General Strike, Britain 1926

The revolution that might have been

Miners' leader AJ Cook

By Stan Crooke

STRIKERS playing football against the police. Oxbridge undergraduates and retired army officers running the trains and trams. The Australian and English cricket teams carrying on the Test matches regardless. Dames and debutantes peeling potatoes in Hyde Park. The "stake-in-the- country" people mucking in to keep things moving.

This is the image of the British General Strike of 70 years ago this month which the establishment has passed down to posterity — a very British affair; one which was sensible enough to refrain from disrupting the hallowed British way of life.

And this image contains something of the truth.

The idea of the general strike

AT the close of the nineteenth and opening of the twentieth centuries the international working class had added the weapon of the general strike to its arsenal in the war against capital. In the decades before the British General Strike, Belgium, Russia, Sweden and Germany had all experienced general strikes — Belgium more than once.

Drawing on the experience of such mass strikes, Trotsky wrote: "The general strike is one of the most acute forms of class war. It is one step from the general strike to armed insurrection... If carried through to the end, the general strike brings the revolutionary class up against the task of organising a new state power... A real victory for the general strike can only be found in the conquest of power by the proletariat."

But such understandings and interpretations of the general strike were alien to the traditions of the British labour movement.

The British labour movement had grown up and shaped itself politically and organisationally before Marxism became a mass current in the working class internationally. On the eve of the General Strike, the Communist Party of Great Britain numbered just 5,000, while the trade unions, even after the post-1920 periods of slump, had some 5.5 million members.

Successive union amalgamations had created a number of massed trade union battalions, especially in transport and engineering. And the Labour Party had been established at the turn of the century as the unions' political wing, to represent and advance their interests in the Parliamentary arena.

But the British labour movement operated within the confines of the capitalist system. Its politics were confined to the perspective of advance within capitalism. What Lenin termed the ideological front of the class struggle was neglected almost entirely. And the cumbersome, top-heavy labour movement bureaucracy constituted a conservative dead-weight bearing down on the working class.

Nowhere was this contradiction between massive organisational strength and debilitating political and intellectual weakness more clearly manifested than in the 1926 General Strike. While the numbers involved surpassed earlier general strikes in other countries, only the most modest of goals was set for it by a labour movement leadership which had not wanted the strike in the first place, and sought to end it as quickly as possible once it was underway.

The build-up

THE immediate post-war years saw a series of major, and generally successful, battles by the trade unions: the Clydeside General Strike of 1919 for a 40-hour week, the successful strike by 300,000 Lancashire cotton operatives for a 48-hour week and a 30% wage increase, the victory of railway workers in preventing wage-cuts, and the successful campaign of 1920 against British intervention against the recently victorious Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union: London dockers went on strike to stop the export of military hardware for use against the Bolsheviks.

But the end of the post-war boom at the close of 1920 heralded a series of reverses for the working class. By June 1921 unemployment had rocketed to two million. Between 1921 and 1923 union membership fell by over two million. Exploiting the opportunity, the bosses pressed home their offensive throughout industry.

The onset of a short-lived industrial recovery in 1923 once again tipped the balance of forces in the opposite direction, restoring working-class morale and halting the decline in union membership. The result was a series of strikes, many unofficial, some of them offensive rather than defensive in character.

The experiences of Ramsay MacDonald's disastrous Labour government of 1924 encouraged workers to rely on trade union industrial struggle to defend their interests. The first Labour government condemned the strikes which continued through 1924, and frequently played the role of strike-breaker. JR Clynes, one of its ministers, openly boasted that in its handling of strikes the government had "played the part of a national government and not a

class government."

In November 1924 Baldwin returned to power with the largest Tory majority for half a century. Under pressure from the Treasury and the Bank of England, and in the mistaken belief that the experiences of the Labour government had demoralised the working class, the new Tory government decided on a return to the gold standard (that is, to use gold as an index against which to measure the value of the pound sterling).

Given the international currency fluctuations which had occurred since Britain had come off the gold standard in 1914, a return to it could be achieved only through a massive attack on domestic wage rates. Consequently, by mid-1925 engineering employers were demanding wage cuts and longer working hours, textiles employers were demanding a 10% wage cut, and craftsmen in railway workshops were confronted with demands for wage cuts of 5%.

The miners

NOT for the first time, miners found themselves bearing the brunt of the employers' renewed offensive.

In 1914, almost one in ten of the male labour force in Britain was employed in the coal industry, making mining the largest and most important industry in the country, and the miners' union (Miners' Federation of Great Britain, MFGB) a major force in the trade union movement.

During the war years, mining had been placed under government control and the MFGB successfully achieved an 8-hour working day, a minimum wage and national wage agreements. Despite the failure of the MFGB's attempt in the aftermath of the war to win a 30% wage increase, a 6-hour working day and full nationalisation of the mines, including a measure of workers' control, miners remained a prime target for the employers' offensive.

Exploiting the slump of 1921, the government worked hand-in-glove with the employers to attack the miners. The date of the ending of the government's war-time control of the mines was brought forward by five months (to 31 March 1921), and the mine-owners demanded abolition of national wage agreements and wage cuts so severe that they meant a return to a level lower than pre-war earnings. When miners refused, the employers locked them out.

Deserted by the leaders of the transport and rail unions on "Black Friday" (15 April 1921) the miners battled on hopelessly against the mine-owners' lock-out for another three months, until they were forced back on terms worse than they might have had in April, though the owners did agree to continuation of a nationally agreed minimum percentage wage.

Between 1920 and 1924, real wages in mining fell more drastically than in most other trades, and by 1925 miners formed the single largest group amongst the unemployed. The return to the gold standard in April of the same year raised added difficulties to the export of coal and this intensified the crisis of the coal industry: by the early summer coal exports had slumped, 60% of output was being mined at a loss, and 400 pits had been forced to close.

The mineowners renewed their attack on pay and working conditions. A set of demands forwarded to the MFGB on 1 July called for savage wage-cuts, abolition of the residual minimum percentage wage, an end to national bargaining and a complete reversion to district agreements. The philosophy behind the renewed offensive had been spelt out in a speech by the Scottish mineowner Sir Adam Nimmo to the National Liberal Club in January:

"The wages of those engaged in the industry cannot permanently rest upon considerations of the cost of living, or what the men may call a living wage... British coal has to compete with the coal produced in other countries... It is of no avail to suggest that the wages received do not permit of the miners having a proper standard of living."

"Red Friday"

THE MFGB appealed for support to the TUC General Council. The Council resolved to "give the miners their complete support... and to co-operate with them wholeheartedly in their resistance to the mineowners' proposals." A Special Industrial Committee and a Coal Embargo Committee were set up by the General Council, threatening an embargo on all movements of coal if the miners were

locked out for rejecting the employers' demands.

But the government and the employers were not ready for a fight, and the apparently imminent conflict was averted by government intervention. On 30 July ("Red Friday") the government announced a nine month subsidy to the coal industry, during which time a Royal Commission headed by Sir Herbert Samuel was to conduct an inquiry into the industry and draw up proposals for its future.

Yet "Red Friday" was not a straightforward example of the effectiveness of militant trade union solidarity. Pressure from a leftward shift in trade union organisation in the preceding years, and fears of an intensive industry-wide employers' offensive should the miners win certainly influenced the General Council. But the Council was also anxious to appear to be militant in order to avoid the possibility of having to act militantly. There was a big element of bluff in a situation where employers were not bluffing.

