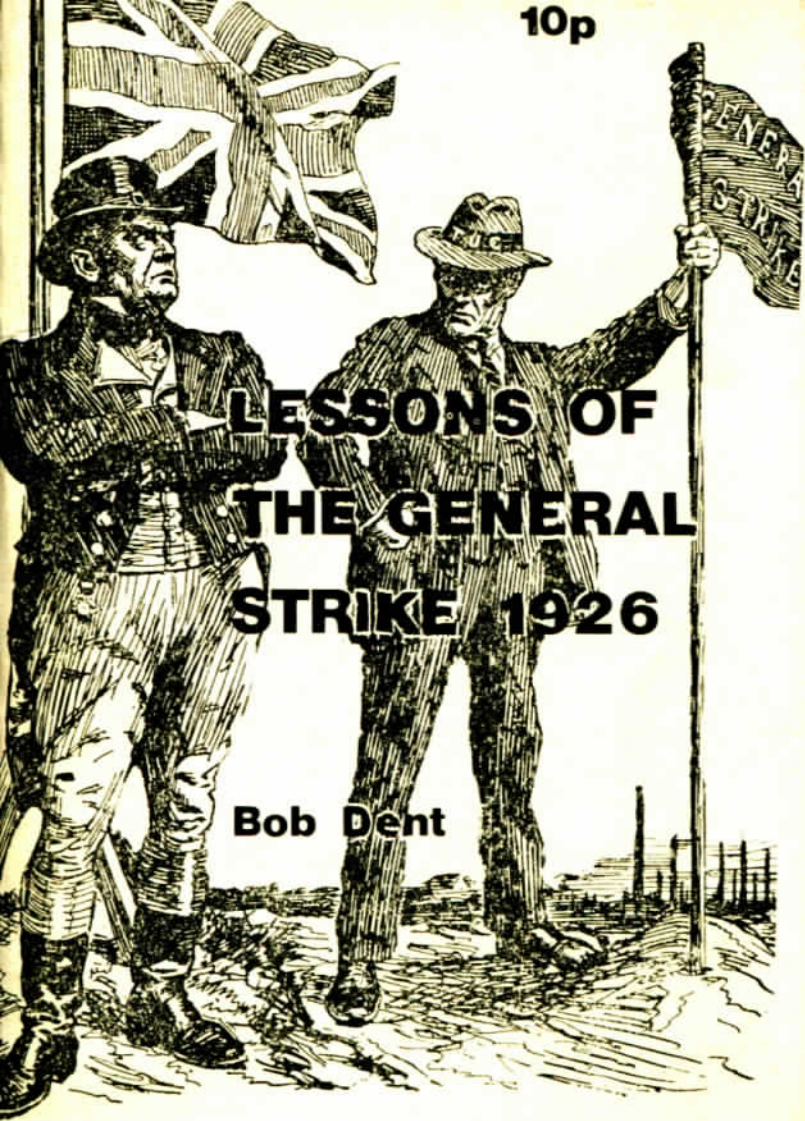


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**LESSONS OF
THE GENERAL
STRIKE 1926**

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INTRODUCTION

Talk of a general strike is in the air. The last few years have seen more days 'gained' through strikes than any since 1926, the year of the only general strike in British history. But what exactly happened in that year? Very few books have been published on the subject. Even fewer are easily accessible. The aim of this pamphlet is to take a look at the role and function of the three main elements of the strike: the government, who used all the power of the state to smash the strike; the trade union leaders, who betrayed the cause of the strike throughout, and the rank and file workers, who, placing too much trust in these leaders, failed to push the strike through to a successful conclusion. In 1926, the general strike failed. If there was another, would its fate be the same, or can the lessons of that year be applied today?



BACKGROUND DETAILS

Red Friday

In 1925 the mineowners, claiming that exports and prices had dropped, proposed a 25% cut in wages and a return to the 8-hour day, i.e. a return to the miners' working conditions of 1921. The miners' union refused to negotiate. The owners said they would terminate the current agreement on July 31st and deal with the matter at local level. The transport and rail unions agreed to strike in support of the miners as from July 31st. The General Council of the TUC promised support. Meanwhile, the government, insisting that a subsidy to the coal industry was out of the question, floundered about trying to get the miners and owners to compromise. Neither side would budge. A court of inquiry reported and was sympathetic to the miners. It was ignored. Late in the evening of Thursday July 30th the Cabinet met in a state of crisis. The government agreed to give a subsidy until May 1st 1926 provided both sides withdrew their threats. A full inquiry was promised. The following day the owners withdrew their termination notices and the strike was called off. July 31st was a clear victory for the miners. The threat of united action had forced the government and the owners to climb down. It was known as Red Friday.

