist is discarded. The banknotes in his wallet are so much fluff. But we must eat to live. Very well, the canning factories, the docks and warehouses are already in the hands of the workers. The flour mills and bakehouses, the dairies and packing houses are controlled by them. The dockers, railwaymen and lorry drivers deliver the food to the factories and working class districts, the shop assistants and canteen workers supply it to the workers and their families.

Distribution will not be according to the amount of money a person has but according to his need. Large families will receive more than small families or single persons. Children will have first call on milk and sweets. Delicacies such as poultry and grapes will go to the hospitals and invalids instead of to wealthy overfed idlers. Farm labourers and smallholders send food to the cities.

Miners will continue to send coal to the surface, and the railwaymen's' industrial union will deliver it to the factories, gasworks, power stations and distribution centres. Power station workers organised in their syndicate will produce electricity and distribute it to the workers' houses, factories and transport undertakings.

Necessary communication among related industrial plants will be the responsibility of the telephone and other post office workers.

Distribution

Stores of clothing held by textile mills and shops will be distributed to the most needy by the Textile and Distributive Syndicates. Hospital and other health service workers will continue their work through their unions. Water and other municipal services will be carried on by the Municipal Workers' Industrial Union.

Newspaper compositors and machinists will refuse any longer to print the lies and provocations of the employing class, as they refused on the eve of the 1926 General Strike in Britain. But instead of walking out of the print shops they remain at work and turn the newspapers into organs of the General Strike.

At a glance, any worker can see the obvious advantage of such a strike weapon and its great superiority over the old strike method of starving for three to six months. Superior because we eat instead of starving, but the Syndicalist method is effective not only because of the strikers seizure of the commissariat for the strikers, it also uses the boycott against the employing class.

All domestic and personal servants who were members of their union would leave their employment. Employers would be forced to cook, make beds, do shopping and run their own errands. Postal workers would cease all communications with bourgeois districts. No buses, trains, trams or lorries would pass through these areas or touch buildings where blacklegs were employed, housed or fed.

No food or drink would be delivered to these places. The municipal workers would strike against sweeping their streets or emptying their dust-bins. Gas, water and electricity would cease to flow to them. The weapons of starvation and deprivation which the capitalists have so often used against the workers will be used against them.

It is obvious that faced with such a situation the employing class will offer anything, a shorter working day, higher wages, holidays with pay, as the French capitalist class did when confronted by the stay-in strikes of the workers of France in 1936. Anything to get back their control of industry.

The greatest mistake the French workers ever made was to hand back to their employers the industries and services they held so successfully. Once having taken control of industry class-conscious industrially organised workers would continue to hold that industry, establishing the principles of common ownership and workers' control of industry, abolishing capitalism and the wages system and distributing the good things of life, each according to his needs.

Stay In Strikes in Europe

The engineering workers of Italy successfully seized the factories in 1920. During the occupation they were fed by the Peasants' Syndicates, co-operatives, distributive workers and railwaymen. After four weeks occupation they returned the factories to the capitalists in return for a shorter working day, a wage increase and several minor concessions; within two-years of the return of the factories the workers of Italy were defeated by Fascism.

The workers of France in 1936 took possession of factories and many other undertakings in one of the most successful strikes ever known. Unfortunately, they returned them to the employing class in return for holidays with pay, wage increases and a shorter working day. Almost, at once the Popular Front government put in power just after the strike by Communist, Socialist and Liberal votes began the piece-meal reconquest of the gains made by the strikers.

Syndicalists have always taught that it is not sufficient to practice the stay-in-strike for wage concessions, but that it is necessary to take and hold the means of production as the Spanish Syndicalist workers did in 1936. By holding the factories, mines, railways and all means of production and distribution the workers established the principle of "Workers' Control of Industry"⊠. Each factory is run by the workers of that factory assembled in meeting and by the delegates elected

by them, such delegates to be subject to instant recall by the people who elected them should they not fulfil their duties. Each factory or group of workshops is, in the same way represented on the district council of its industry. Each district is represented on the national council of the industry. All industries and services are federated to a National Council of Labour integrating the whole social economy of the country, distributing work and materials, cutting out waste, preparing statistics and assessing distribution.

By this means the social economy is integrated without centralisation, that clumsy red-tape bound machine of the bureaucrat. By having the affairs of an Industry controlled by the persons working in that industry, by district affairs being controlled by the district and factory affairs by the workers in That factory; by control from below instead of from above and by exercising the principle of election and recall federalism, instead of centralism, becomes the principle of the new society.