As National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) President, Marchbank, put it: "On Black Friday they nearly had the government on their knees. If they could bring the government into a similar position on this occasion, it might not only prevent a stoppage, but save the miners' position. But for this they wanted more support."

The threat of a boycott was seen as sufficient in itself to compel government intervention and a withdrawal of the mineowners' demands. This is underlined by the absence of any serious preparation to implement the threatened coal embargo.

Indeed, as the scheduled date of its intended implementation approached, leaders of the transport and rail unions became increasingly and openly sceptical about the viability of attempting to black all coal transportation.

Walter Citrine, soon to become TUC General Secretary, expressed concern after "Red Friday" that the General Council's posture might have appeared as a challenge to the "constitutional" government:

"If the challenge of the movement could have been given the appearance of a denial of the government's right to govern, and as the beginning of open war between society as at present constituted and the whole organised working-class movement, a very serious situation might have arisen."

Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald went one better. He condemned the Tories for giving in on "Red Friday": those who believed that "direct action against society offers great prospects for improvement in working class conditions naturally feel that they have won a fine triumph... The mishandling of the government handed over the honours of war to those who may be inclined to toy with revolution."

In reality though, the government had only climbed down for the purpose of preparing itself for confrontation in the future. While a minority of Baldwin's cabinet wanted a retreat to allow time for further negotiations, the more hawkish elements saw retreat as a tactic to guarantee victory in the future battle.

The government was not yet prepared for a full confrontation. The cabinet meeting of 30 July 1925 concluded: "Whilst the [strike-breaking] organisation was complete, it was only a skeleton and could not be put into operation until volunteers had come forward... There was general agreement that in the event of a strike on the scale now threatened, the maintenance of the essential public services could be effected, but only by a great and costly effort."

Churchill made the same point more bluntly five months later in the House of Commons: "We therefore decided to postpone the crisis in the hope of averting it, of coping with it effectually when the time came."

The government made a tactical retreat to prepare for conflict when the nine-month subsidy ran out.

The government prepares

AS early as February 1919 the cabinet had set up a special committee on "industrial unrest" to prevent or undermine strikes. In the aftermath of "Black Friday" [1921] the organisation was allowed to collapse, but was subsequently revived in May 1923. The Labour government of 1924 maintained it in being and even discussed using it against striking dockers and tramwaymen. But, as Baldwin's climbdown in 1925 indicated, the strike-breaking apparatus had not been sufficiently developed to cope with a possible general strike.

Jimmy Thomas, railwaymen's leader, called off on Black Friday, 15 April 1921, a sympathetic strike of rail and transport workers in support of the miners who had been locked out by the coal owners determined to drive down wages.

From "Red Friday" onwards, the government began to speedily rectify, from their own point of view, this situation.

Within a week of "Red Friday" Joynson-Hicks, the Home Secretary, had drawn up plans for a complete overhaul of the government's strike-breaking machinery. Permanent headquarters were to be set up in each of the regions into which the country had been divided and key civil servants seconded to a central headquarters in London.

In post and railway centres, employers were recruited to work with the official apparatus. A communications network was built up between the London central headquarters and local authorities and police forces. £10,000 was allocated for spending on the stockpiling of resources.

A steel-helmet Civil Constabulary Reserve was formed, eventually numbering 200,000, with 40,000 in London alone. The navy was given responsibility for moving supplies and, if necessary, troops. Thus they could bypass the railways.

A nominally independent Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) was set up in September 1925, for the purpose of recruiting and training "volunteer labour" to act as strike-breakers. But Joynson-Hicks had clearly been involved in the establishment of the OMS, and its claims to a spurious independence were further undermined by its co-operation with the government's official strike-breaking machinery in the run-up to the General Strike and its incorporation into that machinery on the outbreak of the strike itself.

At the beginning of October 1925 Joynson-Hicks reported to the cabinet: "Various unofficial [sic] organisations had been formed for this purpose (of recruiting "volunteer labour") including the OMS, the Chambers of Commerce, the Fascisti and the Crusaders... (the volunteers) would, in case of emergency, be at the disposal of the government." Preparations by the government continued through 1925 and into 1926. Local food officers were appointed. Access to the media during the strike was organised. Scabs were enrolled from engineering colleges and electrical firms to run London power stations. Road commissions were appointed and ordered to organise schemes to train drivers for heavy lorries.

On the eve of the strike Joynson-Hicks reported to the cabinet that 98 volunteer service committees and 147 haulage committees had been set up, 331 local food officers had been appointed, and arrangements for food supplies and emergency electricity generation were virtually complete.

Despite this government preparation for all-out class war, the leadership of the labour movement, mesmerised by a fear of appearing to act contrary to the norms of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, made no comparable preparations for the General Strike.

The TUC dawdles and squirms

AT no point did the General Council or the Special Industrial Committee seriously draw up plans for a general strike. Instead, they pinned their hopes on the Samuel Commission coming up with a compromise formula they could accept and thereby avoid confrontation with the employers and their government.

The 1925 TUC Congress, despite much left rhetoric, rejected proposals advocating stronger powers for the General Council, empowering it to call strike action in order to assist "a union defending a vital trade union principle." Epitomising the mentality of the labour movement bureaucracy, General Council member Clynes, the recent ex-Minister, argued against the proposals on the grounds that "I am not in fear of the capitalist class. The only class that I fear is our own."

A month later the Labour Party conference likewise neglected the question of the general strike looming on the horizon. Instead, it stepped up the witch-hunt against the Communist Party and adopted a new "Labour and the Nation" programme. As Cramp, the then Party chairperson, put it: "We transcend the conflict of classes."

The Co-operative Society followed suit. Still owed £200,000 from credit dispensed during the 1921 miners' lock-out, it wrote to both the Special Industrial Committee and the General Council asking for the funds of the whole trade union movement to be offered as security for any credit offered to miners in the event of a strike or further lock-out. Both the Committee and the Council turned down the Co-op's request, leaving local union organisations to reach arrangements with local Co-ops as best they could.

Rather than prepare for the general strike, the union bureaucracy attacked those who urged such preparations. In February 1926 the Special Industrial Committee warned trade unionists not to be influenced by "unauthorised and unofficial suggestions which are being made in many quarters regarding the mining problem." Citrine, a month later, argued against "rank and file control" as incompatible with a co-ordinated policy in the hands of a "trade union general staff."

In both cases, the objects of attack were the Communist Party and the rank-and-file trade unionists organised by it in the National Minority Movement, both of which warned of the inevitability of the coming confrontation and advocated the establishment of local Councils of Action to prepare for it.

As the date of the ending of the subsidy approached, the lack of preparation became increasingly apparent. Citrine, TUC General Secretary after 1925, questioned the very viability of a general strike: "A general strike... is a literal impossibility... In some imperfect way services essential to life must be carried on."

This was true. And the socialist solution was for the working class to take over the running of such services. But this would have meant challenging capitalist power structures, and that Citrine and his fellow-bureaucrats were not prepared to do. Thus, instead of challenging those structures, the General Council ended up supinely offering to assist the Tories in maintaining vital services on the eve of the strike.

It was a proposal indicative of the nature of the incumbent leadership, failing to make any serious preparations in advance of the strike. Instead, it offered to help the government undermine its own projected strike!