July-May

During the 9-month period of the subsidy the government did little talking and much preparation for a showdown (*see below*). The unions did much talking and little preparation. In August Sir Herbert Samuel was appointed chairman of a Coal Commission. The Commission met from October to January 1926 and published its report in March. Its recommendations included long-term measures which would better the working conditions of the miners (amalgamations, profit-sharing, pit-head baths, etc.) and immediate ones including an end to the subsidy and a reduction in pay. The miners' leaders rejected the report out of hand. *Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day* was their slogan. Throughout April there were endless meetings between the

government and both sides of the industry. The owners prepared to cut wages as from May 1st. The government would not consider a further subsidy. On Thursday April 30th a conference of trade union executives voted to support a general strike in support of the miners.

May 3rd (Monday): Beginning of strike (for strike activities, see below). As the strike intensified there was absolute dead-lock.

May 6th (Thursday): Samuel, returning from a holiday in Italy, proposed negotiations. J.H. Thomas, the Secretary of the TUC General Council, met Samuel at the Reform Club and agreed to talk. The government stressed that the strike must first end and that any agreement reached through Samuel would be entirely unofficial.

May 7th–10th: Over the weekend a TUC negotiating committee held secret meetings with Samuel at the house of Abe Bailey, a wealthy South African mineowner.

May 10th (Monday): The miners' leaders met Samuel and rejected his proposals. (This latest 'Samuel Memorandum' differed from his previous recommendation only in that it urged the future formation of a Mines National Board to survey the industry.) A split was emerging between the miners and the General Council, who were in favour of acceptance.

May 11th (Tuesday): Negotiations continued. Thomas met with several government officials and gave false assurances that the miners would end the strike. In the afternoon the General Council sent a message to Samuel saying it would proceed without the miners and end the strike. At an evening meeting between the miners' leaders and the General Council, the former refused to accept the Samuel Memorandum or to end the strike.

May 12th (Wednesday): The General Council informed the government that the strike would be terminated.

May 13th: Circulars were sent to unions calling off the strike. These were generally met by disbelief and anger. Protest telegrams flooded into the TUC. The return to work was not immediate. On the days immediately following the official stoppage, the numbers of strikers continued to rise. Gradually, however, a slow return to work began.

May 14th: The government issued its own proposals, which included immediate wage cuts. The miners' union continued to strike, and did so on their own until hunger and poverty drove them to desperation.

November 26th: A miners' delegate conference called off the strike. Wages were reduced and hours increased.

THE GOVERNMENT

In an interview with his biographer years later, Baldwin, the Prime Minister in 1926, when asked why the government had given way on Red Friday, replied: 'We were not ready.' This blunt statement explains a lot, for immediately after the miners' initial victory the government settled down to prepare for a strike the following May. The Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies was created. Ostensibly an unofficial body, it enjoyed full government support. Its aims were widely publicised in the press, 'to organise those citizens who would be prepared to volunteer to maintain supplies and services in the event of a general strike', i.e. to blackleg and smash the strike. It was headed by Lord Hardinge of Penghurst and attracted other similarly unemployed nobility, as well as a sprinkling of Fascists. It appointed local commissioners to take over the running of the localities should the strike occur, and attempted to recruit transport drivers, messengers, clerical workers and the like. Meanwhile the government itself resurrected the Emergency Committee on Supply and Transport—a body consisting of representatives from all the ministries and which had remained idle since the rail crisis of 1919. By late November 1925, a scheme was outlined and a secret circular (No. 636 from the Ministry of Health!) was sent to local commissioners outlining plans to control transport, food and fuel, to maintain law and order, and to encourage recruitment. Preparations were made to take over the nation's haulage companies. A skeleton structure was thus being prepared behind the scenes while out front the Samuel Commission was preparing its report.

