

THE 1926 GENERAL STRIKE



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Introduction

By Jeremy Dewar

The purpose of studying great moments of the class struggle from the past is not merely to recall the heroic struggles of our forebears but to see what lessons they hold for how to confront today's problems. As the much quoted phrase goes, 'Those who cannot learn from history are destined to repeat it'. It is in that spirit that Workers Power has decided to expand and re-issue this pamphlet on the 1926 general strike on the occasion of its centenary.

This pamphlet is really an examination of the reasons for the general strike's defeat, but this should take nothing away from the courage, ingenuity and determination of the rank and file trade unionists and wider working class in the struggle. In Fife and Glasgow, in Liverpool, Newcastle and London, in the South Wales valleys, elements of dual power existed and could have been developed.

A pre-revolutionary situation gripped Britain. The only thing that prevented it was the non-revolutionary policies of the trade unions, the Labour Party and the Communist Party. For this reason it is imperative that, while commemorating the activities of the working class in the strike, we also look at the lessons that we can and must learn from its failure.

The first and most obvious lesson from 1926 is that the trade unions, organising in workplaces of all types, as well as being essential instruments to increase wages, protect working conditions, and a powerful lever for important social reforms for the working class as a whole, are also the basis for a successful socialist revolution in Britain.

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However, on their own they are incapable of leading that revolution to success, as long as their permanent officialdom, what Marxists call the trade union bureaucracy, retains its leadership of them. This remains true today, despite major changes to the composition of the working class and therefore of the trade unions.

The trade unions represent today, as then, only a minority of the working class. So, as the revolutionaries of the 1920s realised, we need to expand them by organising the most downtrodden layers and the unemployed, presently excluded from them.

But at the same time we must reject the notion, popularised today by the likes of Unite's Sharon Graham, that the unions can and should remain clear of politics. Socialists have to fight against 'pure and simple trade unionism', a bureaucratic distortion of syndicalism, as an ideology for the unions. This work cannot be left to the last minute but has to begin today.

Secondly, the general strike proved that the idea that the class struggle in Britain does not face the question of revolution, or that the British working class is not susceptible to revolutionary ideas because we have a democracy, is false. Just two years after the first (minority) Labour government, millions struck against the elected Tory government and hundreds of thousands took to the street to fight the forces of the state.

The response of the ruling class Liberals and Tories was that any class-wide action in solidarity with a million miners facing wages cuts and longer hours in the harsh conditions of the pits was a challenge to the constitution and had to be smashed. Unfortunately, a section of the trade union and Labour Party leaders agreed with them. And worse still they held the power in our movement at the decisive moment.

Similar conditions prevailed in the great strikes of the 1970s and 1980s, and on a smaller scale in the 24-hour strike by two million UK public sector workers on 30 November 2011. These could have led to further all-out action but they were sold out by the union leaders.

Thirdly, the events of 1924-26 show that in the epoch of imperialism what appears to be a simple trade dispute can escalate, by force of its own internal dynamic, into a struggle for power. A general strike, if it is more than a one-day demonstration, poses as Trotsky said 'who shall be master in the house'.

The Miners Strike of 1984-5 too posed this question – since it was no mere trade dispute but a well-planned government attack on the part of Thatcher, just like Baldwin's in '26, aimed to break the spirit and strength of the working class and its most militant vanguard. Only mass working class solidarity action – a de facto general or mass strike by key unions – could have defeated her. The failure to achieve this or – on the part of some of the revolutionary left – to even fight for it

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- was paid for not only by the miners but by the entire working class.

But for this potential to be realised, workers need to build new organisations, essentially councils of action and workers' defence corps. This is why in every significant class-wide struggle, most recently in the 2022-23 strike wave, communists must raise the prospect and necessity of such organisations.

Fourthly, rank and file militants in the unions who put their trust in the left-talking wing of the union bureaucracy must maintain their independence at all costs and create the nucleus of an alternative leadership of the struggle answerable even in the thick of the struggle to the democratic decision of the members.

Most of the left wing groupings in today's unions are Broad Lefts, i.e. blocs which focus almost exclusively on electing left officials, supporting them in office, and capturing the bureaucratic machinery of the unions against the right wing. This is futile, as the various capitulations and vacillations of 'left' leaders have shown, most notably in 1978-79 with the betrayals of Hugh Scanlon and Jack Jones in the Winter of Discontent, and during the year-long miners' strike of 1984-85 - figures far more militant than today's left leaders - but also in more recent 'strike waves'.

Instead, we need to build a rank and file movement, independent of all wings of the bureaucracy. Of course we need to support left officials against the right, where they back greater democracy and militancy in the union. But the rank and file have to set out their own goals and methods of struggle without fear or favour, including a fight to abolish the wages system itself, i.e. the struggle for socialism must be written on its banners.

A rank and file movement must be ready to do this, as Trotsky said, by means of the 'perpetual, systematic, inflexible, untiring and irreconcilable unmasking of the quasi-left leaders of every hue'. It must retain its ability to take its own initiatives and use that capacity when needed¹.

Fifthly and finally the great events of the General Strike expose the necessity of a truly revolutionary party. Only such a party, rooted in the working class and with growing influence in its combative organisations, can guide the workers through the twists and turns of the struggle. Only such a party can build a bridge from today's struggles to the conquest of power, from workers' reformist consciousness to a revolutionary consciousness.

Trotsky was fully aware that the young Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was probably incapable of leading the working class to victory on its first attempt, but that an inconclusive outcome would render the party subsequent opportunities, so long as it carried out a correct line.

As Trotsky wrote on 6 May 1926:

¹ Leon Trotsky, 'Problems of the British Labour Movement', Writings on Britain, New Park, vol.2, p.136

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‘The results of the strike, both the immediate and the more remote, will be the more significant the more resolutely the revolutionary force of the masses sweeps away the barriers erected by the counter-revolutionary leadership... If the strike does not produce this change, it will bring it far closer.’²

This perspective is in stark contrast to the positions of both Zinoviev and Stalin, who effectively gave up on the CPGB and sought a short-cut via the trade union lefts in the Anglo-Russian Committee.

This is important today when it has become fashionable to dismiss the ‘sects’, by which our critics mean small programmatically and ideologically based groups. While the antics of the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party have alienated many activists, and are indeed both sectarian and opportunist, we cannot dismiss the need for revolutionary clarity. You don’t dismiss the need for a bicycle just because there are two broken bikes in the shed.

It should be remembered that the decisive force in the 1926 mass strike was not the loosely formed and politically confused Independent Labour Party with its 50,000 members, but the CPGB one twentieth its size. The CPGB had the advantage of a democratic centralist structure, a correct programme (for a time at least) and, via the National Minority Movement, influence amongst the most militant sectors of the class. Of course, that programme needs to be refined, retuned even during the struggle, but the idea that we can do without such a programme has to be dismissed outright.

Then there comes the fact that even the best revolutionary party has to embody its programme in strategy and tactics for a concrete struggle. This must include a correct assessment of the political issues at play, and the quality of the present leadership of that struggle. The question of with whom and with what forces a united front can be struck to take forward the struggle is posed with great sharpness.

If revolutionary work in the trade unions cannot be postponed until the moment of reckoning is upon us, then this is even more true of the revolutionary party. There is no revolutionary party in Britain, capable of providing an alternative leadership to the bureaucrats right or left, despite the many organisations that label themselves as such. That remains to be built, on the basis of a programme that links today’s struggles to the revolutionary abolition of capitalism. That is why we encourage workers, women and youth to read our pamphlet, and discuss it with Workers Power. If you agree with us, we encourage you to join us.

2 ibid, p.146-7

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By Dave Stockton

British Imperialism and its working class

Two fundamental, simultaneous but contradictory developments shaped British politics in the decades after the First World War: the decline of Britain from its century old position as the dominant power of world capitalism; and a corresponding move to the left by the British working class movement both in terms of trade union organisation and tactics and a break from the Liberals, the second party of the bourgeoisie, to found the Labour Party, albeit with a largely liberal politics and leadership. A secondary factor was the emergence of socialist and syndicalist groups coalescing as the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920-21.

As the first modern industrial, i.e. fully capitalist nation, Britain in this period was the 'workshop of the world'. But this position had already come increasingly under challenge in the last years of the nineteenth century by competition from the more modern and large scale industries of Germany and the United States of America. A series of 'great powers' began to develop their own colonies or dominate formally independent states in Latin America, challenging Britain's domination of markets and sources of raw materials.

Theorists like the English liberal JA Hobson and Marxists like Rudolf Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg and VI Lenin characterised this development as 'imperialism'. Lenin in his book with this title saw this as a new period (the highest and last) in the history of capitalism, characterised by a struggle between giant monopolies and banks for world markets, and militarily between states for control of territory. That

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was why Lenin characterised the First World War as an imperialist war, something the Second International had done at its Stuttgart and Basel congresses, laying down that the socialist parties should give no support to such wars, but reneged on by the majority of its sections in 1914.

Britain joined the war by Tsarist Russia and France against Germany and Austria in 1914 primarily to knock out its main imperialist challenger. While, after great sacrifices, she won that contest, the consequences were not entirely to her advantage. The USA, which had joined the war late, came out of it far stronger, compared to its European allies. Britain had to sell off many British investments in the US to pay for armaments, ships, food supplies etc. German industries had grown massively in scale during the war, though the Versailles peace treaty placed a huge burden of reparations on it in the short term.

The British Empire was also shrinking. The settler colonies in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa though still 'under the crown' became effectively independent, while Britain lost most of Ireland, its oldest colony, to the Republicans in a brutal war (1919-1921). A powerful independence movement spread in India. Britain's world dominance over trade finance and industry as well as its monopoly of raw material resources were under even greater threat.

