

Essays on the general strike Part III

From war to aborted general strike

The Independent Labour Party's more intimate contact with the socialistic working class meant it was unwilling to actually support the war. Of its seven MPs only two came out as admitted social chauvinists - the shameful JR Clynes and James Parker. The other five maintained an equivocal social pacifism.

Opposition to the war did not mean staying true to the internationalist resolutions agreed at congresses of the Second International. Nor, even as the corpses piled mountain high, was there any suggestion of, let alone agitation for, a general strike.

As a fire and brimstone protestant, Kier Hardie absolved himself. The "nation must be united". With its existence at stake there must be no "discordant notes at home". Sentiments repeated by Ramsay MacDonald, who adopted an equally ethereal approach. He believed the war was wrong, but an other worldly history would have to judge. Fred Jowett was also determined to keep his Christian reputation unsullied. He would "not be party" to the murder and mangling of human lives. But this high minded soul was going to do nothing to stop the bloodbath or those who benefited from it. While he refused to lend a hand, those who believed in the war "should do the recruiting".¹

That said, even such meek and mild opposition to the war was to take a very distinct and dangerous political profile. Britain was fighting total war. Against its own expectations the ILP enjoyed a new lease of life. Alongside militant workers there was an influx of Oxbridge students, upper crust peaceniks, disillusioned liberals and myriad hole-in-the-wall scheme-mongers.

The British Socialist Party underwent a more variegated pattern of evolution. Henry Hyndman, its leader, applauded his German "comrades" Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, Clara Zetkin and "the fiery Rosa Luxemburg".² After all, they were against German "Prussianized" militarism. That this stemmed from their proletarian internationalism, not pro-Britishness, was entirely lost on our top-hatted national socialist.³ For him Haig, Pétain, Kitchener and Jellicoe were the unconscious agents of progress. His considered opinion was that Germany would only join the civilised world after it had "finally" been "defeated by the allies".⁴

Not till 1915 did the internationalist forces organised around the unofficial, factional, publication *The Call* secure an anti-war, anti-Hyndman majority. In so doing, like the ILP, the BSP opened itself up to vilification by the yellow press and government ministers, accusations of treason and all sorts of casual physical attacks on its comrades. However the BSP, unlike the ILP, did not ply some social pacifist golden mean. It navigated a slow, fitful and difficult course towards communism.

Among the masses initial chauvinist hysteria was quickly brought into question. Speed-ups and dilution of labour, conscription and reports of life in the trenches provoked creeping disillusionment. Patriotic cataracts began to fall away. Militancy, thrown back by the outbreak of war, reasserted itself.

It was very much a movement from below. Merger of the trade union bureaucracy with the merchants of exploitation and death gave impetus to a powerful unofficial network. Shop stewards, originally elected to inspect cards and collect union dues, took the lead in defending workers' rights and conditions, and breaking the industrial truce. Beginning in South Wales and the Clyde in 1915, strikes involving many thousands of workers became increasingly common, especially among engineering workers.⁵ In key industrial centres - crucially Sheffield and Clydeside - workers' committees were formed. Despite nagging arrests and dispersal of leaders through judicial banishments, the movement was sufficiently strong to establish a national

committee in 1917. Not surprisingly these shop stewards, who were more often than not influenced by revolutionary ideas, took an ever more hostile attitude to the carnage in Europe.

What was lacking was the Communist Party. In the closing years of the war it would almost certainly have begun to grow at an enormous rate - if it had existed. Harnessing popular discontent, which was manifesting itself at every level and in every way, a Communist Party would have provided coordination, consistent theory and strategic direction.