Nor was the government adverse to the use of more direct tactics. In the autumn it just so happened that 12 leading

members of the Communist Party were arrested under the Incitement to Mutiny Act of 1797! Similar arrests were made of leaders of a South Wales coal strike at the same time. By these moves, the government hoped to put out of action for several weeks elements which it thought might be harmful to its strategy.

It soon became obvious that the Samuel recommendations were not acceptable to the miners, yet the government this time were absolutely unwilling to extend the subsidy to the industry. The soft-liners in the Cabinet hoped for a compromise through the TUC; but the hard-liners, headed by Churchill, argued that, as the authorities were fully armed and prepared, a blow could be struck against the unions which would paralyse them for years.

On May 2nd, the day before the strike started, the government invoked the Emergency Powers Act. This short Act (it consists of only 3 paragraphs!) is one of the most powerful that any British government can use, for it enables the government, in times of crisis, to take whatever measures it sees fit to maintain law and order and essential services. It is literally as vague as this! The effect of it is to give the government in power the cover of legality for any actions which it may want to take, thus neutralising-beforehand any criticism of the authorities based upon legal or constitutional grounds. So much for democracy and the impartiality of the law!

Thus, legally covered and organisationally prepared, the government was ready to sit it out, though not entirely passively, for it still had in its arsenal the two traditional weapons of all governments—propaganda and force. On the propaganda front, the Cabinet was clear and consistent. Baldwin set the tone: 'It is not wages that are imperilled, it is the freedom of our very constitution'. Winston Churchill in the official *British Gazette* followed suit. Slandering the strikers day by day, he consistently claimed that the whole strike was against the constitution, against the monarchy, against the 'British way of life', against the public interest. Behind every move he saw, or at least said that he saw, the threat of revolution. The essential function of this propa-

ganda was to instil fear in the trade union leaders and to bring them to heel—for throughout the strike the General Council maintained that this was purely an industrial dispute and had no political implications whatsoever. Thus the ideological field, the battle for ideas, was abandoned by the TUC. The government made good use of this advantage in its mouthpiece, the *British Gazette*. Paper supplies were commandeered for the government and when objections were raised, Churchill, taking everything to extremes but thereby bringing out more clearly the implicit assumptions of the authorities, replied 'I do not at all agree with your idea that the TUC have as much right as the government to publish their side of the case'. If the General Council had seriously wanted to conduct an effective political propaganda campaign (which they didn't) they would probably have found it necessary to seize and hold paper supplies by force (which they certainly wouldn't have).

When those in power believe that a threat exists to their authority, they will not shrink from any means to preserve that authority, least of all the means of violence. During the general strike, troops were used whenever possible to convey essentials and do the work of strikers. At all times they were stationed on the alert to quell any disturbances which might get out of hand. Typical of the 'trouble spots' was Liverpool, where two battleships, three destroyers and a troopship were stationed in the Mersey throughout the duration of the strike. To show that the government did not regard these manoeuvres as empty threats, the *British Gazette* announced on May 8th '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.' Government pronouncements became increasingly military as the strike progressed. The following is taken from the *Gazette* of May 10th: 'Troops had descended on their objective before the enemy had time to realise they were there.' This referred to an attempt to break the picket of the London dock on May 6th, when a fully armed battalion of Grenadier Guards escorted by 20 armoured cars, moved into the docks and set up Lewis guns



Sunday Worker, 8 August 1926

at vantage points, while inexperienced and inept volunteers attempted to unload the waiting cargo.

Meanwhile, the Emergency Powers Act was enabling the police to have a very busy time hassling and arresting pickets, leafleters, 'loiterers' and the like. Baton charges on crowds were a common sight, and riots in Leeds, Hull and Glasgow were ferociously put down. Political militants were especially victimised. On May 5th, police raided the premises and smashed the equipment of the Communist Party's *Workers' Daily*. There was no let up in these repressive state activities. Even starvation was considered, for on May 11th, the day before the strike ended, the Cabinet prepared an Order in Council prohibiting banks from paying out monies to any person 'acting in opposition to the National Interest'. Fortunately, the authorities had no time to put this into effect.