In addition, war ravaged Europe started to recover. When the French occupation of the Ruhr, Germany's industrial heartland, producing 80% of the country's coal, iron and steel, came to an end in September 1924, this put British extractive and industrial competitiveness under extreme pressure. German manufacturing and mining were considered more productive, thanks to new investment. The squeeze on British capitalism was getting tighter.

The second development was the stronger position of the British working class. The pre-war years has seen what became known as the Great Unrest (1910-14). Huge strikes, both official and unofficial, took place across the country, but especially in the north of England, in Ireland and Scotland, drawing in and politicising millions. This at first largely syndicalist wave, based on reform movements amongst the miners, especially in South Wales, then during the war with the growth of the Shop Stewards movement, the Clyde and Sheffield Workers Committees from 1915 through to the end of the war. Many of the strikes saw violent clashes violent when police moved to crush them.

The principle voiced by the Clyde Workers' Committee in 1915 declared: 'We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers but will act independently immediately, they misrepresent them.'¹ This declaration of inde-

¹ Tony Cliff & Donny Gluckstein, 'Marxism and Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926', 1986, chapter 6, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1986/tradeunion/index.htm>

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pendence of the rank and file against the union bureaucracy was a major step forward. However, it had one important weakness. It left the central leadership and negotiating power in the hands of the officials and did not deal with how to halt and reverse the sabotage of major struggles when the bureaucracy suddenly 'mis-represented' the members.

In the years 1919-20, immediately after the war, rank and file initiated militancy continued. Working class soldiers, returning from the trenches, were not prepared to go back to the old ways of low wages, long hours and intolerable working and living conditions. War time premier David Lloyd George, at the 1918 general election, had promised them 'homes fit for heroes.' Although his government legislated for 500,000, itself an insufficient number, only 200,000 homes were actually built.

At the same time there were stirrings right across the hitherto politically backward British working class. The trade unions had formed the Labour Representation Committee in 1901, renamed the Labour Party in 1906, though this came decades after the German and French workers had created their own parties. But before the war the new party avoided any commitment to socialism, and it only opened membership to individuals in parliamentary constituencies after the war ended in 1918. Even then, it was its leaders' fear of Bolshevism infecting the workers, many of whom witnessed the October revolution as a source of class pride and inspiration, that moved Labour's leaders to grant a limited form of party democracy.

By 1923 Labour had replaced the Liberals as the main party of the organised working class and formed their first (minority) government. The experience of Ramsay MacDonald's short and distinctly unimpressive government further politicised workers, leading to the growth of a left wing within the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and also of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) which had been founded in July 1920.

On the trade union front a Triple Alliance had been formed in 1914 between the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and National Transport Workers' Federation, with a pledge to strike in solidarity for better conditions. Between 1919 and 1921 partial gains were made. But it ended in defeat – or rather betrayal. When the MFGB rejected a government offer on 13 April 1921 (Black Friday), James Henry (Jimmy) Thomas, leader of the rail workers, and Ernest Bevin, head of the transport workers, broke their pledge to support the miners.

And what a defeat this was. It coincided with the onset of the most sudden and severe depression in living memory in which unemployment rose from 2.5 per cent of the insured workforce to 17.9 per cent. There was severe deflation (retail prices fell by 24% in 1921) and employers imposed corresponding reductions. By the end of 1921, six million workers had suffered wage cuts averaging 8 per cent. By 1924, real wages had fallen dramatically; by 26 per cent for miners, by 20 per cent for iron and steel

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workers, by 11 per cent for textile workers.

The Communist Party immediately launched the National Unemployed Workers Movement led by Wal Hannington and in Scotland by Harry Mc Shane. Its goal was: 'To create the united front of employed and unemployed workers against all attempts of the employing class to use the unemployed to lower working class standards and conditions.' Its programme called for:

- I. Work or Full Pay
- II. Abolition of Task Work
- III. Relief for Unemployment to be Charged to the National Exchequer administered by the Trade Unions
- IV. Abolition of Overtime.²

As we have noted in 'Marxism and the Trade Unions':

*'Nearly two million workers, a quarter of the entire membership, flooded out of the trade unions, virtually wiping out the whole of the massive postwar increase. Unemployment leapt from only a quarter of a million in September 1920 to 17.4 per cent in the same month of the following year. It organised the first of its famous Hunger marches to London and its local branches went on to participate in the industrial struggles of the employed over the next five years, including the general strike. It was very militant and consequently suffered regular police repression, with a number of its members suffering prison terms.'*³

The 1926 general strike was the culmination of a period of recovery from this defeat and the immediate context for it. It is both what made it inevitable and what gave it its explosive revolutionary potential. As Leon Trotsky wrote at the time: 'The mass strike arose from the imbalance between the current position of the British economy on the world market and the traditional industrial and class relations within the country.'

2 <http://workerspower.uk/the-unemployed-struggles-of-the-1920s-we-will-not-starve-in-silence/>

3 Stuart King, 'The Comintern, the CPGB and the Minority Movement', *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, Prinkipo Press, p72
Leon Trotsky, 'Problems of the British labour movement, Trotsky's Writings on Britain, vol. 2, p143

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The Second Congress of the Communist (Third) International

A significant part of this recovery was a process of revolutionary regroupment. Some 10 British socialists managed to evade the Royal Navy blockade to get to Petrograd and then Moscow to attend the second congress of the Communist International in July–August 1920. They represented various communist and syndicalist groups already involved in negotiations for the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

Amongst these were Tom Quelch and William McLaine of the British Socialist Party, Sylvia Pankhurst of the self-proclaimed British Section of the Third International, as well as Jack Tanner, Willie Gallagher and J T Muphy of the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee movements. These delegates were instrumental in debating the 21 Conditions for a party's admission to the Comintern and agreeing to Lenin's proposal for the CPGB to seek affiliation to the Labour Party (founded in 1919)⁴. Also in 1921 the CPGB set up a commission (led by Harry Pollitt and R Palme Dutt) to reorganise itself along 'Bolshevik lines' including party direction of the trade union work of its members.⁵

The shop stewards' representatives, Gallagher and Tanner, were initially hostile to the congress' instruction to work in the mass trade unions and win them to a communist international of trade unions⁶, though they were later convinced by Lenin after the congress. They participated in the formation of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), which was founded the following year.

The CPGB and the British bureau of RILU launched a 'Back to the Unions – Stop the Retreat' campaign at a London conference in September 1922. It was attended by over 300 delegates and proclaimed its aim was to halt the constant wage cuts and increases in working hours. It also promoted the reorganisation of the trade unions at workplace level to strengthen the power of the rank and file, paving the way for the establishment of the National Minority Movement (NMM) in January 1924. In this, the CP's influence amongst the miners, particularly in South Wales and Scotland, played a major role.

The miners

In the mid-1920s the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) had almost a million members, and was the militant core of the working class movement. Coal

4 Ed. John Riddell, 'Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920', Pathfinder, 1991, vol.1 pp556-58,

5 Ibid, vol.1 pp247-60

6 Ibid, vol.2, pp762-790, pp911-937

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was still the main fuel of trade and Empire, powering factories, railways and the electricity supply. It powered the world's largest navy, which in turn guarded an empire containing 458 million people, a fifth of the world's population.

In October 1924, Tory Stanley Baldwin was elected prime minister with a majority of 209 seats, Labour with 151, losing 40 seats. Baldwin's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, headed a fiercely anti-working class group in the Cabinet with Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, India Secretary F E Smith (Lord Birkenhead) and Home Secretary William Joynson- Hicks. They were eager to 'put the trade unions in their place' and crush the young Communist Party to boot. At key moments they, rather than Baldwin called the shots.

On 30 June 1925, mine owners announced plans to cut miner's wages and increase their working hours. Miners responded with the slogan: 'Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day.' At the head of the MFGB stood one of the most combative union leaders in British history, A J Cook.

Cook had been elected with the support of the CPGB and the Miners' Minority Movement, the rank and file organisation formed by the CPGB and its allies in January 1924, which became a cross-union body in the summer of that year. Most other trade union and Labour Party leaders hated him with a passion.

Fred Bramley, Trades Union Congress (TUC) general secretary, commented to his assistant, Walter Citrine: 'Have you seen who has been elected secretary of the Miners' Federation? Cook, a raving, tearing Communist.'⁷ Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald called him 'a guttersnipe'⁸, while Beatrice Webb, ideologue of Labour's reformist Fabians, wrote in her Diaries that: 'He looks low-caste – not at all the skilled artisan type, more the agricultural labourer... an inspired idiot'⁹.

The TUC Lefts

In the years immediately after the war a number of new leaders were elected in unions. Many had been active in the syndicalist inspired movements of the pre-war period and some joined the young communist party, though only for a short period, leaving usually because their decisions as officials clashed with the line of the party.

Previously right-wingers like rail workers' leader James Henry Thomas, textile union leader John Robert Clynes and Iron and Steel Trades Confederation leader

7 A.J. Cook, "An Agitator of the Worst Type", Paul Foot, Socialist Workers party pamphlet January 1986

8 David Kirkwood, 'My Life of Revolt', 1935, p231

9 Beatrice Webb, Diary entry, 10 September 1926

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Arthur Pugh had dominated the TUC. But Thomas and Clynes left the TUC General Council to join MacDonald's short-lived minority Labour government in January 1924.

This opened the way for the election of a number of 'lefts' to the General Council, including Alf Purcell of the furniture union (NAFTA), Alonzo Swales of the engineers (AEU), George Hicks of the builders' union (AUBTW), and A J Cook. Transport workers' leader Ernest Bevin had been regarded as somewhat of a 'left' until Cook's election.