At the beginning of March 1926, the Samuel Commission published its conclusions. Often vague and imprecise, and sometimes mutually contradictory, they amounted to reorganisation of the coal industry at some point in the future, under private ownership not through nationalisation (though nationalisation of Coal Royalties was proposed), and, more immediately, abolition of the government subsidy and wage cuts of up to 13%.

Neither the government, nor the mineowners, nor the MFGB were prepared to accept these proposals. The Labour Party leaders and the TUC General Council were!

According to Ramsay MacDonald, the Commission's report was "a conspicuous landmark in the history of political thought... the stars in their courses are fighting for us." And the General Council regarded pay-cuts in exchange for re-organisation in the future as a fair enough exchange.

Dismissing the miners' response of "not a penny off the pay, not a second on the day" as a "mere slogan" which would "get them nowhere", members of the TUC General Council and Special Industrial Committee spent the six weeks before the General Strike in desperate negotiations to try to find a compromise. Thomas, the NUR General Secretary, described the TUC leaders' position as "almost grovelling", though there was little justification for the qualification "almost."

The General Council convened a meeting of union executives on 29 April. Even now, with a lock-out of miners only two days away, Pugh, chair of the TUC, appealed for negotiations between miners and mineowners on the basis of the Samuel Commission report; he expressed optimism about intervention by Baldwin.

The meeting authorised the Special Industrial Committee to continue its efforts to secure an "honourable settlement", and endorsed the view of Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) General Secretary Bevin that no mention should be made of a possible general strike, for fear that it would "place a weapon in the hands of our opponents."

After another round of abortive negotiations, the reconvened meeting of union executives voted on 1 May by over 3.5 million to less than 50,000 in favour of the General Council's "Proposals for Co-ordinated Action", that is, for a general strike. The MFGB also agreed to permit the General Council to assume primary responsibility for negotiations, provided that there was the "fullest consultation between the two bodies."

Using the latter agreement as justification, the General Council, despite having committed itself to a general strike from midnight on 3 May, resumed negotiations with the government, attempting to knit together a package involving a temporary extension of the subsidy, reorganisation of the coal industry, and wage cuts. Given the known opposition of miners to the wage cuts, this was treacherous.

But negotiations again broke down on 2 May, at the government's initiative, after members of the print union NATSOPA at the *Daily Mail* refused to typeset an editorial denouncing the imminent general strike. Prepared to sink to any depths to avert the strike, the General Council sent a message to Baldwin disowning the NATSOPA members, stressing that they were "entirely without responsibility" for the NATSOPA members' action, and deploring the "precipitous and calamitous" curtailment of negotiations.

Even now the General Council was not done with its grovelling. In the face of the government's demand that withdrawal of the general strike notices was a precondition of further negotiations, the General Council replied that this might be possible if they could be privately assured that the government accepted their latest "peace formula" "not in detail, but in principle."

With just two hours to go to midnight on 3 May, Labour Party leaders Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson, acting as intermediaries for the General Council, met Baldwin, Churchill and other members of the Tory cabinet in a last-minute bid to avert the General Strike. MacDonald and Henderson were infinitely more concerned to avert it than the members of the Tory government.

The attempt failed. At midnight the General Strike began.

The strike is solid

"WE have from all over the country reports that have surpassed all our expectations. Not only the railwaymen and transport men, but all other trades came out in a manner we did not expect immediately. The difficulty of the General Council has been to keep men in what we might call the second line of defence rather than call them out."

This TUC statement on day one of the strike (4 May) is indicative of the General Council's overall attitude throughout: despite the breadth of support in the labour movement, the General Council saw the struggle as purely defensive. They expended considerable energy on stopping workers in the "second line" from immediately joining the strike. Their principal concern was ending the strike as quickly as possible.

They hoped that action by unions in the "first line" would be

enough to force a few concessions out of the government, and that these could then be sold to the membership as a basis for ending the strike.

The "first line" involved four main groups of unions: transport, print, metal and heavy chemical, and construction (save those employed in housing and hospital work). Electricity and gas workers were instructed to "co-operate" by ceasing the supply of power for industrial but not domestic purposes: technically this was impossible to carry out.

Confusion was caused by different unions choosing different definitions of "first line" industries. The leadership's lack of militancy led to differences of opinion between the bureaucracy and membership in individual unions as to whether or not they should be out on strike, notably in electricity and construction.

Given the General Council's lack of preparation for the strike, and its concern to prevent it, the TUC's running of the strike was inevitably ramshackle. Initially, the General Council set up six sub-committees. But the responsibilities assumed by the sub-committees overlapped, leading to conflicting instructions, the sub-committees were not always recognised by the unions, and nor did they show much success in fulfilling their intended functions.

On 5 May, therefore, the sub-committees were wound up and replaced by a Strike Organisation Committee (SOC), run by TGWU General Secretary Ernest Bevin and General Council member Arthur Purcell. But confusion resulting from the ambiguities of the TUC's instructions, and dissatisfaction with the two-stage nature of the strike continued to characterise the strike: the SOC complained of "unofficial" strike action, and union militants attacked the SOC for "appearing to be chiefly concerned with finding excuses for keeping men at work."

Considering the lack of TUC preparations, and of preparations on a local level, the response from the rank and file membership of the unions on the first day of the strike was a sign of their enthusiasm for a fight. The working class was raring to go! Up and down the country, the response was overwhelming.

In Manchester, for example, the tramway system was shut down completely, and other transport workers were also solid from the start. Work at the docks was at a standstill, and the ship canal was not working, while there was also widespread support from members of the "second-line" Electrical Trade Union.

Similarly, in Birmingham, 90% of workers employed in the tram, omnibus and waterways services struck from midnight on 3 May. Support from local railway workers was equally widespread. The local strike committee reported to the TUC: "The extent of the stoppage is much greater than anyone anticipated, and all road, passenger and carrying traffic has been stopped... on the railway the stoppage is complete... in the factories the difficulty now is to keep people at work. All are anxious to be out and in the fight."

In the surrounding towns, such as Walsall and Wolverhampton, it was a similar picture. In Wolverhampton the bus and tram services were shut down completely. The local strike committee, as too the West Bromwich strike committee, reported difficulties in keeping people in work who were not classified as "first line." Engineers in Walsall, where there was equally widespread support for the strike, solved the problem by deciding that they were really involved in transport work and consequently could strike.

There was strong support in the smaller towns too. According to TUC reports, support in Nottingham, for example, was "unexpectedly fine", while 6,000 walked out in Leicester on the strike's first day. Ironically though, some areas of traditional militancy, such as the "Red Clyde", were initially only partially drawn into the strike. Why? Engineering and shipbuilding workers, who formed the backbone of the local labour movement, were classified as "second line"!

Scabs

WHILE workers rallied to the cause of the miners, the government sent into action the army of scabs it had recruited, organised and trained in the nine months between "Red Friday" and the start of the General Strike. Its scab army was a broad, cross-class alliance, stretching across society from aristocrats to lumpen proletarians.