But with the small revolutionary organisations still at loggerheads and functioning as little more than dogmatic propagandist sects, it was the shop stewards as *shop stewards* who took the lead. Here was the crux of the problem. Most shop stewards were still trammelled by the one-dimensional universe of syndicalism. They regarded 'politics' with contempt. That meant they were unable to link up battles on the shop floor with an anti-war political perspective.⁶

William Gallacher was later to admit that failure to see the necessity of a Communist Party "represented a fatal weakness". As he said of himself and other Clydeside shop stewards' leaders, "We were carrying on a strike when we ought to have been making revolution."⁷

The limitations imposed on struggles by the lack of a Communist Party was brought into even sharper focus in Ireland. Here after all was a country with a revolutionary, not a reformist tradition, a tradition that could only be deepened by the outbreak of world war.

With Jim Larkin's exile, James Connolly became the recognised leader of its militant workers, above all those of Dublin. He was one of the tiny minority, which included the only parties which deserved the name - the Russian Bolsheviks and perhaps the Bulgarian Narrows. From the very beginning they damned the war and denounced imperialism's social chauvinist hangers-on. Never have so many owed so much to so few.

Despite his Christian beliefs and syndicalist inclinations, Connolly was a convinced revolutionary, whose life was dedicated not only to Irish but worldwide freedom. That is why he hoped the declaration of war by the imperialists would "have been the signal for rebellion" throughout Europe. Naturally failure on this score was a bitter disappointment. Yet all was far from lost. Britain's life and death struggle with Germany was Ireland's opportunity. An opportunity for national and social liberation.

Although preferring a British defeat, Connolly did not advocate a German victory. "We do not wish to be ruled by either empire," he wrote.⁸ The Irish, led by the workers, would rule themselves. Connolly therefore castigated those in Sinn Féin who maintained a 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' pro-Germanism. He was for the revolutionary defeat of both sides. A position summed up by the banner he had hung outside the headquarters of the Irish TGWU in Dublin - "We serve neither king nor Kaiser, but Ireland".

Connolly had close personal ties with the movement in Britain, the Clyde in particular. Unfortunately, despite this there was no centralised revolutionary organisation that would enable all advanced sections in the workers' movement to unite their actions throughout the British Isles against the British state - the main and common enemy.

When the Irish Citizen's Army and their republican allies seized the general post office and other prominent sites in Dublin and proclaimed the Irish republic, it was a purely national affair. Furthermore in motivation and psychology it was an act of revolutionary suicide, rather than the insurrectionary culmination of proletarian self-movement. Neither Connolly's group, the Irish Socialist Republican Party, nor the Irish TGWU knew anything about it. No systematic propaganda work had been conducted to pre-

pare the population, no mass movement was ready to support it with strikes, demonstrations and popular committees.

The Easter Rising was therefore doomed to isolation. Though heroic, it was an act of desperation. Of course that did not mean it should have been dismissed or attacked.⁹ In the wake of the rising a powerful national independence movement developed, forcing a British withdrawal from the southern twenty-six counties in 1921. A severe blow to the British Empire.

The October Revolution showed what could be done with a Communist Party. It inspired advanced workers everywhere to follow suit. In Britain this subjective awakening was intimately connected with a powerful objective movement; together they put the *real* general strike firmly back on the agenda.

We have already touched upon the objective movement - growing working class discontent, especially in the engineering industry. But there was more to it than one section of the population. The army and navy became ever more restless in the last two years of the war, and with the end of hostilities reluctance to demobilise the forces meant a growing spiral of dislocation within the state machine. Mutinies and desertions, increasingly common in 1917, became organised and ever more dangerous to the boss class. Soldiers unwilling to return to France staged mass demonstrations and in January 1919 troops effectively took over Calais in protest at the refusal to demob them. Only by dispatching two divisions from Germany was the mutiny broken. And as is often the case it was in the navy that discontent took the most politically defined forms. At Plymouth and Portsmouth the red flag was run up on several ships and ships' committees became widespread with delegates going from ship to ship and from port to port.