These figures pressed the TUC to support the Comintern's initiative for unity between the Amsterdam-based International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) and the Moscow-based Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). When the IFTU rejected this initiative, in April 1925, the TUC formed the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee (ARC) with the Soviet All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. Its goals were to promote for international unity against the economic offensive of capital on workers' wages and the threat of war, specifically against the Soviet Union.

This body and attitude to it dictated by the Russian politburo, now dominated by Stalin and Bukharin, soon became a major issue of contention with the Opposition in Russia led by Trotsky and, later, Zinoviev too. The attitude of the Stalin-Bukharin bloc, that supporting the building of socialism in Russia was the overriding priority for the world's communist parties and their left allies in the unions, was soon to have a malign influence on the policy of the CPGB and its attitude to the TUC lefts in the context of a historic eruption of the class struggle in Britain.

Following MacDonald's defeat and Baldwin's re-election in October 1924, the mine owners demanded wage cuts, an increase of the working day from seven hours to eight, and coalfield wage agreements in place of a national one. The new General Council promised industrial action in support of the MFGB. Taken by surprise and unprepared, Baldwin's government played for time and agreed to a nine month government subsidy to the mine owners to avoid a strike on 31 July 1925.

The Labour paper, the Daily Herald, dubbed this tactical retreat, 'Red Friday', a great victory for working class solidarity. But for Baldwin this was only a breathing space for preparations to smash the unions, first and foremost the miners. He lulled the unions into quiescence with the time-honoured ruse of a Royal Commission, to investigate conditions in the mining industry. Under the chairmanship of Sir Herbert Samuel, a Liberal and Zionist (first High Commissioner of the British Mandate in Palestine, the Commission was to report in March 1926.

Communists prepare for battle

At this point it is worth breaking the narrative to explore in more depth how the

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newly formed CPGB reacted to the impending attack on the miners and the rising class struggle across industries, the election of the 'lefts' to the TUC General Council, and the founding of the ARC. Through this, we hope to reveal both the enormous potential of the situation unfolding and the pitfalls that stood in the way of a revolutionary outcome.

Following its formation in July-August 1920 the CPGB rapidly grew to 2,500-3,000 members by 1926. The young party was unable to make much of an impact on the defensive trade union struggles in its first year. It did warn that the Black Friday sellout by the Triple Alliance leaders was likely, using the slogan, 'Watch your leaders!'. But overall, it was plagued by the sectarian outlook of its preceding organisations, and the theoretical level of the leadership was woefully inadequate to a battle of historic dimensions for the unions.¹⁰

Nevertheless, two initiatives in particular started to put the CPGB on the map in industrial areas. The first was the formation of the NUWM, which we have discussed earlier. The second was the 'Back to the Unions' campaign, launched in September 1922, with the aim of forcing the unions to resist the lowering of wages and lengthening the working day. It called for Trades Councils to be reorganised so they could lead the campaign and for affiliation to the RILU. By these means the CPGB gained a foothold in the unions.

But it was the third initiative, the formation of the Miners Minority Movement in January 1924, followed by the Metal Workers Minority Movement in May, and the fully cross-union National Minority Movement (NMM) in August, that saw the big breakthrough. The founding conference of the NMM passed motions on wages, hours, unemployment, factory committees, workers' control and Trades Councils, demanding the latter open its doors to women, youth and the jobless, so they could become real hubs of resistance to the bosses' offensive.¹¹

This period, 1924 through to Autumn 1925, marked the high point of the CPGB's revolutionary work in the unions, as they anticipated a mass strike between the Triple Alliance and the government. They refused to allow the Anglo-Russian Committee to soften their criticism of the 'left' trade union leaders:

'Vast masses of workers everywhere are moving slowly forward. Those leaders who stand in the way are going to be swept aside. The class struggle cannot be limited to an exchange of diplomatic letters [in the ARC].'¹²

At its Sixth Congress in May 1924 the CPGB resolution on the Minority Movement

10 Brian Pearce and Michael Woodhouse, 'A History of Communism in Britain', Bookmarks, p74 and passim

11 Stuart King, 'The Comintern, the CPGB and the Minority Movement', *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, Prinkipo Press, pp88-94

12 *Workers' Weekly*, 25 January 1925, Editorial

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laid out a clear strategy for the general strike, which the party thought was imminent, though it was delayed nine months by the Samuel Commission. 'In the actual fight to achieve their immediate demands the workers will be brought up against the whole organised power of capitalism – the State.' It continued, 'The opposition movements can only go forward under the leadership of a powerful Communist party,' before concluding that party worker members must 'prepare the working class for the real problems that confront them, that of the conquest of power.'¹³

This marked a complete break from the syndicalist tradition, from which many of the CPGB leaders came, because it related the immediate goals of the struggle against the employers and their government to the conquest of state power, and therefore the necessary leadership of the revolutionary party. The CPGB recognised the importance of the tactic of the united front to winning over the workers that still supported the trade union lefts, like Cook.

The same resolution also warned the NMM not 'to place too much reliance on what we have called the official left wing' but to 'criticise its weaknesses relentlessly'. Nevertheless, 'the main activity [of the CPGB and the NMM] must be devoted to capturing the masses'¹⁴ The CPGB fought with some success for joint rank and file strike committees and councils of action.

The tragedy of the General Strike was that, between May 1925 and May 1926, the CPGB changed its line 180 degrees. The CPGB started lauding the left (and not so left) leaders Purcell, Swales and Hicks, as 'proletarian' heroes. They revived the slogan, 'All Power to the General Council' without any caveats. The slogan had originated as one aimed at the conservative leaders, who used their individual union's autonomy as an excuse for rejecting combined action, especially a general strike. Thus, without realising it, they ceded control of the strike to those they knew would betray it. The change in line is best shown by two quotes from CPGB leader JT Murphy. This is what he wrote in September 1925:

*'But let us be clear what a General Strike means. It can only mean the throwing down of the gauntlet to the capitalist state, and all the powers at its disposal. Either that challenge is a gesture... or it must develop its challenge into an actual fight for power.'*¹⁵

Compare that to this, written three days before the general strike:

13 Brian Pearce and Michael Woodhouse, 'A History of Communism in Britain', Bookmarks, p.88

14 Ibid, p. 89

15 Workers' Weekly, September 1925

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*'Our party does not hold the leading positions in the trade unions. It is not conducting the negotiations with the employers and the government. It can only advise and place its forces at the service of the workers – led by others. And let it be remembered that those who are leading have not revolutionary perspectives before them. [...] To entertain any exaggerated views as to the revolutionary possibilities of this crisis and visions of new leaders 'arising spontaneously in the struggle' etc is fantastic.'*¹⁶

Thus, the fight for the leadership of the working class in the here and now was abandoned. This is not to say, as we shall see, that CPGB members did not form the backbone of the strike, building councils of action, workers' defence guards and party cells, but they were told 'on no account' should these take leadership of the strike. Nor is it to belittle the imprisonment in October 1925 of most of the CPGB's leadership on fake charges. But the Stalinisation of the CPGB was the root cause of their non-revolutionary line in 1926.

'All Power to the General Council'

The General Council of the TUC had been founded in 1921 and the CPGB argued for individual unions to give more power to the General Council, that it should become a 'general staff of Labour' against the employers and the government with the authority to call a general strike. But in reality, it was a general staff of the union bureaucracy and, when push came to shove, it would mobilise against the MFGB, which was a fighting union, and The National Minority Movement, the militant and organised rank and file.

Nevertheless, in August 1924, through the NMM, the CPGB issued a clear warning:

*'It must not be imagined that the increase of the powers of the General Council will have the tendency to make it less reactionary. On the contrary, the tendency will be for it to become more so... We can guard against the General Council becoming a machine of the capitalists, and can only really evolve from the General Council a Workers' General Staff, only by, in the first place and fundamentally, developing a revolutionary class consciousness among the Trade Union membership.'*¹⁷

16 Ibid, 30 April 1926

17 Stuart King, 'The Comintern, the CPGB and the Minority Movement', *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, Prinkipo Press, p92

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J R Campbell wrote in the *Communist Review* of October 1924 that: 'It would be a suicidal policy for the Communist Party and the Minority Movement to place too much reliance on what we have called the official left wing. It is the duty of our Party and the NMM to criticise its weaknesses relentlessly. The revolutionary workers must never forget that their main activity must be devoted to capturing the masses.'

The weakness in this position was that it did not spell out exactly how the union rank and file could assert its control over the union leaders, and indeed replace them, if they wavered or betrayed. But, worse than that, a real degeneration in the CP and the NMM's position was at hand – a collapse into a zigzagging policy that cloaked the left leaders' climb-downs with 'revolutionary' phrases and compromises with reformism. The origins of this development lay in Moscow.

A critical change in the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Communist International was underway. The first phase of this (between 1923 and 1925) saw the rising power of a 'troika' of leaders, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and Josef Stalin, the latter heading a growing party and state bureaucracy that had marginalised the co-leader of the October Revolution Leon Trotsky.

As president of the Comintern, Zinoviev's policy was generally a 'left' adventurist one. This included support for the 'theory of the offensive' within the German Communist Party, the abandonment of united front tactics 'from above as well as from below,' i.e. placing demands for action on the reformist union and party leaders, as well as mobilising the rank and file, and even calling the social democrats 'social fascists'.