Peers worked in Printing House Square, while the motor pool in Horse Guards Parade run by Lord Curzon was a popular rendezvous for affluent Londoners. Running canteens for scab lorry drivers became a popular upper-class pastime. *The Sketch* of 12 May reported:

"The cook-house brigade at the Hyde Park canteens for food supply transport men included many well-known people. Lady Betty Butler is the younger daughter of the 7th Earl of Lanesborough and is the unmarried sister of the Duchess of Sutherland. Lady Askwith is the wife of Lord Askwith, and Sir George Arthur Bt., M.V.O., was secretary to Field Marshal Earl Kitchener."

Ex-colonial civil servants and retired military personnel were of particular importance in scabbing on the railways. As one of them reminisced: "I immediately volunteered for the Great Central Railway... sleeping happily on 3rd class carriage seats and jeered at by the bloody-minded mutineers... a Lieutenant Colonel as driver... Our driver carried a revolver which he said he would use if he were attacked."

Students were also an important source of recruitment to the government's scab army. At Edinburgh University, over 2,000 students, out of 3,953, enrolled as "volunteer workers" during the strike (in recognition of which a local ship-owner donated £10,000 to the university). At the neighbouring St. Andrew's University, virtually all 650 students signed up as scabs. This pattern was not repeated everywhere, however: at Glasgow University, where the Labour Club had campaigned against attempts to enrol strike breakers, only 300 out of 5,000 students scabbed.

But the strike-breaking organisation also managed to recruit some working-class support. The Newcastle Civil Commission, for example, reported problems in recruiting special constables, but none in recruiting scab dockworkers. In London, cargoes were kept on the move at the docks by Covent Garden porters. The extent of victimisation and of strikers being replaced by scabs after the General Strike is an indication of the government's success in recruiting a working-class contingent to break the strike.

Hand-in-hand with organising the scabs went the government's strengthening of the police force with police auxiliaries. On 6 May the Civil Constabulary Reserve was set up for the purposes of crowd control. Run by the War Office, it drew its membership from the Territorial Army and former soldiers.

To encourage recruitment to the Civil Constabulary, the War Office issued the encouraging statement "there is no objection to officers of the Reserve, or Officers, offering their services to local organisations for the maintenance of order and vital services." An appeal was made for more London special constables by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who described the duties of the former as "one of the most important obligations on citizenship, and incumbent upon those who set a value on loyalty to their king and country, and to the cause of good and orderly government."

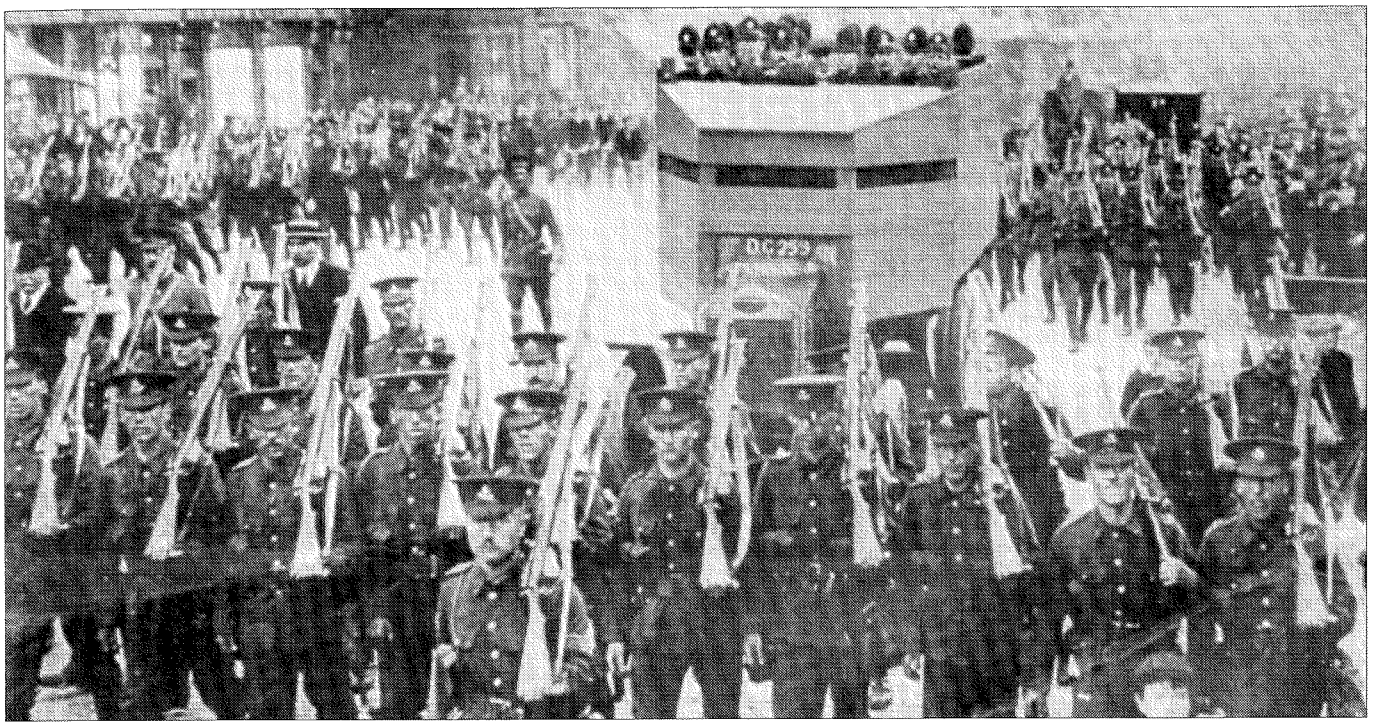
The number of special constables recruited in London in the course of the General Strike rose from 3,035 (4 May) to 51,807 (11 May). The Civil Constabulary Reserve grew to 9,000. And another 200,000 "second reserve" policemen were mobilised elsewhere in England and Wales.

The armed forces

THE scabs, the police and the police auxiliaries were backed up by the armed forces. On the third day of the strike the government announced: "All ranks of the armed forces of the crown are hereby notified that any action which they may find 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."

The following day two battalions of Guards, with supporting cavalry and backed up by armoured cars, occupied the London docks. Armed troops kept a round-the-clock guard on buses at transport depots. These, rather than scabs or police auxiliaries, were used for the transportation of food supplies. Cavalry regiments, such as the Royal Horse Guards stationed in Hyde Park, were also ready for action throughout the strike.

Equal in importance to the army in strike-breaking was the navy. Battleships and destroyers took up position in the Clyde, the Thames and the Mersey, and dropped anchor in the harbours of Cardiff, Newport, Hull, Harwich, Middlesbrough and Portsmouth. The navy took over Tilbury ferry and ran petrol from the Thamesside depots into London. By the end of the General Strike, 33 of 61 electricity gen-



Police and army protect scabs

erating stations in and around London were being run or partly run by the navy.

Having prepared for the eventuality of a general strike since "Red Friday", the ruling class and its government were able to mobilise and put into action a scab army, backed up by the standing armed forces of the state. While members of the British "fascisti" distributed anti-strike propaganda in London, the scabs moved into action in the docks, transport networks and power stations, strike-breaking in the shadow of the deployment of the armed forces.

Organising the strike: Councils of Action

THE running of the strike was, by contrast, more spontaneous. Though the small membership of the Communist Party had campaigned for the establishment of Councils of Action in preparation for the strike, only in a few areas had such campaigning made any impact. Not until the beginning of May did the labour movement really set about organising itself for battle.