Politicians say that government, parliament, the courts, army and police are neutral institutions which stand above the conflicting interests of society. During the general strike, however, this state machinery consistently worked on the side of the employing class. Blacklegs were given protection, pickets were prosecuted. Every encouragement was given to persuade the union leaders to give way, while the pressure on employers was negligible. The government saw the issue almost totally in terms of constitutionality versus illegality and the threat of revolution. Indeed, the class-consciousness of the ruling authorities was manifest well before the strike broke out, as its preparations show. The real problem from the government's point of view was not that the miners were receiving a pittance but that millions of men were refusing to work for their employers.

THE TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP

The activities of the TUC before and throughout the strike clearly indicate that this body in no way believed that the strike could, or even ought, to be successful. In the nine months prior to May, while the government was busy preparing for a showdown, the TUC did absolutely nothing

except talk and submit proposals to the Samuel Commission.

A conference of trade union executives was not convened until the last minute, a few days before the end of the government's subsidy period. When it did meet, the executives just sat around, playing cards and waiting for news of the negotiations, which finally broke down on Saturday, May 1st. Reporting to the conference, Jimmy Thomas, the General Secretary, declared: 'I begged and pleaded like I have never begged before'. But to no avail. The government was standing firm. The conference then agreed to call a strike from Monday, May 3rd. At this point the General Council did an amazing thing: After the conference had broken up and after the miners' leaders had left London for the provinces, it sent a message to the Prime Minister saying that it was ready to see him!! On Saturday night Thomas and the rest went to see Baldwin and began discussing the Samuel Report. Throughout Sunday the meetings continued and it seemed that an interim agreement was being reached when, in the early hours of Monday morning, the Cabinet, using the excuse that strike action had already begun at the *Daily Mail* (see below), broke off all negotiations. A worried General Council was left to head a general strike for which it had not prepared, and which it had struggled to avoid right up to the very last minute

If the strike could not be avoided, at least its effects could be minimised. Thomas gave the game away in the House of Commons on May 13th, the day after the strike ended: '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.' The TUC, afraid that militancy might go too far, aimed at exercising a centralised direction over all strike activity. Inevitably, the General Council spent more time trying to subdue its own militants than in fighting the battle. It soon issued warnings to all affiliated branches explaining how to overcome 'disorder' among the ranks. Criticising those who wanted to organise workers' defence militias, its recommendations preferred to emphasise the need for adequate entertainment for strikers: 'The General Council suggests that in all districts where large numbers of workers

are idle, sports should be organised and entertainment arranged', declared the first issue of the *British Worker* — the General Council's paper. Many local officials must have been relieved to hear such bold words. The bulletin of the Cardiff strike committee contained the following gem: 'Keep smiling. Refuse to be provoked. Get into your garden. Look after your wife and kiddies. If you have not got a garden, get into the country, the parks and playgrounds.'

The *British Worker* was a model of respectability. Its editor laid down the policy in the first issue: 'Our task is to keep the strikers steady and quiet.' Following up, in its 'Message to All Workers', the paper re-iterated the General Council's view that the dispute was purely an industrial affair, and pleaded—as it continued to do in every subsequent issue—for complete trust in and obedience to the General Council. A special committee exercised a censorship over its content. The committee publicly announced that 'the whole content of the journal should be such as to convince the public that the General Council is in strong control of the strike situation, and that everything which occurs is according to plan'. Had this been the case, nothing would have happened for, as we have seen, there was no plan! No doubt the subtlety of this statement pleased the TUC no end.

On the second day of the strike (Tuesday, May 4th) a circular was sent to all local organisations who were instructed to 'confine their statements on the situation to the material supplied by the committee and to add nothing in the way of comment or interpretation'. Not surprisingly this authoritarian pronouncement backfired in many places. Manchester printers refused to print the committee's statements. Fenner Brockway was despatched post haste to quell this mini-revolt. Instructions to cease publication of the *Bradford Worker* and the *Preston Strike News* were both happily ignored. The General Council was not getting all its own way.

As the strike deepened and spread, the General Council desperately sought a way out of the situation. Its chance came on Thursday, May 6th, when Sir Herbert Samuel, recently returned from another Italian holiday, broached the

question of negotiations. Thomas, meeting Samuel at the Reform Club, gave the go-ahead for talks. The miners' union was not consulted. Secret meetings were held over the weekend, even though the government had made it clear to the General Council that Samuel was acting in an entirely unofficial capacity. The situation was full of contradictions. On Saturday (May 8th) Thomas, at a rally in Hammersmith, had the gall to declare, 'I have never been in favour of a general strike'. And on the Monday, after three days of negotiations over proposals the miners had already rejected, the General Council had the cheek to issue the following message: 'Stand firm. Be loyal to instructions and trust your leaders'. On the same day the miners' leaders met Samuel for the first time and rejected his proposals out of hand. By Tuesday an open split had occurred between the miners' union and the General Council. It was Thomas again who stated the latter's position most clearly: 'Never mind what the miners or anyone else says, we accept it'. The TUC informed the government on Wednesday that the strike would be ended.