In the name of 'Bolshevisation', there was a purge of the Left Opposition in the Comintern and at the same time its bureaucratic centralisation. Also Zinoviev invented the term 'Trotskyism', which he counterposed to 'Leninism', and promoted and a 'cult of Lenin'. Stalin took up many of these creations of Zinoviev and implemented them in the Comintern's disastrous 'Third Period' (1928-34).

In Britain, however, under Zinoviev's leadership, the Comintern's wooing of the TUC lefts began in earnest. He had become impatient with the small CPGB's slow growth, and looked to the left union leaders as a vehicle for the emergence of a mass communist party. In the summer of 1924 at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International, Zinoviev suggested:

'We do not know exactly whence the Communist mass party of Britain will come, whether only through the Stewart-MacManus door [leaders of the CPGB] or through some other door.'¹⁸ The alternative 'door' Zinoviev cautiously referred to was that of the left union leaders, who, in 1924-25, appeared to be the dominant force on the TUC General Council.

18 Daniel F. Calhoun, 'The United Front: the TUC and the Russians', 1976, p.65

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Stalin and Nicolai Bukharin, on the other hand, represented a further right faction in the Russian party, which despaired of the revolution in western Europe and were dedicated to a strategy of building 'socialism in one country'. This consigned national sections of the Comintern to the role of protecting the Soviet Union first and foremost, and subordinating revolutionary strategy in their own countries to this goal.

The 'left' leaders of the General Council had visited the Soviet Union on various delegations to promote closer ties with the Soviet unions led by Mikhail Tomsky. The latter visited Britain and received a warm welcome at the Trades Union Congresses of 1924 and 1925. The key TUC lefts included Purcell, Chair of the General Council, Hicks, chair of the TUC's International Committee and Swales, who was President of the TUC in 1925. A.J. Cook, though not a member of the General Council, was secretary of the MFGB from 1924, and closest to the militant rank and file.

When the ARC was formed at a joint conference of delegates from the British and Soviet unions in London in April 1925, these leaders pledged themselves to 'achieve unity in the international trade union movement', to fight against preparations for war and 'strengthen the struggle against the offensive of capital on the working class'.¹⁹

Thus not only the lefts who promoted the ARC, but the TUC itself, was regarded by the Russian Communist Party leadership as a vital ally of the Soviet Union against the British and French warmongers and other potential interventionists. Under the so-called troika of Zinoviev, Stalin and Kamenev, the trade union policy of the CPGB had to be subordinated to preserving this. Soon, the CPGB was expressing complete confidence in the TUC lefts and even toning down its criticism of the TUC rights, in order not to embarrass their left allies. Meanwhile, the presence of Purcell, Swales and Hicks on the General Council continued to assure the CPGB that its influence was growing by leaps and bounds, despite its small size.

In January 1926, the party adopted the slogan, 'All Power to the General Council'. Unlike its earlier slogan of 'More Power to the General Council', its meaning was not limited to proposing that the individual unions cede their power to direct struggles. By mimicking the Bolsheviks' 1917 slogan 'All Power to the Soviets', it suggested the General Council was the leading instrument of a struggle for power, with none of the warnings that Campbell and the NMM had previously issued.

In September 1925, the TUC Congress at Scarborough seemed to indicate a further swing to the left. Alonzo Swales, in his chairman's opening remarks, claimed to observe 'clear indications of a world movement rising in revolt and determined

¹⁹ Russia and international unity: report by the TUC of the Anglo-Russian conference', April 1925, pp18-20, <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/russian/id/1442>

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to shake off the shackles of wage slavery.²⁰ But it also indicated the CPGB's swing to the right. Harry Pollitt suggested the NMM was on the verge of 'capturing' the TUC²¹, while Campbell reported that 'the Congress as a whole trod the path of class struggle'²², and *The Worker* declared it marked 'the end of whining and class collaborationist policy'.²³

Trotsky's estimate of the congress was far more realistic: 'this sort of leftism remains only as long as it does not impose any practical obligations. As soon as a question of action arises the lefts respectfully surrender the leadership to the rights'²⁴ Indeed, a closer inspection would have revealed that a larger right wing, headed by Thomas and Clynes, had come back onto the General Council.

A bigger shock to the Communists came immediately after this, when the Labour Party's conference in Liverpool extended its bans on CPGB members joining, and the CPGB's application to affiliate to, the Labour Party

The Liverpool Conference of the Labour Party was held from 29 September to 2 October. The National Executive recommended that: (a) no member of the Communist Party should be eligible to become or remain a member of a local Labour Party and that (b) no affiliated trade union ought to appoint delegates who are communists to national or local Labour Party conferences.

Harry Pollitt for the Communist Party moved the reference back of (a), which was lost by 321,000 votes to 2,871,000. Emanuel Shinwell moved the reference back of (b) which was lost by 480,000 to 1,692,000. In the period leading up to the conference the Communist Party had mounted a campaign for the lifting of the ban on communists and motions to this effect were passed by 75 local Labour Parties and Trades Councils and three trade unions.

Both motions were defeated even more overwhelmingly than in previous years. Even worse, the General Council 'lefts' failed to speak in support of the Communists' affiliation. But now the Communists made excuses for them, claiming that their failure was merely due to 'lack of confidence'.

However, the fact that the CPGB's allies proved to be broken reeds was not lost on Stanley Baldwin. On 14 October, police raided the CPGB's headquarters, in King Street, Covent Garden, arresting twelve members of its executive and charging them under the Incitement to Mutiny Act of 1797. Thus Willie Gallagher, Wal Hannington and Harry Pollitt were put out of action in Wandsworth Prison for 12 vital months.

20 Tony Cliff, 'Trotsky: Fighting the rising Stalinist bureaucracy 1923-1927', ch8, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1991/trotsky3/index.html>

21 *Workers Weekly*, 11 September 1925

22 JR Campbell, 'From Minority to Majority'. *Communist Review*, October 1925

23 *The Worker*, 19 September 1925

24 Leon Trotsky, 'Problems of the British Labour Movement', *Writings on Britain*, vol.2, New Park, p139

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The TUC leaders knew well that a massive struggle would break out in the spring when Samuel's Commission finally reported and the temporary government subsidy to the mine owners ran out. They merely watched as the Tories proceeded to organise the police and military forces under regional commissioners across the country to break a general strike... and did nothing to combat this. The TUC meanwhile basked in their 'Red Friday' victory for six months while the government prepared a strikebreaking outfit, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS), which now had several hundred thousand volunteers and special constables.

Meanwhile, Trotsky was issuing clear warnings about the role of the TUC lefts like Hicks, Swales and Cook plus the Labour Party 'lefts' like George Lansbury:

'The left faction on the General Council is distinguished by a total ideological formlessness and for this very reason it is incapable of consolidating around itself organizationally the leadership of the trade union movement.'

*'This too explains the impotence of the lefts within the Labour Party. The latter rests of course upon the same trade unions. It might appear that the left faction which 'leads' the General Council would have taken control of the Labour Party. But we see something quite different in reality. The extreme rights continue to control the party. This can be explained by the fact that a party cannot confine itself to isolated left campaigns but is compelled to have an overall system policy. The lefts have no such system nor by their very essence can they. But the rights do: with them stands tradition, experience and routine and, most important, with them stands bourgeois society as a whole which slips them ready-made solutions. For MacDonald has only to translate Baldwin's and Lloyd George's suggestions into Fabian language. The rights win despite the fact that the lefts are more numerous. The weakness of the lefts arises from their disorder and their disorder from their ideological formlessness. In order to marshal their ranks, the lefts have first of all to rally their ideas. The best of them will only be capable of doing so under the fire of the most ruthless criticism based upon the everyday experience of the masses.'*²⁵

Government, TUC and Minority Movement: final plans

At the end of January 1926, the General Council finally appointed a nine person

25 Ibid, pp137-38, 7 January 1926

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Special Industrial Committee to liaise with the miners. It consisted of right-wingers Thomas, Pugh and Alexander Walkden, centre-right figures Arthur Hayday, Walter Citrine and RB Walker, and left-wingers Ben Tillett, John Bromley, and George Hicks. Increasingly dominated by the right wing, this committee would play crucial role in betraying the general strike.

Nevertheless, at its monthly meeting on 26 February, the General Council resolved to 'stand firmly and unitedly against any attempt further to degrade the standard of life in the coalfields', calling for 'no reduction in wages, no increase in working hours and no interference with the principle of National Agreements.'

This was a victory for the left, supported by the centre around TGWU leader Ernest Bevin. Meanwhile, AJ Cook continued making fiery speeches at miners' rallies across the country, popularising his slogan, 'Not a minute on the day; not a penny off the pay'.

The government's subsidy to the mine owners was due to end on 30 April. The Samuel Commission finally issued its report on 10 March. Whilst it criticised the mine owners and talked of the need for a 'reorganisation' of the coal industry, it also recommended wage cuts or an increase in working hours – what it impudently called 'a temporary sacrifice by the men in the industry'. To confirm this, the mine-owners published new terms of employment to begin on 1 May, which added an hour on the day, reduced wages by as much as 25 per cent, and replaced national wage agreements with district level ones. Otherwise there would be a lock out.

But Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald welcomed Samuel's report as 'a conspicuous landmark in the history of political thought', while Thomas said that it was 70 per cent in favour of the miners, and should form a basis for negotiations.

Cook, however, with over one million miners mobilised behind him, totally rejected any wage cuts. But in an ominous warning of what was to come, the TUC lefts failed to endorse the miners' rejection of the Samuel report. This was an early signal that they would cede leadership to Thomas and the right wing, just as Leon Trotsky had predicted.

In sharp contrast, the CPGB declared Samuel's report, 'a declaration of war against the miners and the whole working class movement.'