Trades Councils played a central role in this. The TUC had placed upon Trades Councils "the responsibility of organising the trade unions in dispute in the most effective manner for the preservation of peace and order." From the TUC's point of view, this meant that Trades Councils should play a modest co-ordinating role in the localities. In practice, though, driven by the unfolding logic of the general strike, Trades Councils became a force and a power in their own right.

Moribund Trades Councils were revived. Existing ones were broadened out and drew in delegates from working-class organisations beyond just trade unions. Thus they effectively transformed themselves into Councils of Action: joint committees of delegates from unions, political parties, unemployed movements and other working-class bodies which ran the strike and took over many of the functions normally carried out by agencies of the bourgeois state.

Between 400 and 500 Councils of Action emerged in the course of the General Strike. The Councils and their individual sub-committees were responsible for the day-to-day running of the strike: finance, propaganda, communications, transport, entertainment, picketing, prisoners' support, relations with the police, arbitrating in inter-union disputes, etc., etc.

In areas where there was a strong right-wing control over the labour movement, the emergence of Councils of Action was often successfully blocked. Control kept in the hands of individual union sub-committees cut across the drive for local unity and subverted the development of the strike's potential for undermining the everyday functioning of bourgeois society.

Attempts to link up the local Councils of Action on a broader regional and national scale met with only limited success. In Edinburgh a central strike committee existed as of 1-2 May, operating from the NUM headquarters in Hillside Crescent. In Glasgow, a central strike committee set up the seventeen local area strike committees.

Efforts to set up similar centralised organisations met with some success in London, on Merseyside and the Tyne, and in East Glamorgan and South Lancashire. Elsewhere the individual Councils of Action remained isolated from one another throughout the strike. But the establishment of such Councils was an achievement in itself, given the efforts of right-wing leaders to block involvement in them by union branches, local Co-ops, and Labour Party branches.

Of course, the ruling class opposed the Councils of Action. Thus, for example, the Welsh mining village of Mardy, where the local strike committee enjoyed virtually absolute powers, was denounced in the Welsh press as "Little Moscow", the scene of a "reign of terror and violence", of "the red reign of terror in lawless Mardy."

The labour movement bureaucracy and the ruling classes had good reason to fear and oppose the Councils of Action and Trades Councils or strike committees which functioned as Councils of Action. These bodies ran the strike. In the context of a general strike, that could only mean beginning to run society itself, by making inroads into the power exercised by the ruling classes and its agencies in the "ordinary" functioning of capitalist society.

For example, deciding who would be allowed to move, or paralysed, and organising food supplies to the workers. The logic of an escalating conflict was for the workers to go on expanding the range of such activities. Councils of Action would at a certain point grow over into soviets.

For the ruling classes, it was their power itself that was at stake.

A struggle for control over transportation and distribution, for example, continued throughout the strike, waged by the strikers' organisations against the state's strike-breakers.

Councils of Action or their transport sub-committees were, in many areas, the bodies which decided on the transportation or non-transportation of goods and people. In Airdrie and Coatbridge in Lanarkshire, the local Council of Action issued permits for transport through its transport sub-committee and organised pickets of up to 4,000 to shut down road and rail movements which it had not sanctioned.

In Arran in Ayrshire the same procedure was adopted, though here, unlike anywhere else in the west of Scotland, the transport committee granted permits for the local buses on the grounds that they served working-class people. But more elaborate procedures were fol-

lowed in other parts of the country: in Birmingham the Trade Union Emergency Committee, issued transport permits only where trade union labour was being used to load, unload and distribute the goods, and only if vehicles with permits carried notices saying that they were using union labour and moving with union consent.

Mass picketing was the chief means used to try to keep scab transport off the roads and rails. In Irvine and Auchinleck in Ayrshire, pickets of up to 500 stopped buses taking workers to the local docks and obstructed railway lines to hold up trains. In the East Midlands, strikers attacked and overturned buses, smashed the windows of trams which ventured out onto the streets, filled the seats of private buses and then refused to pay the fare, or, in some cases, removed the carburettors of buses to immobilise them.

But, given the TUC's lack of preparation for the strike and the Tories' detailed advance planning, full trade union control over transport was never achieved in the course of the strike. In fact, by 7 May the TUC Strike Organisation Committee ordered all local trade union organisations to cease issuing any transport permits at all, due to the effectiveness of the scab transport system set up by the government.

Given the widespread support for the strike, mass picketing was used rarely, and then primarily in an attempt to assert control over transportation, rather than to picket out workplaces: around the docks in south London, against attempts to run buses and trams in Glasgow, in Tyneside in an effort to close down the main Newcastle-Durham road, or in Lanarkshire as mentioned above.

Workers' Defence Corps were set up around the country: in Coatbridge just outside Glasgow, in various parts of London, and also in Cheltenham, Gloucester, Chatham, Aldershot and Colchester.

The largest such workers' defence corps, numbering some 700, was set up in Methil in Fife, run by former war-time army warrant officers and NCOs. Its establishment sufficed to end police interference in picketing.

Of course the police attributed the violent disturbances which occurred during the strike to Communist agitators, and the union bureaucracy fought to dampen down any potential conflict. A London police report concluded: "It is now perfectly clear that the hooligans, incited and helped by paid Communist agitators, are responsible for disturbances. Trade unionist leaders are now frightened by the storm they have created, and are urging strikers to wear war medals and refrain from violence."

After the Bolshevik revolution the ruling class was petrified by the spectre of working-class power. Cartoon by Dunn from May Day issue of the *Communist*

Central to the work of the Councils of Action and the Trades Councils was the need to maintain strikers' morale. One means was the organisation of entertainment — in Swindon teams of married versus single men played each other at football, cricket, bowls and darts, and socials and literary readings were also well supported, while in the south Wales mining villages an alternative culture flourished around things such as comic bands, much to the annoyance of local vicars: "A most vulgar spectacle, indeed a most indecent spectacle. It was immoral and blasphemous. One band had the audacity to carry a card upon which was the writing: 'I am the bread of life.'"

More important as a factor in the maintaining of morale and countering the government's black propaganda was the production of local strike bulletins, many of them under the control of the local Communist Party branches. The TUC helped increase the circulation of such bulletins by delaying official sanction for Councils of Action to produce their own local newspapers, thus leaving the field open to "unofficial" strike bulletins.

In Edinburgh the print-run of the daily duplicated strike bulletin rose from some 6,000 at the start of the strike to over 12,000 by its close. The bulletin contained strike news only, plus a commentary on such news and a reply to government propaganda. Equally popular in Birmingham was the local "Central Strike Bulletin", which sold out as fast as it could be produced, whilst the Communist Party bulletin "Birmingham Worker" was suppressed after three days under the Emergency Powers Act. Similarly, in Glasgow, the Communist Party organised publication of *The Worker* and *Workers' Weekly* until an entire night shift was arrested by the police.

The Scottish TUC was even more hostile to local strike bulletins than the TUC itself and regularly attempted to prevent their production (along with attempting to prevent strike meetings being held on Sundays and to block the establishment of local area strike committees to run the strike).

In the second week of the strike the STUC began production of the *Scottish Worker*, in an attempt to provide a moderate "official" alternative to the local strike bulletins. Though consisting largely of reprints from the TUC's *British Worker* and being intensely conservative in tone, the first issue of the *Scottish Worker* nonetheless sold out its 25,000 copies in 40 minutes.