Thus the General Council had completely betrayed the miners' cause. It called off the strike without the miners' consent, and without receiving any kind of guarantees. Baldwin was able to announce on the BBC, quite truthfully, 'The strike has ended without conditions entered into by the government.' The miners' union announced that they were 'no party in any shape or form' to the TUC decision. But by now, the damage was done.

The trade union leadership entered the strike both unprepared and unwilling. It did little to ensure its success, being more concerned with controlling militancy than winning the struggle. At the first opportunity it opened talks with Sir Herbert Samuel, who represented no-one but himself. And, finally, it ended the strike completely unconditionally and behind the backs of the miners. These were the actions of men who were afraid, afraid of what their followers were pushing them into.

The greatest weakness of the General Council was political. While troops and warships were stationed at the ready, while volunteers were being recruited as special constables, while the government invoked the Emergency Powers Act to

give itself a legal carte-blanc, the trade union leaders were blandly insisting that the general strike was merely an industrial dispute like any other, completely unrelated to politics. By refusing to challenge the government politically, the General Council gave half the game away before the first die was cast. The fear of politics had again been admirably articulated by Thomas. Speaking in the House of Commons on May 3rd, he said: 'I have never disguised that, in a challenge to the constitution, God help us unless the government won'. With 'leaders' like this, who needed enemies?

Note: It may seem unfair to constantly quote J.H. Thomas as representative of all the trade union leaders. It is true that Thomas always expressed the most extremely reactionary views, yet in a sense he was merely articulating the hidden assumptions of TUC policy—for although there were indeed several 'left' members on the General Council, when it came to the crunch they always voted for the line laid down by Thomas. Seen in this way—from the perspective of what was actually done (or not done)—then Thomas was truly representative.

A NOTE ON THE LABOUR PARTY

The position of the Labour Party before and during the general strike was at times harmful, but generally irrelevant to the course of the strike. Being an organisation aimed at securing parliamentary seats, it had always looked down on and feared direct industrial action.

Way back in 1911, four Labour MPs had tabled a Bill which proposed to make strikes illegal unless thirty days notice had been given in advance. Labour's election programme of 1922 declared that the party was 'the best bulwark against violent upheaval and class war'. The first Labour government had even been prepared to invoke the Emergency Powers Act against a threatened rail strike.

Soon after the victory of Red Friday, Ramsey MacDonald, the leader of the party, spoke at an ILP summer school: 'The

government has simply handed over the appearance, at any rate, of victory to the very forces that sane, well-considered, thoroughly well-examined socialism feels to be probably its greatest enemy'. MacDonald was no militant! But neither was the Labour Party as a whole prepared to see the coal crisis as a crisis of the whole social and political system of capitalism. The scheme it submitted to the Samuel Commission aimed at 'securing fair treatment for producers and, as far as possible, to keep such questions outside the realm of political controversy'.

During the strike, the party had no function at all as a party. Its members, where they did get involved, did so as trade unionists or individuals, rather than as agents of the party. The irrelevancy of the Labour Party was a function of its attachment to parliamentary politics—for in times of crisis, when power is determined in the streets and factories, parliament is shown up in its true light—an empty sham, a con machine. This political bankruptcy and utter helplessness was highlighted by Ramsey MacDonald in a speech delivered a few hours before the strike began.....'I have said so in the House of Commons. I don't like it: honestly I don't like it: but honestly, what can be done?'

THE RANK AND FILE

Observers of all shades of opinion have noted that the strength of the strike lay in the organisational talents of the rank and file workers. As in all crisis situations, the generally unused and unseen capacities of ordinary people break through the dual barriers of bureaucracy and alienation and give us a glimpse of an alternative order.