In response, the Minority Movement called a National Conference of Action on 21 March 1926. Its 883 delegates (including representatives of 52 Trades Councils) claimed to represent 957,000 workers, making it the largest conference in its history.

The veteran union leader and communist Tom Mann made a militant speech in solidarity with the miners, and delegates discussed transforming the Trades Councils into real councils of action, by bringing in political organisations, cooperative societies and the Unemployed Workers' Movement.

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Dozens of such councils of action had already been formed in areas where Communists and the Minority Movement were strong, like the Fife coalfield in Scotland. Mann also emphasised the need for defence organisations to protect strikers against the inevitable repression of the police, the OMS and the small but violent National Fascist movement.

Although the CPGB had presented the General Council as the 'general staff of the movement', there was little debate or discussion on what was to be expected of it, or of the lefts. This failure was a fatal weakness in the CPGB's strategy.

Only on 27 April – three days from the mine owners' deadline – did the General Council commission a plan for solidarity action. However, it did summon the executives of its 141 affiliated unions to a special conference on Thursday 29 April in London's Farringdon Memorial Hall. There, 828 delegates assembled and met daily until 3 May to hear reports of the negotiations. In a speech to the assembled union executives, Ernest Bevin, leader of the TGWU, stressed the radical nature of what the movement was doing:

'You are moving to an extraordinary position. In 24 hours from now you may have to cease being separate unions, for this purpose you will become one union with no autonomy (cheers). The miners will have to throw in their lot and cause, and the general movement will have to take the responsibility of seeing it through.'

'Bevin went on to call the Farringdon meeting 'our parliament, our assembly, our constituent assembly, where we will place the facts and figures and the proposals and problems that have to be submitted for calm judgment, and at the end take your instruction.'²⁶

The situation did indeed require that the union executives act for the movement as a whole, indeed as leaders of the working class. But Bevin was also clearly asserting was that the miners would have to accept the decisions of the movement. What if those decisions were to accept the necessity of wage cuts and longer hours?

What he and they refused to recognise was that a general strike was intrinsically a political struggle, a struggle with the state. For this, however, they were totally unprepared and indeed unwilling. The TUC did not wish to force the government to submit, but to pressure it to arbitrate more favourably to the miners with the employers. It remained, left-wingers included, a collection of union officials looking for a deal. Also the so-called constituent assembly was dispersed as soon as the

²⁶ Christopher Farman, '1926: the General Strike; Britain's Aborted Revolution?', 1974, p120

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strike began, and negotiations with Baldwin were handed over to a smaller committee on which the decisive figures were right wingers like Thomas and Citrine.

They were facing ruling class negotiators of a very different temper. Baldwin himself was inclined to delay, but he was surrounded by a group of hard-nosed class warriors: Churchill, Joynson-Hicks and Lord Birkenhead. They were not looking for a compromise but for victory, and were determined to smash the unions' resistance and make industry profitable again, even if this meant facing down a general strike.

The right wing union leaders were more aware of this than the lefts and drew completely defeatist conclusions from it. Thomas revealed his thinking to the TUC's new acting secretary, Walter Citrine:

*'I am perfectly convinced Walter there is no hope. Stanley Baldwin talks to me just like a pal. There is going to be trouble and there is no way out of it. [...] They are going to smash it. It won't last more than a few days. [...] You see Walter they have made up their mind they must fight. Who is this strike against? It is not against the coal owners. The money is not in the industry so it must be against the state. Well, Baldwin states the state must be supreme, and he is right.'*²⁷

Their dilemma was that neither the Cabinet nor the coal owners would offer a compromise that the TUC could sell to the miners' leaders. Neither an immediate sell-out nor a government retreat was possible. A general strike was absolutely inevitable.

What was not inevitable was its defeat – or its victory. These were determined by the actions, strategy and tactics of its leaders, not just of the General Council, but also of any alternative leadership – the CPGB, the Minority Movement – and the hundreds of thousands of militants in the unions, the Trades Councils and the NUWM.

At precisely this point, however, the CPGB failed even more dramatically by themselves renouncing any revolutionary perspective for the strike. As we have seen, in the last issue of the Workers Weekly before the strike in an article entitled 'Fighting for life – Revolution not in sight', J T Murphy ceded the leadership of the general strike to the reformist union 'lefts', who were incapable of challenging for power.

And what of Purcell, Swales and Hicks? They were now ready to let Thomas take responsibility, as Trotsky had predicted in his pamphlet, *Where Is Britain Going?*

²⁷ Christopher Farman, '1926: the General Strike; Britain's Aborted Revolution?', 1974, p120

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This was because the only alternative to surrender was an all-out indefinite general strike, facing inevitable legal and police-military repression.

Even the miners' leader Cook was utterly unprepared for that and began to look for a way out. In the Daily Herald of 27 April he wrote, 'I am convinced that a settlement can be reached by a straight return to the [Samuel] Commission's proposals.'

The government, however, insisted on an explicit commitment from the miners to accept wage reductions, and refused to put any pressure on the mine owners to withdraw their lockout notices, or to provide any further government money. In short, Baldwin called the TUC's bluff.

Negotiations fail

The General Council turned its Special Industrial Committee into a Negotiating Committee under Thomas's leadership, engaging in shuttle diplomacy between TUC headquarters in Ecclestone Square and nearby 10 Downing Street. At every critical moment they excluded the miners' AJ Cook.

When the owner's ultimatum expired with no agreement one million miners found themselves locked out. Huge May Day marches, all supporting the call for a general strike, demonstrated mass enthusiasm for it. The central London May Day demonstration marched past the Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street, and one union executive member at the conference recalled, 'I never heard the Red Flag sung so loudly and with such spirit.'

But inside the hall, union executives were singing from a different hymn sheet, quite literally, Cardinal Newman's famous hymn whose words 'Lead Kindly Light amidst the encircling gloom, lead thou me on. The night is dark, and I am far from home' etc. rather aptly expressed the mood of a trade union bureaucracy afraid of the struggle they faced.

Thomas solemnly addressed the conference:

'I suppose my usual critics will say that Thomas was almost grovelling, and it is true. In all my long experience – and I have conducted many negotiations – I have never begged and pleaded like I begged and pleaded all day today. [...] For ten days we said to the government "you force the coal owners to give us some terms, never mind what they are and however bad they are. Let us have something to go on". They said, "No, it cannot be done".'²⁸

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But with no face-saving compromise on offer the assembled bureaucrats had to honour their pledge to stand by the miners, and the conference voted overwhelmingly for the General Council's motion for the strike to begin at midnight on Monday 3 May for with the first line of workers in rail and road transport, the print, iron and steel and other metals, heavy chemicals, electricity, gas, building (excluding hospitals and houses).

The King and the Privy Council declared a State of Emergency, giving the government far ranging powers.

Although negotiations continued on 1 May, behind the scenes a sellout was already under way, brokered by Thomas. He and the Negotiating Committee believed an agreement was within reach on the basis of accepting the Samuel Report, including pay cuts and an extra day's working for the miners. Thomas went so far as to draft a memorandum with Lord Birkenhead that accepted wage cuts. But the miners' executive continued to reject it – and the other Cabinet die-hards also jibbed. A pretext was needed for the government to break off negotiations

When printers at the Daily Mail declared an unofficial strike to prevent the publication of a provocative anti-union editorial, the Cabinet feigned outrage and sent the Negotiating Committee packing. The TUC leaders then cravenly repudiated the strikers at Daily Mail and dispatched Pugh and Citrine back to Downing Street. When they got there, the doorman curtly informed them that the prime minister had gone to bed and could not be disturbed.

With his sell-out cruelly snatched from under his nose, Thomas left Downing Street in total despair. As he said later, 'I gave way to tears. It was like seeing the fabric you loved smashed to fragments.'

The strike was now on, but its 'leadership' suffering a total collapse of morale. Henceforth they were looking for any means to end it.

On 6 May, Trotsky once again warned of the unavoidably political character of a general strike and its inherent revolutionary potential, which the bourgeoisie recognised, even if the workers' leaders did not or would not. It is worth quoting him at length.

'A general strike is the sharpest form of class struggle. It is only one step from the general strike to armed insurrection. This is precisely why the general strike, more than any other form of class struggle, requires clear, distinct, resolute and therefore revolutionary leadership. In the current strike of the British proletariat there is not a ghost of such a leadership, and it is not to be expected that it can be conjured up out of the ground. The General Council of the Trades Union Congress set out with the ridiculous statement that the present General Strike did not represent a political struggle and did not in any event constitute

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an assault upon the state power of the bankers, industrialists and landowners, or upon the sanctity of British parliamentarism. This most loyal and submissive declaration of war does not, however, appear the least bit convincing to the government, which feels the real instruments of rule slipping out of its hands under the effect of the strike.

'State power is not an 'idea' but a material apparatus. When the apparatus of government and suppression is paralysed the state power itself is thereby paralysed. In modern society no-one can hold power without controlling the railways, shipping, posts, telegraphs, power stations, coal and so on. The fact that MacDonald and Thomas have sworn to renounce any political objectives may typify them personally but it in no way typifies the nature of the General Strike which if carried through to the end sets the revolutionary class the task of organising a new state power. Fighting against this with all their might, however, are those very people who by the course of events have been placed "at the head" of the General Strike. And in this the main danger lies.

'Men who did not want the General Strike, who deny the political nature of the General Strike, and fear above all the consequences of a victorious strike, must inevitably direct all their efforts towards keeping it within the bounds of a semi-political semi-strike, that is to say, towards emasculating it.