Workers' bulletins

A *LABOUR Research* survey carried out in the immediate aftermath of the General Strike showed that half of the Trades Councils and Councils of Action which responded to its questionnaire had produced bulletins of their own during the strike. The need for such local bulletins was underlined by the contents of the TUC's strike newspaper *British Worker*.

The paper did not seek to promote a more militant attitude on the part of the strikers. On the contrary, its purpose, according to the secretary of the TUC Publicity Committee responsible for its production, was "not to publish anything that will frighten or demoralise the public. It is the view of my Committee that the whole contents 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 that occurs is according to plan."

Hence the stress placed by the newspaper on the need for strikers to behave "responsibly" and to "avoid obstruction and to confine themselves strictly to their legitimate duties." The paper was not short on suggestions as to how strikers, all of whom were assumed to be male, could keep out of trouble: "Special football and cricket matches... indoor attractions... whist drives... keep smiling... get into the garden, look after the wife and kiddies. If you have not got a garden get into the country, the parks and playgrounds. Do not hang around the centre of the city. Get into the country, there is no more healthful occupation than walking."

Whilst the General Council of the TUC adopted the lowest of low-key approaches in its *British Worker*, the government showed no such restraint in the use it made of its own strike paper, the *British Gazette*, and of the supposedly neutral BBC.

Although Churchill had wanted to commandeer the BBC, it remained nominally independent, but only by doing voluntarily what the government required of it anyway. News which might encourage the strikers was suppressed, and not even TUC or Labour Party leaders were allowed to broadcast. And whilst the BBC ignored the appeal for a settlement by the Archbishop of Canterbury on 7 May, refusing to broadcast it after a request from the government, it reported in full the sermon by Cardinal Bourne in which he denounced the strike as "a sin against the obedience which we owe God."

The anti-strike paper *British Gazette* claimed the largest circulation in the world (over 2,200,000 by the end of the strike), but its circulation was extremely limited geographically. Bundles of them were dropped onto selected Durham mining villages by the RAF,

but it never reached Scotland or South Wales at all.

The paper reported on usually fictional "returns to work", attacked the 1913 Trade Union Act for turning unions into "a vast political body, spending money to the end that the capitalist state may be overthrown", denounced the unions for calling the strike without first conducting a ballot of the membership, and acted as a recruiting agency for scabs and strike-breakers.

But the most consistent theme in the *British Gazette* was that the General Strike was a threat to the country's constitution. "Hold-up of a nation", "Government and the challenge", "The constitution of a soviet" read some of the headlines in its first issue, which explained:

"The general strike is in operation, expressing in no uncertain terms a direct challenge to ordered government. It would be futile to attempt to minimise the seriousness of such a challenge, constituting as it does an effort to force upon some 42 million British citizens the will of less than four million others engaged in the vital services of the country... Either the nation must be mistress in its own house, or suffer the existing constitution to be fatally injured and endure the erection of a Soviet of Trade Unions."

The same line of attack was maintained in subsequent issues. "The general strike is a challenge to Parliament and the road to anarchy," it emphasised on 6 May, and again on 7 May: "Either the country will break the General Strike or the General Strike will break the country."

Others joined in the attacks on the supposed illegality or unconstitutionality of the strike. In the Commons Sir John Simons, a former Liberal Attorney-General, attacked the strike as illegal, as too did Mr. Justice Astbury in the High Court. And the government began to give consideration to new anti-union legislation, declaring illegal any strike of a sympathetic character which was calculated to intimidate or coerce the government, and authorising the restraint of funds assigned to such strikes by unions.

But before the Tories were able to plan such anti-union legislation in more detail and bring it into effect the TUC leaders were on the verge of calling off the strike.

The aftermath

IN line with instructions issued by the TUC General Council on 9 May, trade unionists in the "second line" (engineering, shipbuilding and chemicals and cement) joined in the general strike as of the first shift on 12 May.

Up to another 200,000 workers joined the strike, of which the organisation was becoming increasingly stronger and more effective. But at midday on the same day, the TUC General Council threw in the towel and called off the strike.

As the miners' leader AJ Cook later put it: "Sir Herbert [Samuel] was seen by the Rt Hon JH Thomas, and discussions began in private. Those who had been unwilling and hesitant to go into the strike were continually seeking some way out of it... These discussions were held simply with a view to creating some pretext to justify calling off the General Strike."

Initial proposals by Samuel for an end to the dispute made no headway with the mineowners, but were looked on favourably by the TUC General Council — including the proposals for pay-cuts. When the miners' union leaders protested at their exclusion from these discussions, they were told that only "preliminary discussions" had taken place.

The first "Samuel memorandum" was circulated to the General Council on the evening of 8 May and to members of the miners' union, the MFGB, the next day. The General Council proposed various amendments but the MFGB executive opposed the memorandum in principle because it included proposals for wage reductions.

In the afternoon of 10 May, the TUC Negotiating Committee met the miners' leaders to discuss the wage cuts. The miners refused to back down. The following day, the Negotiating Committee returned to meet Samuel to draw up a settlement which they and the General Council of the TUC could accept on their own authority. In other words: they abandoned the miners.

The final "settlement", which still included wage cuts, was drawn up between Samuel and the TUC Negotiating Committee during the afternoon of 11 May. In the evening the General Council presented the settlement as an ultimatum to the miners' leaders. They still refused to accept it but the following day a General Council deputation turned up at 10 Downing Street to announce their surrender.

Sir Horace Wilson, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Labour, met them on the doorstep, to check before allowing them to enter that they had arrived to call off the strike and not to try to engage in negotiations.

"Peace with Honour" proclaimed the front-page headline in the following day's *British Worker*, which sought to excuse the betrayal on the grounds that, "the General Council called off the General Strike in confidence that the Prime Minister meant what he said when he asked for resumption of negotiations towards an honourable peace."

Up and down the country, however, trade unionists displayed a very different attitude. On the day after the TUC called off the strike, there were 100,000 more workers on strike than there had been on 12 May, due to the strikers' anger at the blatant betrayal, and the refusal of "second line" trade unionists to return to work so soon after being called out.

But, demoralised and disheartened by the decision of the TUC leadership, the workers had drifted back to work by the start of the following week (17 May). Appeals by the Communist Party for a continuation of the general strike were unsuccessful.

Victimisation was widespread, as employers exploited the opportunity to root out militants. An official statement of 12 May pointed out: "His Majesty's Government have no power to impel employers to take back every man who has been on strike, nor have they entered any obligation of any kind on this matter."

The government took a hard line towards its own employees: government industrial workers were to be re-instated only as work became available (i.e. scabs were to be kept on); one year's pension rights were to be forfeited; those guilty of "violence or intimidation" were to be sacked; and the "accredited representatives" of workers were to be compelled to declare the strike a "wrongful act".

Conservative controlled local authorities took an equally vindictive line (in many areas scabs were kept on in place of strikers on the trams), as did private bus firms and road-hauliers (nationally, 2,900 workers in these industries were not re-instated), printing industry employers, and railway companies. In other industries, especially those employing "second line" workers, the victimisation was less intense.

Results of defeat

DESERTED by the TUC, the miners fought on for another seven months, faced by mineowners determined to make their isolation the occasion for breaking up their union organisation and pushing down rates of pay. By November they had been driven back to work on the worst possible terms: replacement of national settlements by district ones; wages cut back to 1921 levels, and in some areas to 1914 levels; abolition of the seven hour day.