Symbolic, but also typical, was the way in which the strike began. We have seen how the General Council was trying to negotiate a settlement at the last minute. Late on Sunday night, news filtered through to the Cabinet that workers on the *Daily Mail* had already begun to strike. What had happened was that machine men had refused to print the paper's editorial, which was viciously attacking the strike movement. They refused to continue work even

though George Isaacs, the Secretary of NATSOPA urged them to do so! The Cabinet used this incident to break off negotiations and so the strike became inevitable. It is ironic that it was the unofficial actions of some workers against the advice of their union leaders which sparked off the strike.

Up and down the country the initiatives passed to local Trades Councils, many of which formed themselves into more broadly based councils of action. Such bodies had first appeared in August 1920, when industrial action was being waged against the government's military interventions against communist Russia. Calling on this experience, plus that of long years of trade union and strike activities, the councils of action played a major role in the development of the strike, especially in the big provincial cities, which were not only geographically but also politically distant from the London centre. The *British Worker*, for example, took six days to reach Newcastle. Perhaps it is not surprising therefore that the Tees-side area was one of the most militant and best organised.

The TUC had given instructions not to interfere with the production of food and essentials. This caused immense confusion when government lorries carrying such goods were intercepted by pickets. The Northumberland and Durham joint strike committee, however, had issued the following strategically perceptive statement as early as May 2nd (2 days before the strike commenced): 'Whoever handles and transports food, the same person controls food; whoever controls food will find the 'neutral' part of the population rallying to their side. Who feeds the people wins the strike.' Dual power reached its zenith in the North East area, so much so that the Civil Commissioner, Sir Kingsley Wood, had to come to the committee begging for permission to carry out his instructions. The implications of such a situation were imprinted on the minds of many witnesses. A sheet-metal worker, writing in his union journal after the strike, wrote: 'Employers of labour were coming cap in hand, begging for permission to do certain things.....I thought of many occasions when I had been turned away from the door of some workshop in a weary struggle to get

the means to purchase the essentials of life for self and dependents.'

Although not as extensive as in the North East, all areas could testify to the capacity of the rank and file. News-sheets sprang up in almost every district and flourished, being much more in touch than the censored *British Worker*. Some, like the Aberdeen bulletin, continued after the end of the strike. In Coventry, coal was distributed to households at prices lower than the industry had charged. Fifty-seven motorcyclists got together in Bolton and organised themselves into a communications network. In Bethnal Green, the local library was occupied and served as an organising centre. Many areas recruited strikers for a workers' defence corps to try to combat police and troop activity. Such arrangements were immediately condemned by the General Council and the Labour Party.

The effect of the strike grew everyday. The TUC had originally issued a call for only a partial strike: coal, transport, building workers, etc. The success of the strike wave embarrassed the trade union leaders. The electricians wanted to cut off supply, but the General Council said no. Reports of the Trade Councils to the TUC consistently tell that their greatest difficulty was trying to keep the men in work! Nor were the strikers prepared to sit idly at home, or stroll in the parks, as the TUC would have liked. Mass pickets closed the London docks until fully armed troops moved in. Neither force nor sabotage was out of the question. Serious riots occurred in Leeds and Glasgow, trams were overturned and burnt in Hull. On May 9th, the Flying Scotsman was derailed at Cramlington, near Newcastle. There were hints of rent strikes and mutinies in the army. They were only hints, but the cumulative effect of the strike was enough to make a frightened TUC clutch at straws. After only four days of the strike they started talks with Sir Herbert Samuel. After a further five days they had talked themselves into ending the strike. The call to end the strike was at first greeted with disbelief and then with anger. Telegrams of complaint flooded the TUC. Demonstrators marched against the decision. And, at first, the strikers refused to obey their 'leaders'. Indeed, a statement was made in the House of

Commons to the effect that, from the time when the strike officially ended 24 hours previously, 100,000 more workers had come out.

What happened next highlighted one of the most glaring contradictions of the whole movement. Although nominally in control, the TUC had played no effective part either in preparing or sustaining the general strike. The strength of the strike lay in the rank and file, whose massive show of solidarity both surprised and frightened the TUC. But when the General Council called off the strike, the movement behaved like a lost sheep, as if the capitulation of the trade union leaders was the be all and end all of everything. It is true that the strike continued for a few days, but this was due more to momentum than determination to fight on without the General Council. Slowly, a return to work began under the guidance of union officials who regarded the decision as 'inevitable'. It is this mass-psychological phenomenon of helplessness when faced with a betrayal by the 'leadership' which needs serious study. For in actual fact, although the General Council had reached an agreement with Samuel, nothing had changed. Production remained at a standstill; the strike was spreading; at the centre of the dispute the miners stood firm; the government had given no assurances. Only the General Council had 'chickened-out'. Why, then, did the strike fail?