*'We must look facts in the face: the principal efforts of the official Labour Party leaders and of a considerable number of official trade union leaders will be directed not towards paralysing the bourgeois state by means of the strike but towards paralysing the General Strike by means of the bourgeois state.'*²⁹

The Strike is on

Between 1.5 and 1.75 million workers solidly obeyed their unions' instructions to strike, as well as a million locked out miners. This figure was to rise to 3.6 million workers by the end of the strike. Under Bevin's bureaucratic plan, for a staged deployment by different industries, the majority of workers had been instructed not to strike, and many who did were ordered to return to work.

In London the main groups called out were the dockers, printers, power station

²⁹ Leon Trotsky, 'Problems of the British Labour Movement', Writings on Britain, New Park, vol.2, pp144-45

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workers, railwaymen, and transport workers. Henry Hamilton Fyfe (editor of the *British Worker*, the TUC's strike paper) recorded the first day in his diary:

'On the railways scarcely a wheel turns... Docks everywhere are empty and silent. The roads, outside of the cities, have little traffic on them. Building has almost entirely stopped, except on housing schemes and hospital extensions. Iron and steel works are closed; so are the heavy chemical factories. There are none of the ordinary newspapers. Nothing like a strike on this scale has been seen before – anywhere.'

On the second day, the Liverpool Council of Action, founded ten months before, reported that all engineers and shipyard workers on the Mersey were out. In Birkenhead and Wallasey, a group of strikers waylaid trams that were running and brought them to a halt. The strike was solid, and it remained so throughout the nine days. In no sense could it be said that it failed due to any lack of enthusiasm from the rank and file. Its main organisers were not the faint-hearted bureaucrats at Eccleston Square, but the local Trades Councils and the councils of action.

The state of emergency gave the government enormous powers. It deployed the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies and 226,000 Special Constables. The middle-class OMS volunteers were able to get a few buses running but failed completely when it came to trains; obviously public schoolboys and Oxbridge graduates lacked the skills to run a steam locomotive.

Scab buses and trams were waylaid by mass pickets and some set on fire. There were fierce battles between police and strikers in many cities, especially around the London docks. The picture of strikers and police playing football, an image encouraged by the TUC, is a false one. But then the TUC's message had been to keep 'busy', do some gardening, don't sit around and talk: that is, stay passive!

The councils of action, however, had other ideas. In Fife coalfield, a CPGB and Minority Movement stronghold, defence guards massively increased their numbers after a clash between pickets and police, and patrolled the streets in military formation, armed with pickaxe handles. Police provocations suddenly stopped, and a situation approaching dual power ensued. Similar conditions emerged in the North East and in the Welsh mining valleys.

The government commandeered all available newsprint and published a newspaper, *The British Gazette*, with Churchill as its editor. The TUC responded by printing the *British Worker* on the *Daily Herald* presses. Police raided it and continually harassed its distribution. Churchill even confiscated some of its newsprint reserves. The Cabinet, however, decided not to take direct control of the BBC (dubbed the *Bosses Broadcasting Corporation* by the strikers) as it was already loyally toeing the

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government line.

At every stage of the strike rank and file workers were both to the left of and ahead of the leaders. Not only male workers, but women, the unemployed, youth rallied to the strike, organising demos, protests, picketing to stop the scabs and clashing with the police. The ingenuity of the workers, faced with immediate problems such as the production and distribution of food, producing strike bulletins to counter the lies of John Reith's BBC and Churchill's British Gazette, discovering and eliminating scab operations, etc. was incredible and an example to this day. The Co-op organised food distribution in coordination with the Trades Councils and councils of action.

Approximately 400 Trades Councils and 100-150 councils of action ran the strike at the local level in the most industrial and urban areas. Some of these were little more than gatherings of the local union leaders and activists, but others, especially where the CPGB was influential, did draw in more rank and file elements, non-union workers and the wider community. Of course they were not soviets of elected and recallable delegates, but they could take decisions and execute them, the essence of workers' democracy.

In some areas, notably Newcastle and the North-East, councils of action linked up, widening their authority and coordinating their activities. A 30 year-old CP member, Rajani Palme Dutt organised despatch motorcyclists from his workplace to deliver messages between strike centres across Newcastle and the North-East. On Merseyside each district had its own council of action, linked up centrally, while in many South Wales valleys councils of action ran pit villages without the police daring to show their faces. As in Fife, elements of dual power were emerging.

Stopping all transport, even cars (which were mostly owned by the middle class) telling the drivers not to go to work, was a major task. In Camberwell, South London women devised the tactic of pushing prams in front of (stationary) lorries, buses and trams, stopping the traffic, to allowing a striker to 'persuade' the scab to get out. Across London 47 buses were put out of action by sabotage on just one day – 7 May.

In the Elephant & Castle a riot against the police ended with a tram pushed into the entrance to the tube station. South London was a hub of rank and file activity because it was the main entrance for goods and produce from Dover; Southwark alone had three councils of action. There were exemption notices, 'By permission of the TUC,' but these were thoroughly checked as fakes were known to circulate.

The provision of daily necessities was made even more urgent ironically because the strike. These too were organised by strike committees and councils of action in conjunction with the local Co-ops. Everything from children's schooling to soup kitchens were run by workers, sometimes taking over the bosses' facilities.

Here it was possible for workers to glimpse the possibility of a life without boss-

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es. However, despite the use of armoured cars guarding convoys and ferries used to get the scabs to work, despite warships being anchored in the Mersey and other ports, and despite gangs of the British Fascisti (modelled on Mussolini's blackshirts) and Special Constables beating up pickets and protesters, the main weapon used against the workers was the treacherous TUC leaders.

The Betrayal and how it should have been fought

While the solidity of the strike across the country was growing, the Negotiating Committee never stopped looking for a way to end it at the miners' expense. Here, Sir Herbert Samuel, was dragged back from holiday to play a part. The TUC met him, behind the miners' backs, and agreed to his drafting a memorandum that included a reduction in wages. The Negotiating Committee accepted these terms, with the 'left' Swales fully concurring. The miners once more rejected them. This was what the TUC General Council took as its pretext to call off the general strike.

They were helped in this by a High Court judge, Mr. Justice Astbury, who ruled on Tuesday 11 May that, since the strike was not in furtherance of a trade dispute, it constituted a breach of contract not covered by the immunities granted by the trade union acts. Thus union funds could not legally be used for strike pay; union assets could therefore be threatened with legal confiscation.

The following day a TUC delegation consisting of Bevin, Pugh, Thomas and Citrine, went to Downing Street to indicate their willingness to call off the general strike provided that the Samuel Commission proposals were a basis for negotiation and the Government promised there would be no victimisation of strikers by employers. Baldwin sent a secretary to tell them he would only see them if they agreed the general strike would be called off unconditionally. Once again he made clear that there was no question of discussing Samuel's recommendations. They duly announced they were simply calling for a return to work with the miners still locked out.

Lord Birkenhead later wrote that as the crestfallen leaders trooped out of the cabinet room the spectacle was 'so humiliating that some instinctive breeding made one unwilling even to look at them'. Ernest Bevin said, as they left Number Ten, 'we will never be forgiven for this day's work'.

The British Worker's last strike edition ran the deceitful headline, 'Strike Terminated Today – Trades Union Congress General Council Satisfied That Miners Will Now Get a Fair Deal'. The Hull strike committee's bulletin more truthfully reported: 'Alarm – Fear – Despair – a victorious army disarmed and handed over to its enemies'. In fact, on Thursday 13 May there were 100,000 more workers on strike than

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on any previous day.

The employers immediately began to victimise strikers, and many were forced to resume the strike on 14 May. On 20 May, a miners' delegate conference once more rejected Baldwin's proposals and the lockout continued till November when, with its funds exhausted and an uncoordinated return to work underway, the MFGB finally accepted the harsh conditions. Many militants were victimised and remained unemployed for years.

Once again Trotsky put his finger on the key question, correctly pointing the finger at the Russian unions for not fighting openly for the miners and preferring to foster relations with the TUC bureaucracy:

*'Certainly, support of an economic strike, even an isolated one, was absolutely necessary. There can be no two opinions on that among revolutionists. But this support should have borne not only a financial but also a revolutionary-political character. The All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions should have declared openly to the British mineworkers' union and the whole British working class that the mineworkers' strike could seriously count upon success only if by its stubbornness, its tenacity, and its scope, it could prepare the way for a new outbreak of the General Strike. That could have been achieved only by an open and direct struggle against the General Council, the agency of the government and the mine owners. The struggle to convert the economic strike into a political strike should have signified, therefore, a furious political and organizational war against the General Council. The first step to such a war had to be the break with the Anglo-Russian Committee, which had become a reactionary obstacle, a chain on the feet of the working class.'*³⁰

And here the political weakness of the most left wing of all the left leaders – A J Cook came to the fore. Yes, he had fought with the Negotiating Committee traitors to prevent the betrayal, but he had not turned to the members of the other unions to recall their own conferences to continue the solidarity action, or a conference of the union movement as a whole, to block the General Council's ending of the strike. After this while he remained a tireless leader of the locked out miners – much as Arthur Scargill was in 1984-5 – his observance of the fundamental rule of the trade union bureaucracy never to interfere in each other's organisations or publicly criticise their leaders conduct prevented him from heading a settling of accounts with Thomas, Bevin and Citrine.

Instead the promises by other union leaders to raise funds for the miners (most

30 Leon Trotsky, 'Problems of the British Labour Movement', Writings on Britain, New Park, vol.2, pp243-44

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renege on anyway) meant that, at the September 1926 TUC Congress in Bournemouth, he wavered again, more crucially. The General Council had promised a voluntary levy of all trade union members and Cook agreed to block any congress debate on the union leaders' sell-out.