The miners were further weakened by the emergence of non-political company unionism, especially in the Nottinghamshire coalfield, where the local Labour MP, George Spencer, initiated a breakaway company union. And in Scotland the right-wing old-guard broke away to form a rival union to that left under a mainly Communist leadership.

Given the central position which the miners occupied in the trade union movement, it was inevitable that their defeat, like the betrayal of the General Strike itself, would have a knock-on effect on the labour movement as a whole. Victimisation in the short term was followed by a slump in union membership in the longer term — from 5.5 million to well under 5 million by 1927, with accumulated union funds dropping from £12.5 million at the start of 1926 to less than £8.5 million by the close of the same year.

Those unions which suffered the heaviest losses in membership were in the industries most involved in the General Strike: coal, printing, railways and road-transport.

As union membership fell in the aftermath of the strike, so too did the number of strikes per year and their total duration. In 1924 and 1925 there had been over 1,300 strikes amounting to over 16 million working days, whereas in 1927 and 1928 there were 610

strikes adding up to just over 2.5 million working days. Wages also fell after the General Strike, though not as quickly as the cost of living, so there was an increase in real wages which played a part in reducing the frequency of strikes.

In the short term after the strike, unemployment remained around 10%, though it was much higher in certain trades and regions. By the Great Depression (1929-31), however, it had risen to an official figure of nearly 3 million. The employers' abilities to impose such major job losses were also a consequence of the TUC's failure to put up a consistent fight in 1926.

The plight of the unemployed was made worse by the punitive disbandment of the Poor Law Guardians by the then Minister of Health Neville Chamberlain. "The best and kindest thing to do now is strike quickly and hard," he had commented during the strike, and followed this up by disbanding the Guardians on the grounds that they had allegedly been too generous in relieving hunger and hardship.

The Tories also used the General Strike as the pretext to introduce new anti-union legislation: the Trades Disputes Act of 1927, of the eight clauses of which only three were directly related to banning general strikes, the supposed reason for the introduction of the punitive legislation.

The Act of 1927 made both general and sympathetic strikes illegal, with leadership of an "illegal" strike being liable to a fine or imprisonment of up to two years; removed immunity from trade union funds; forbade mass picketing; and extended the definition of "intimidation". It banned Civil Service unions from affiliating to the TUC or Labour Party, and replaced "contracting out" from the political levy with having to "contract in" to it.

Although a National Trade Union Defence Committee was set up by the TUC, the Labour Party and the Co-op to campaign against the legislation as it went through Parliament, the campaign was low-key and certainly did not involve strike action. Once the legislation had entered the statute books, the TUC General Council advised its affiliates to comply with it.

For all its faults, the Communist Party alone made anything approaching a serious effort to stem the tide of retreat. But its main membership found itself heavily under attack from the labour movement bureaucracy after the General Strike. In 1927 the TUC organised an enquiry into "Communist disruption" in trade unions, and a number of unions sought to ban Party members from holding offices. The impact of the witch-hunt was reflected in the fact that only nine Communist Party members were present at the 1927 TUC Congress as delegates.

Learning the lessons?

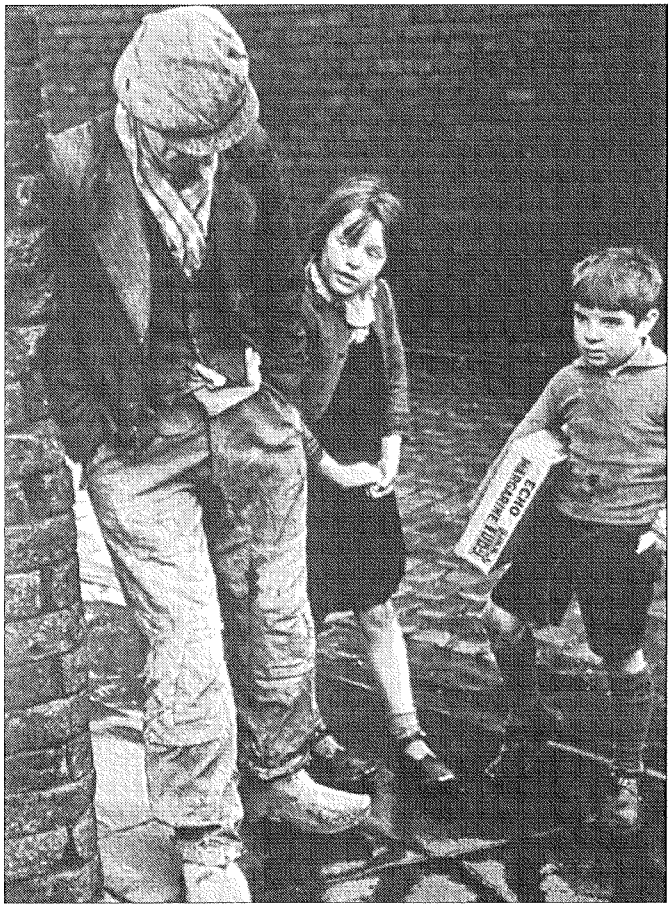
WHILST rank-and-file trade unionists were left to pay the price for the abrupt calling off of the General Strike, the General Council of the TUC suppressed debate on the question in order to avoid the danger of falling victim to a backlash.

Most individual trade union executives lined up with the General Council, in a shared desire to avoid being brought to account for deserting the miners. The only exceptions to this were the executives of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, the print union NATSOPA, and, ironically, the Electrical Trades Union, which passed resolutions stating "...grave concern at the instruction received from the TUC that the General Strike initiated by that body with the full approval of the affiliated unions had been called off without the consideration of the unions concerned," and calling for an immediate reconvening of the special conference of union executives which had issued the original general strike instruction.

By June, the General Council calculated that it had weathered the storm and wanted to go ahead with the holding of the union executives' conference. But now the MFGB opposed it, on the grounds that publication of the TUC's arguments might weaken the miners' case, at a time when they were still locked out.

In exchange for the General Council agreeing to further postponement of the conference, the MFGB agreed to withdraw from sale the pamphlet by its General Secretary AJ Cook attacking the TUC's record and to refrain from advocating an embargo on coal or financial levy without the consent of other unions.

Thus, when the 1926 TUC conference convened in September, the General Council was able to successfully argue that discussion of the General Strike should be left to the postponed union executives' conference. An attempt to overturn this position, which the MFGB supported, was heavily defeated.



The price of defeat: unemployment and demoralisation of the '30s.

The repeatedly postponed executives' conference finally took place in January 1927. By this time the initial anger had fully abated, and the General Council had no problem in either answering or avoiding answering the accusations raised against its conduct by the MFGB. The MFGB's weak resolution that the General Council's report should be referred to the membership of TUC affiliates for further discussion was defeated by a margin of nearly 34%.

At the centre of the General Council argument was its claim that prolongation of the General Strike would not have led to victory but defeat as a result of "a process of attrition which would have disorganised the trade union movement... completely established the reactionary elements in the country and damned any possibility of getting a fair consideration of the miners' case."

In reality though, it was not simply a case of the leadership of the trade union movement fearing defeat which led them to end the General Strike — they feared just as much what the outcome of victory in the General Strike would be, just as they feared the increasingly obvious political nature of the General Strike as well.