WHY THE STRIKE FAILED

The English working class is the oldest working class in history. By 1926 it had accumulated years of experience in industrial struggle. Its trade unions were the oldest in the world. It is this history which gave the movement so much of its strength. The capacity for order and discipline in organising the practicalities of the strike was a function of many years spent in the hard school of factory struggle.

But it was this history which also provided a limiting framework. What was needed, particularly when the TUC backed out of the strike, was the imagination and spontaneity to continue and extend the struggle without the



traditional trade union leadership. Imagination and spontaneity are inevitably not the strongest characteristics of a society which has experienced a total bourgeois cultural hegemony for generations. This hegemony of urban technological values, which stress order, efficiency, discipline and control, could provide the strikers with a useful base for organising a massive strike on the conventional lines. But a general strike is of different sorts. It is a weapon implicitly political, implicitly revolutionary. Such a strike requires a different set of values and a different cultural approach. History moves in a paradoxical way. The oldest working-class found that its long years of experience furnished it with both its strengths and its weaknesses.

Moreover, we must remember that the English ruling-class is also the oldest of its kind in the world. By 1926 it had learnt many lessons. Relying on ideological rather than military power, it had practised the art of paternalism to perfection. (Paternalism, and its co-partner subservient acquiescence, could be found at all levels of society in 1926. Consider the following report from the Dartford Labour Party: 'The instructions of the TUC were accepted without question and the faith and confidence of the men in that body was a religion.') In the political field, paternalism had generated the parliamentary system. This had had the effect of displacing the concept of 'politics' towards getting seats in parliament and away from challenging the power structures which controlled the everyday life of the worker both inside and outside the factory. The whole of the labour movement, however, didn't fall for the parliamentary trick. But those that didn't (the Syndicalists, industrial unionists, and guild socialists of the pre- and post-war years) went the other way and concentrated almost entirely on industrial struggle at the point of production; thus curiously acquiescing in the narrow definition of politics as that which concerns parliament and politicians.

These complexities, themselves the product of an advanced liberal-democratic capitalism, served to leave the political field open to the state. As still happens today, the government during the general strike made great use of the concept of the 'National Interest', saying that the strikers

were harming the public. This false dichotomy between strikers and public was left unanswered by the Labour politicians, who accepted the argument, and by the trade unionists who, seeing the strike as purely a workers' industrial struggle, fell into the trap of treating other sections of the population as 'marginal' to the cause. This political failure resulted in a lack of real unity. For example, one of the problems facing the strike movement was that the unemployed were greatly tempted to blackleg during the strike—official relief being sometimes refused on the grounds that work was available (i.e. strike-breaking). No real strategy was conceived either by the TUC or the rank and file for overcoming this. Many unemployed workers organised themselves but often received no support from strikers. Representation of the unemployed on the Liverpool Council of Action was refused, and a meeting called by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement in the city was banned on the grounds that only the Council had the official capacity to organise meetings! And remember, Liverpool was one of the most militant areas!

Similarly, the role of women (or lack of it) during the strike is significant. No-one argued that the active participation of women was necessary. No special women's committees seem to have been formed apart from a few money-raising ones. The point that it is the women's labour in the home that keeps the men and therefore the system going, was missed by everyone.

The government made good use of all the strike's weaknesses. The strikers, afraid of creating 'disturbances', had generally not taken over food distribution. This left the authorities in the powerful position of being able to say that, while the strikers were starving the population, they themselves were feeding the people. The food dilemma highlighted one of the main contradictions. The government said the strike was revolutionary. The strikers said not. By not taking over food distribution, order and respectability were maintained. But the authorities were able to make great propaganda out of the fact. In order to prevent this, the strikers would have had to take over the food industry. But this would have been revolutionary!