So, when Jack Tanner of the Engineers Union moved reference back of the General Council's report and the holding of a full debate on the actions of the General Council during the Nine Days, delegates thunderously applauded. But AJ Cook intervened to say, 'We have a million miners locked out. We are more concerned just now to get an honourable settlement for these million men than we are in washing dirty linen in this Congress.' Tanner's motion was defeated.

The Aftermath

There can be no doubt as to the courage and determination of the CPGB. Its members were the heart and soul of the councils of action for which they had fought for nearly a year. Of the 5,000 workers arrested throughout the strike, 1,200 were Communists.

Their problem was the political line of their party. Its immediate reaction to the calling off of the strike by the General Council, a decision supported by both left and right, was one of total shock.

Nor did they learn from their mistakes. A CPGB Executive Committee statement in *Workers Weekly* on 4 June 1926 observed:

'There will be a reaction without [outside of] our party against working with left wing leaders. We must fight down this natural feeling, and get better contact with these leaders and more mass pressure on them.'

The task that the Communist Party faced was to develop a strategy for victory in the general strike, and to fight for it openly. This meant more than councils of action, workers' defence guards and so on, vital as these were.

It meant placing demands on the TUC leaders and on the lefts to explicitly rule out a surrender of the miners' demands. It meant winning the councils of action to a clear recognition that the strike was a political strike against the bosses' government, a 'challenge to the constitution' as Baldwin (correctly) claimed it to be and not a trades dispute as the TUC pathetically asserted.

It is impossible, as Trotsky said, to suspend the functioning, not only of the economy but also of the state itself, without the strike raising the question 'who shall be the master in the house?' It meant recognising the revolutionary potential that is

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always present in an all-out general strike.

It also required giving the clearest possible warning of the inevitable treachery of the TUC right wing and the inevitable unreliability of the centre and the left. It meant popularising proposals to control the leaders, to call them to account and, above all, to take the initiative the moment they wavered or tried to retreat or surrender.

This would have meant the Minority Movement clearly posing itself from the beginning as an alternative leadership for the strike, and the CPGB as the political alternative to MacDonalld and the Labour Party. This, the CPGB and the NMM utterly failed to do.

As for the Soviet party and the Comintern, using the excuse of the need to continue to support the striking miners, they refused to condemn outright the TUC, including its left leaders, or to break up the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee, which otherwise would be a bloc with strike breakers. In any case the British TUC broke up the ARC in 1927.

But the real reason for the Comintern's lack of a clear balance sheet after the strike is that it would have meant having to make an analysis of their own role and embroil themselves in the responsibility for the CPGB's leadership political failures.

Conclusion

Revolutionary Marxists, following Lenin and Trotsky, insist that revolutionary situations cannot be imposed on a society from the outside, but mature from the contradictions in the objective circumstances.

Three of these conditions for revolution are objective: that the ruling class cannot continue to dominate society in the old way, leading to a profound economic and political crisis; secondly, that the working class and oppressed peoples refuse to be subjected to their rule, facing a precipitous and intolerable fall in their living standards; and thirdly, that the working class, at the head of the other oppressed strata in society are prepared to take unusually drastic mass action, even to their own immediate detriment.

In 1925-26 these objective facts were clearly present in Britain. Yet there was no revolution. Trotsky, analysing the situation in France in 1935, explained why, essentially adding a fourth condition for revolution, an active communist party giving a clear revolutionary leadership to the masses:

'The situation [in France] is revolutionary, as revolutionary as it can be, granted the non-revolutionary policies of the working-class parties. More exactly,

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*the situation is pre-revolutionary. In order to bring the situation to its full maturity, there must be an immediate, vigorous, unremitting mobilization of the masses, under the slogan of the conquest of power in the name of socialism. This is the only way through which the pre-revolutionary situation will be changed into a revolutionary situation.*³¹

Trotsky neither despaired at the small size of the CPGB, nor, unlike Zinoviev, did he seek a short cut via the left bureaucracy. Instead he insisted that the young Communist Party could grow during the struggle, if it adopted the correct policy and if it utilised the united front in a revolutionary manner.

If it did both these things, the CPGB could grow into a mass party and challenge for leadership of the working class, maybe not in time to lead the May 1926 strike to victory. Trotsky did not believe this could be achieved overnight. He was realistic. However, he had been a leader of the 1905 revolution in Russia and knew that such situations, if they led to a strengthening of the revolutionary pole, could prepare the working class struggles ahead:

*'The more powerfully [the working class] shakes the foundations of capitalism and the further back it thrusts the treacherous and opportunist leaders the harder it will be for bourgeois reaction to go over to the counter-offensive, the less proletarian organisations will suffer, and the sooner will follow the next, more decisive stage of the struggle.'*³²

The united front was crucial in these circumstances, but the Comintern was just codifying the use of this tactic in 1921-22, and the Stalinisation of the International came too soon for its fundamental elements to be grasped in Britain. Trotsky summed up the tactic with the slogan, 'March separately, strike together!' by which he meant that the agreement with the reformists is only confined to action; freedom of the revolutionary party to criticise its temporary 'allies' before, during and after the united action was a pre-condition to the united front.

The CPGB failed to internalise this point. But without it, the united front can only ever strengthen the reformist leadership of the working class, providing the misleaders and traitors with left cover. As soon as this becomes the likely outcome of the united front, communists must break openly and decisively with the reformist leaders, taking as many of their rank and file followers with them.

Last but not least, the lessons of the general strike must also include the impor-

31 Leon Trotsky, 'Once again, whither France?', On France, Pathfinder, 1935, p68

32 Leon Trotsky, 'Problems of the British Labour Movement', Writings on Britain, New Park, vol.2, p146

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tance of the revolutionary International. Through the early years the Comintern provided the British communists with clear revolutionary advice, encouragement and guidance.

Not only did Lenin personally take the time after the second congress to convince Gallagher and Tanner of the correct line regarding mass working class organisations, but the Comintern sent the Bolshevik organiser Mikhail Borodin to run the RILU Bureau in London. Borodin got nowhere talking to the central and district leaders of the CPGB and decided to go directly to the worker-members in the South Wales, and later Scottish coalfields. He taught them how to gather round them the best militants, and from there grew the seeds of the Miners' Minority Movement.

But the degeneration of the Comintern had, as we have seen, disastrous consequences, not just for the general strike but also for the CPGB itself. For the comrades of Workers Power and the International Socialist League, of which we are the British section, the lesson is not that 'foreign' leaders are bad and should be distrusted. On the contrary, it is that the highest form of proletarian internationalism is the struggle for a new, revolutionary International in the best traditions of the first four Internationals. But this requires an active and critical approach to our international partners, not subordination to the largest, most powerful party within it. Once the Comintern had thrown this away with the Stalin-Bukharin theory of socialism in one country, it signalled its break with true internationalism. We must ensure that this error is not repeated as we prepare for fresh revolutionary opportunities in Britain and across the world.

Chronology

March 1926 The Samuel Commission on the Coal Industry issues its long-awaited report: the coal industry should be reorganised but not nationalised; the subsidy for miners' wages that had been paid for nine months to avert a strike in 1925 should end on 30 April. The colliery owners demand longer hours and wage cuts.

April sees stalemate after a series of negotiations between government, colliery owners, miners and the TUC. Lockout notices are posted at mines by the owners for when the subsidy ends at the end of the month. Arthur Cook, a leader of the miners, has this clarion call: 'Not a penny off the pay, not a second on the day.'

1 May A Special Conference approves the TUC General Council's proposals for a General strike in defence of the miners' wages and hours to begin at midnight on Monday 3 May. The government proclaims a State of Emergency. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, broadcasts to the nation: 'Keep steady. Keep ready. Remember that peace on Earth comes to men of goodwill.' Unions begin to issue strike orders for the first line of industries to come out, such as unions from transport, printing, the press, iron, steel and metals, heavy chemicals, electricity, gas, building (excluding hospitals and houses). The TUC and the Prime Minister resume negotiations at 9pm.

2 May Baldwin and the TUC break their negotiations so the prime minister can meet with the Cabinet while the Miners' Executive join discussions with the TUC

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General Council.

3 May Negotiations broke down at 1.15am after printers refused to print a Daily Mail leading article denouncing the General Strike as an attack on the constitution. Stanley Baldwin informs the TUC negotiators that 'Overt acts have already taken place, including gross interference with the freedom of the press'. This was a challenge to the constitution, the Government asserted, and so demanded: 'The immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the instructions for a General Strike'. The general strike began at midnight as day shifts ended and night shifts stayed at home.

4 May First day of the strike and the response of those called out exceeded expectations. No passenger trains; hardly any buses or trams and the docks at a standstill. No national newspapers. The BBC issues news bulletins at three hourly intervals. Many trades councils produce their own local strike bulletin broadsheets.

5 May The government appealed for volunteers and Special Constables and issued the British Gazette with Winston Churchill as editor. The TUC replied with the British Worker printed at the premises of the Daily Herald although the first edition was held up for 5 hours by a police raid. At the local level, strike organisations, councils of action, joint strike committees took the initiative where it was felt there was insufficient direction from the TUC. London taxi-drivers, who had not been called out on strike, insist on joining the strike.

6 May The government assures volunteers that they will not be victimised by trade unions after the end of the strike, and they will lose no trade union benefits. Sir John Simon declares in the House of Commons that the General Strike is illegal.

7 May The Archbishop of Canterbury announces proposals for a settlement which are printed in the British Worker but make no appearance in the British Gazette or on the BBC. Sir Herbert Samuel (who had headed the Royal Commission about the mines) returns from holiday and approaches the TUC General Council with an offer of mediation, emphasising that he is acting in an unofficial capacity with no governmental authority. The TUC Negotiating Committee meet with him without informing the miners.