At the outset of the strike, the TUC, through the *British Worker*, had made clear its concept of the event as a purely industrial dispute: "No political issue has ever been mentioned, or thought of, in connection with it [the strike]... the general strike is not a menace to Parliament. No attack is being made on the constitution. We beg Mr Baldwin to believe that."

As the strike continued, as more and more control over the day-to-day functioning of society passed into the hands of the strikers, the union leaders' claims — as they themselves recognised — about the "non-political" nature of the strike sounded increasingly hollow. From their own narrow, socially conservative point of view, the union bureaucracy had opened a Pandora's Box. After the event, the bureaucracy resolved that it would never be opened again, epitomised by the catch-phrase of NUR leader Cramp — "Never again!" — and the conclusion of TUC General Council member Bener Turner: "And I never want to see another."

The TUC report on the General Strike went so far as to attack the Tory government for seeking to bring politics into the strike, by "ingeniously obscuring their own position as a third party in the dispute, by raising constitutional issues, and treating a sympathetic strike on industrial issues as a political movement." And Cramp's colleague JH Thomas effectively accused the government of cheating: the fate of the stoppage had been determined by the "constitutional issues" being "falsely raised and unfairly used."

TUC chairperson Arthur Pugh took an even stronger line on the government's perfidy in being prepared to "introduce" politics into the general strike: "It was not the unions but the government which endeavoured to convert an industrial struggle into a political conflict, and sought to make party capital out of it. Nothing but the restraint, forbearance and good sense of our members prevented the agents of government fomenting a revolutionary temper and plunging the country into conditions of civil war."

What the leaders feared

FROM the point of view of the union bureaucrats, it was not only the government that was "guilty" of seeking to "inject" politics into the General Strike. Shadowy figures at the base of the trade union movement were guilty of the same crime and were condemned in equally harsh terms. As General and Municipal Workers' Union (GMWU) leader Dukes put it at the 1927 special executives' conference: "Every day the strike proceeded, the control and authority was passing out of the hands of responsible executives into the hands of men who had no authority, no responsibility."

Clynes, a Labour MP as well as GMWU President, expressed the same fear in the House of Commons the day after the official end of the general strike: "What he dreaded about this struggle 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." Clynes' overall conclusion was that "we learned that a national strike could not be used as a weapon in a trade dispute... there is one way, and one only, to alter unfair conditions in Britain. It is through the ballot box, and not through violence or resistance."

The same hostility towards the very idea of a general strike was expressed by Clynes' colleague in the Parliamentary Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald: "If fought to a finish as a strike, a general strike would ruin Trade Unionism, and the Government in the meantime could create a revolution... I hope that the result will be a thorough reconsideration of trade union tactics... if the wonderful unity in the strike which impressed the whole world with the solidarity of British labour would be shown in politics, labour could solve mining and similar difficulties through the ballot box."

The defeat of the General Strike did not lead to a "thorough reconsideration" of the tactics and underlying ideas of the trade union movement. What it did do, however, was to reinforce and accelerate tendencies already apparent in the trade unions' direction of development prior to 1926. There was an increased emphasis on collaboration with management, increasing productivity and improving efficiency.

As Citrine wrote in 1927: "The unions should actively participate in a concerted effort to raise industry to its highest efficiency by developing the most scientific methods of production, eliminating waste and harmful restrictions." Similarly, the following year's TUC General Council Report argued that the union movement should, "say boldly that not only is it concerned with the prosperity of industry, but that it is going to have a voice as to the way industry is carried on."

Such a "constructive" approach to industry, that is, to encouraging workers to improve the rates of their own exploitation, was the "modern" alternative to the outmoded tactic of strike action (though even before the General Strike the union bureaucracy was not over-enthusiastic about strikes). It was again Citrine who expressed the view held throughout the union bureaucracy: "We should not get rid of strikes and lockouts completely, but I believe that they will be fewer, that reason will play a greater part, and that the community itself will develop a keener interest and a greater sense of social justice."

Such a perspective soon found expression in "Mondism". In November of 1928, Mond, the chairperson of ICI, along with 21 other major employers, wrote to the TUC General Council calling for "direct negotiations with the twin objects of restoration of industrial prosperity and the corresponding improvement in the standard of living of the population" by means of "increasing the competitive power of British industries in the world's markets."

The invitation was accepted, though not without some opposition from within the ranks of the TUC.

Although the conversations with Mond produced little in terms of immediate concrete results, their very occurrence indicated the growing collaborationist tendencies after the General Strike of the TUC General Council, which in July of 1928 had endorsed the resolution outlining the purpose of the talks: "This tendency towards a national organisation of industry and trade... is recognised and this tendency should be welcomed and encouraged, insofar as it leads to improvements in the efficiency of industrial production, services and distribution, and to the raising of the standard of living of the people."

Thus, for the TUC, and for the leadership of the Labour Party as well, the improvement of working class interests and standards of living was seen as dependent upon improving the efficiency and profitability of industry, rather than as a goal to be achieved by eating into the profitability of industry, irrespective of the impact on capitalist efficiency. This approach remains the hallmark of the leadership of the labour movement down to the present day.

On the eve of the General Strike, Trotsky had warned: "There is an unlimited supply of restraining elements in the apparatus of the British working class... All the traditions, the organisational customs, and the ideas of all existing groupings of the labour movement — in various forms and under various slogans — predispose them either to direct betrayal, or to compromise, or else to a policy of wait-and-see with reference to the compromisers and complaints about the traitors." Writing during the strike itself, Trotsky was equally clear as to the role being played by the leadership of the labour movement: "The General Council of the TUC started out with the ridiculous declaration that the present general strike was in no way a political struggle... We must face matters: the main efforts of the official leaders of the Labour Party and of a considerable number of the official trade union leaders will not be directed towards paralysing the bourgeois state by means of the strike, but towards paralysing the general strike with the aid of the bourgeois state."

The task of revolutionaries in such a situation was to organise against the efforts of the leadership to betray the strike, to combat the reformist illusions which existed in the British working class and which its leadership made a point of continuing to foster, and to point to and push forward the revolutionary logic of the general strike.

In the event, the revolutionaries and would-be revolutionaries proved too weak to do so. The small British Communist Party still suffered from the syndicalism of some of its constituent elements, now complicated by the growth of the negative influences of Stalin's bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

The strike went down to defeat. The miners remained locked out and were defeated themselves seven months later. And the leaders of the trade unions and the Labour Party escaped being brought to account for their betrayal of 12 May. Despite the depth and iniquity of that betrayal, Trotsky, fully conscious of the deeply conservative and bureaucratic nature of the British labour movement, was clear in defining some basic tasks of revolutionaries in Britain after the General Strike. As he wrote in the resolution of July 1926, submitted to the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union:

"The Communist International's tactics... ought to remain hard and fast. The following elements of these tactics are of special importance: (1) the necessity for Communists to work in the most reactionary trade unions in order to fight to win over the masses under conditions of all kinds; (2) the necessity for British Communists to enter the Labour Party and to fight against being expelled from that organisation...; (3) the necessity for a struggle against the right-opportunist deviation as well as against the ultra-left."

● A later issue of *Workers' Liberty* will carry a fuller account of the Communist Party and the General Strike.