Do We Need Foremen?

Some say to us. "But, you will still need foremen." We do not agree. A workman who knows his job does not need a foreman-a workman who does not know his job needs the advice and help of his mates. In any case a foreman is rarely appointed because of his superior knowledge or gift of leadership. Marriage, membership of certain clubs, drinking, fawning and bluff, all may open the door to promotion. However if " foremen " were necessary under Workers' Control, we do not pretend to be able to forecast every detail of the new society, but this we do know, any " foreman " or such person would be appointed by the men and be subject to their recall.

Here we see a new principle at work-control from below. At present, and in a State Socialist society, all promotion is from above downwards. We see what the latter means at out work. If a foreman of mediocre ability is about to promote some one from the bench to the chargehand's desk and he spots a worker of outstanding ability who would make a much better foreman than he, does he promote that worker? Hardly! To do so would be to prepare his own downfall, certainly to endanger his own job, so he usually promotes somebody who will not be a serious rival. So it goes on, right up to the top- selection by mediocrity! The worker is usually able to recognise a fellow worker's outstanding skill and acknowledge it. The workers would have no social or economic motive in keeping a good man down, instead, it would be in their interest to nominate him to more responsible work.

Having said that, under the principle of social ownership, the miners would control the mines and engineers the metal working factories, we are often asked, " But who would run the hospitals and who would look after municipal services such as water supply? Of course, hospitals would be run by the hospital workers, all of them, organised in the Health Workers' Syndicate. Municipal services, such as water supply and street cleansing, would be the responsibility of the Municipal Workers' Syndicate. Similarly, education would be the work of those who had spent, their lives studying and practising the art of pedagogy. Of course, the workers of these three syndicates would work in co-operation with the patients, house-dwellers, scholars and parents respectively.

Here is a system of industrial democracy, the only true democracy, not the choice of choosing Tweedledum or Tweedledee every five, eight or ten years and being controlled by him and his partners for the period between, but the control of one's own job and environment, the control of one's own life. The government of men by men gives way to the administration of things.

As to distribution, the Syndicalist method of distribution is free; a system of common ownership and Workers' Control must have a system of free and common distribution to supplement, it. That is, all the good things of life will be produced in plentiful supply and distributed by the distributive, municipal and transport workers to whoever needs them, as much as he needs them. Just as now a person may borrow from the public library as many books as he needs, so he will be allowed as much food as he can eat without payment. Once one had to pay to cross bridges, enter parks and even walk along roads, now we may do that freely. So in a Syndicalist society cinemas and theatres will be us free as museums or parks: railways, trams and postage will be as free of charge as roads and bridges are now.

Some will say that the greedy will ear too much if there is enough for all. Well, water is probably the most precious of commodities, in use value that is, but any one will give a thirsty stranger a glass of water-a pailful if he can drink it. No one worries about some one drinking more than his share of water. Certainly no one hoards pails of water in miserly style, for water being freely to hand, appeals not to the miser or glutton. If bread were as plentiful as water, who would eat more than his share?

Power to the Workers

"But you would still have criminals and hooligans." Yes, we would still be pestered for a few years by these dregs of capitalist society, and the workers would know how to protect their new-won society from these miserable misfits and from counter-revolutionists and Fascists. The workers' syndicates would establish Workers' Militias as did the Spanish workers in 1936, workers patrols and whatever other means of workers' defence were necessary, if needful, the syndicates would arm their militias. But that would not be state power-politics, for the state is the special force of public repression used by the ruling class, old or new, against its subjects the people. The armed syndicates would be a general force-a people in arms. After a while it would be unnecessary for workers to carry arms and these would gradually be laid away, as people during the late war laid aside their gas masks when they discovered that no gas attack was likely. Full freedom would be born and develop naturally and in its own time.

How different when the Revolution gives birth to a new state as in France in 1789 and Russia in 1917. In Russia for example, power came into the hands of the Bolshevik Party, who used it to disarm the workers and build a regular army, police force, secret political police and use spies, gaolers and judges to maintain their political power. In a political revolution power is in the hands of a ruling party. In a social revolution power is in the bands of the workers. If the workers allow themselves to be disarmed by a new government then counter-revolution succeeds.

The Syndicalist Social General Strike then aims at the conquest of the means of production by the workers. We are now poor and enslaved not because of lack of reforms made by politicians, but because the employing class own and control the means of production, without access to which we cannot live. So long as others control the means whereby we live so long shall we be slaves. Only by taking and holding the means of distribution can the workers be free.

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