8 May A convoy of armoured cars, with soldiers in helmets, transport food supplies to a depot in Hyde Park. The government announce plans for a Civil Reserve Constabulary whose recruits would don steel helmets, armlets and be armed with truncheons. The BBC announce a government declaration that any member of the

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armed forces will receive full governmental support for any action they deem necessary to take 'in an honest endeavour to aid the Civil Power'.

9 May Sunday: mass gatherings in support of the strike nationwide; Cardinal Bourne at High Mass declares the General Strike a sin against God; the army place a cordon around London Docks. TUC leaders now inform the miners' leaders of Samuel's recommendations which include wage cuts. TUC General Council informed by the Miners' Federation Executive at a meeting that wage cuts are simply unacceptable.

10 May Sir Herbert Samuel now meets with the TUC Negotiating Committee and the miners' representatives. Miners emphasise the unacceptability of wage cuts. Many arrests mentioned on the BBC. The TUC General Council sends out this rallying call to those out on strike: 'Stand firm. Be loyal to instructions and trust your leaders.'

11 May Those shipbuilding and engineering workers not called out in the first wave are instructed to down tools at midnight. The Transport and General Workers Union leadership publish this message: 'Hold fast. We must see the miners through.'

Justice Astbury declares that the General Strike is illegal and that trade union funds may not be legally used for strike pay to those called out as they are obeying illegal orders.

The TUC General Council accept the final draft of the Samuel Memorandum from the TUC Negotiating Committee. The MFGB Executive reject it as it involves wage cuts.

12 May The TUC General Council visit Downing Street at noon to inform Baldwin that the general strike is unconditionally called off. The news is broadcast at 1pm. The King issues a message calling for co-operation.

13 May It now becomes public knowledge that the settlement does not include withdrawal of the owners' lock-out notices. The MFGB refuse to agree to the settlement. There is widespread employer practice of the imposition of terms of reinstatement that amount to victimisation in many people's eyes. Workers go back on strike: there are more out today than on any previous day.

14 May The Prime Minister's proposals to miners and owners are even less favourable to the miners than those of the Samuel Memorandum. The Railway Unions accept the terms proposed by the Railway Companies and are forced to 'admit that

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in calling a strike they committed a wrongful act’.

15-18 May Dockers, printworkers and other trades unions reach agreements for returning to work. Much victimisation, especially on the railways.

End of November sees the official return to work by the miners after growing piece-meal returns to work throughout the summer and autumn. Wage cuts and longer hours for many, and victimisation and unemployment for many too.

1927 The Trades Disputes and Trades Union Act made all sympathetic strikes illegal; mass picketing and ‘intimidation’ by pickets illegal; no political levy for trades unionists to pay to the Labour Party, instead they will have to ‘contract in’; civil service unions not allowed to affiliate to the TUC; local authority employees forbidden to break their contracts of employment on pain of imprisonment. In September 1927 the TUC wound up the Anglo-Russian Committee, essentially at the behest of the British state.

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Workers Power - Where we stand

Capitalism and socialism

Workers Power is a revolutionary socialist organisation that fights to end exploitation and oppression through working-class power and socialism. Capitalism cannot be reformed in the interests of working people. Whoever governs, it remains a system organised around profit, exploitation and crisis, in which a minority controls wealth and power while the great majority are forced to sell their labour to live.

Marxism is not just a criticism of injustice, but a theory of revolutionary change rooted in class struggle. Capitalism has created immense productive power, but it subordinates everything to competition, profit and the blind movement of the market. We fight not for a fairer management of this system, but for its overthrow and replacement by common ownership, democratic planning and the self-government of the working class.

Reformism and class independence

Labour governments administer capitalism on behalf of the bosses. The working class needs its own politics, its own organisation and its own strategy, not subordination to politicians and officials who want to divert struggle into safe channels and back behind the limits of the system. We fight for class independence against every attempt to tie workers to Labour, liberalism or any wing of the ruling class.

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Reformism does not offer a road beyond capitalism, but a politics of adaptation to it. It channels anger back into parliament, official leaderships and the hope that the system can be managed in the interests of the majority. We fight instead for independent working-class politics rooted in struggle, organisation from below and the fight for socialism.

Trade unions and rank and file

Trade unions remain basic organisations of working-class defence, but they are held back by a bureaucracy whose role is to mediate between workers and bosses, not to lead a fight for power. We fight for rank-and-file control: elected and recallable representatives, democratic strike committees, workplace committees and organisation from below.

We fight to turn the unions into fighting organisations of the class, not service bodies tied to compromise and legal routine. We also fight to build the forms of struggle through which workers can act directly for themselves — from picket line stewards' groups and strike committees to councils of action and wider organs of workers' control. In every serious struggle, the question is whether workers remain dependent on officials or begin to impose their own leadership and their own methods.

The state and revolution

The capitalist state cannot be taken over and used in the interests of the majority. Its courts, police, army, prisons and bureaucracy exist to defend property, hierarchy and class rule. Real democracy for the working class means more than parliament: it means breaking the power of the capitalist state and replacing it with organs of workers' rule based on delegates, councils and democracy from below.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 showed that workers can take power and begin to reorganise society in their own interests. Stalinism was not the fulfilment of that revolution but its bureaucratic defeat: the destruction of workers' democracy by a ruling caste. We fight for socialism from below — workers' power, democratic planning and the self-emancipation of the working class — not rule over the class by officials, generals or a party elite.

Social oppression and liberation

We oppose racism, sexism, anti-migrant chauvinism and the oppression of women and LGBT+ people. These forms of oppression are not secondary to capitalism, but

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part of how it rules, divides and reproduces itself. Working-class unity cannot be built by ignoring oppression, but only by fighting it in practice.

We fight every divide-and-rule strategy used against our class: from racist scapegoating and border controls to attacks on bodily autonomy, queer life and the right to organise freely. We fight fascism and the far right wherever they appear. Liberation cannot be handed down from above or separated from class struggle: it has to be won through mass struggle, collective organisation and the overthrow of the system that sustains oppression.

Climate and planning

The climate crisis shows the bankruptcy of production for profit. Capitalism cannot plan rationally because profit comes first, and every government tied to capital places competition, growth and corporate power above the needs of the planet. Greenwashing, carbon markets and appeals to the same ruling classes that created the crisis will not solve it.

Only democratic planning under workers' control can reorganise the economy at the speed the crisis demands, shifting production from private gain to social need. That means transforming energy, transport, housing and industry on a world scale. The fight for climate justice is therefore inseparable from the fight for socialism.

Imperialism and national liberation

Capitalism is a world system of domination, war and uneven development. Imperialist powers carve up the globe through occupation, debt, military force and political subordination, while weaker ruling classes police their own populations in partnership with global capital. We oppose imperialist war, occupation and every form of national oppression, and we support the right of oppressed peoples to resist and to determine their own future.

But liberation cannot be completed by relying on local ruling classes, liberal diplomacy or rival imperialist camps. In countries shaped by colonialism, dependency and uneven development, the democratic and national tasks can only be carried through consistently by the working class leading all the oppressed. That struggle does not stop at national independence: it passes over into the fight for workers' power and must spread internationally.

Where we stand

From protest to power

We fight on every immediate issue — pay, housing, healthcare, jobs, war and cuts — but we do not separate today's struggles from the fight for power. Reforms matter, but under capitalism they are always partial and always reversible. Revolutionaries need a programme that starts from the real needs of the class, sharpens struggle and points beyond the limits of the system.

That means fighting for the broadest unity in action on concrete aims, while maintaining full political independence from reformist leaders and every wing of the ruling class. It means linking defensive struggles to demands for workers' control, workers' government and ultimately workers' power. Lasting change does not come through parliament or better managers of capitalism, but through the organised force of the working class breaking the resistance of the ruling class and taking power for itself.

A party for struggle

We fight for a revolutionary workers' party: a mass working-class party with an anti-capitalist programme, organised not as an electoral machine but as a party of struggle rooted in workplaces, communities and every front of class conflict. The working class needs more than broad anger, loose networks or left parliamentarians. It needs organisation, leadership and strategy equal to the tasks of the struggle.

That also means building a revolutionary leadership within the working class: militants trained in programme, tested in struggle and committed to democracy, militancy and working-class power. The central crisis in the workers' movement is not the absence of grievances, but the absence of leadership capable of turning struggle into victory. Workers Power fights to help build that leadership.

Internationalism and the International

The struggle for socialism cannot be completed in one country. Capitalism is a world system, and the working class needs not only parties in each country but an international revolutionary organisation. We stand in the tradition of revolutionary Marxism and of the struggle of the first four Internationals to unite workers across borders in a common fight against capitalism, imperialism and war.

But the task today is not to revive old forms by proclamation or nostalgia. It is to help build a new international revolutionary leadership rooted in the struggles of

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the present and capable of carrying the fight for socialism forward. Internationalism is not an optional moral principle: it is a strategic necessity for any serious revolutionary politics.

In May 1926 Britain came closer to a decisive class confrontation than at any time in the twentieth century. This pamphlet re-examines the General Strike not as a heroic myth, but as a critical test of organisation, leadership and strategy. It explores why a struggle marked by extraordinary courage and creativity was brought to a halt, and what that defeat reveals about the role of trade-union bureaucracy, reformist politics and revolutionary organisation. Written for today's activists, it argues that the questions posed in 1926 - rank-and-file power, political leadership, and preparations for wider struggles - remain unresolved, and urgently relevant.