A general strike must either go the whole way or be defeated. But a general strike which goes the whole way is a revolution. The TUC was not prepared to lead a revolution—it therefore could not lead a successful general strike. The strike could have been successful had the rank and file not placed too much trust in their leaders, if they had pushed ahead and organised for *themselves* the conditions for success.

That they did not do this indicates only too well that an advanced capitalist state is very wise to rely not so much on armed but on ideological power—power which, in the last analysis, rests not on blatant propaganda but on internal self-control and the fear of freedom. For what defeated the general strike was not so much the policeman in the street as the policeman in the mind.

Note: Any state relies on a combination of economic, ideological, and armed power. The degree to which each of these three factors is present differs from state to state and from one period to another. Faced with the general strike in 1926, the British government found that its economic power was paralysed. Its troops and police were not really sufficient to suppress the movement by force—it was too widespread for that. Hence it was clearly the ideological factor which predominated in 1926.

A NOTE ON THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND OTHER MILITANTS

The failure of the General Strike was also the failure of the English revolutionary movement. By 1926 many of the best socialist militants were in the Communist Party, which had been founded in 1920. Communist militants were particularly predominant in the Minority Movement—a left-wing trade union pressure group. The Movement contributed a great deal of vigour and determination to the strike but, like its parent body, concentrated more on slogans urging strikers to 'insist' this or 'demand' that of the TUC rather than suggesting concrete proposals for rank and file self-activity. Militant motions against capitalism could be passed, as at

the September 1925 TUC conference, but they did not help the ordinary worker lift his little finger to change the conditions of his life.

The Party itself was dominated by Comintern politics, and although many rank and file CP militants contributed to the successes of the movement, there was no overall political strategy which could meaningfully relate to the conditions of the time.

Many of the Party's declarations were totally confusing and misleading. An executive statement issued in the autumn of 1925 urged the formation of factory committees while at the same time told workers to 'follow the TUC and insist on the formation of the Workers' Alliance under the supreme authority of the General Council'. After the strike (on May 13th) the *Workers' Weekly* informed its readers that 'the Communist Party.....declares that the fundamental failure of the general strike was a failure of leadership'. Many puzzled readers may have recalled that the same paper on January 8th had published the slogan 'All power to the General Council' as part of the communist policy!

The Party consistently called for a move from defensive to offensive action. But the only goal it could offer in the long term was its own policy of nationalisation and the formation of a Labour government!

COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN?

In recent years we have witnessed an upsurge in militancy among many sections of the population—women, students, claimants, prisoners, blacks, even clergy. Among the employed population, new tactics have emerged which demand the involvement of greater numbers of participants, eg. mass pickets, factory occupations, etc. Mental workers—historically a non-militant sector—are also beginning to contest their boring, repetitive tasks; teachers, technicians, office workers, clerks, even civil servants, are on the move. The standard of living makes no difference as this upsurge incudes both unemployed and employed, both low-paid

hospital workers and highly-paid airline pilots.

It is possible that a spark ignited in any one of these areas could, unannounced and spontaneously, set off a chain of strikes, occupations, demonstrations, and events somewhat similar to the May explosion in France in 1968. The gaoling of the five dockers last year and the unofficial strike wave which emerged was only the tip of the iceberg.

What will it be like this time? What are the possibilities? We can never be certain. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we study closely events like the 1926 general strike, not only to avoid a repetition of errors but, more importantly, to gain clues as to what constitutes a successful strategy. In this way, our future hopes need not be too abstract.

We have a wealth of experience to draw from, not only from our own history but also from abroad. But wherever we look, we find that the message is always the same: **unless ordinary people themselves take the power and initiative to change their lives for themselves, then nobody else will do it for them.** If the facts, arguments and ideas in this pamphlet can at all help us to do just that, then its publication will have been worthwhile.

Stop Press — From *The Times*, 22nd March 1973

Labour puts brake on May Day militancy

By Michael Hatfield
Political Staff

Labour Party policy-makers put the brakes on their own militancy yesterday although they

came out in support of offering assistance to the unions in the planned day of protest on May 1 against the Government's counter-inflation.

Significantly, the party is to write to individual affiliated trade unions offering support in the way of speakers if requested and not to the TUC as a body. The prospect of a rebuff from the TUC was not far removed from the minds of many members who are conscious that the TUC leadership does not want the May Day demonstration depicted as a political struggle.

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