Against this backdrop the counterrevolutionary intervention against Soviet Russia could only mean further politicisation and provide a vital common cause. In March 1919 the miners' federation demanded the withdrawal of British troops from Russia. In April, supported by other unions, it proposed the same thing to a joint conference of the Labour Party and TUC. The general part of the resolution was endorsed. But the miners also proposed a series of defiant actions which would force government compliance with this and other demands (the lifting of the blockade against Germany, the end of conscription and release of conscientious objectors). TUC chair, H Stuart-Bunting, would not accept this part of the resolution. It "implied taking industrial action" for political ends. And that, according to many trade union tops, implied plunging Britain into "revolution and civil war".¹⁰

With the Black Watch and Coldstream Guards refusing to embark for Russia, a police strike and a swelling economic movement around wages, there was a ready militant minority. When it came to stopping British intervention against Soviet Russia, the minority demanded words be turned into deeds. The role of revolutionaries was crucial to its transformation into a majority.

On January 18 1919 a national conference of 350 delegates met in London under the slogan 'Hands off Russia'. Called by the London workers' committee in association with the BSP, SLP and the International Workers of the World, it agreed a resolution moved by Harry Pollitt pledging "to carry on active agitation to solidify the labour movement for the purpose of declaring a ... general strike ... unless the unconditional cessation of allied intervention had been officially announced ... and we are satisfied as to the truth of the announcement".¹¹

The resolution was not designed to be a paper one. Nor was it. Meetings and organisation followed and in May Harry Pollitt, Sylvia Pankhurst and a small band of WSF members began a determined campaign of agitation among London dockers and shipyard workers, urging them "to refuse to touch any ship that is to carry munitions to Russia".¹² Reflecting the growing influence of those arguing for direct action, a broad Hands off Russia campaign was set up in June 1919 at a conference in Manchester. Its president was AA Purcell, a member of the parliamentary committee of the TUC, and also included on its national leadership were CT Cramp, industrial secretary of the NUR, Tom Mann, general secretary of the ASE, and George Peet, secretary of the National Shop Stewards' Committee.

The same month saw the Russian question dominate debates at the Labour Party conference. James Sexton of the Dock Labourers was typical of the *right* wing and the times. He claimed to be a "revolutionist of a social character and believed in social revolution". That said, he did not believe in "letting mad dogs loose".¹³ Frankly the best left forces wanted just that, if by mad dogs was meant self-activity of the working class.

The BSP, from 1916 a Labour Party affiliate, advanced the call for a national conference "hav-

ing as its object the organisation of a general strike that shall put an end once and for all to the open and covert participation of the British government in attacks on Soviet Russia".¹⁴ This was overwhelmingly defeated, no small thanks to a wily speech by Ernest Bevin in which he warned against ill-prepared action that must result in failure.

In spite of that the left still won the day for its resolution committing the Labour Party to consult the parliamentary committee of the TUC "with the view to effective action being taken" by a substantial 1,893,000 to 935,000 majority.¹⁵

Undaunted and now on the territory of the Labour Party's NEC, the right continued to obfuscate. As the constitution would in the future serve a Labour government, it must not be torn apart by mad dogs. The government should be persuaded by parliamentary words to leave Russia alone. Nothing more. Faced with deliberate inaction from the official centres of leadership, the triple alliance decided (217 delegates to 11) to recommend a ballot on industrial action among its members. That was on July 25. Four days later, Winston Churchill, secretary of state for war, announced the withdrawal of British troops. Showing the undying commitment ministers of the crown have to the truth, Churchill swore blind that the decision had been made a *year* before! As to the other demands around conscription and conscientious objectors, what was the fuss all about? They had already been dealt with or were in the process of being so.

Such a retreat could only but be temporary. Emboldened by Labour Party and TUC shilly-shallying over Soviet Russia, the government rejected the Sanky commission's report on the mines. Due in part to the number of miners' nominees who sat on it, but in no small part due to a sense of liberalistic economic justice, the commission recommended among other things higher pay, shorter hours and public ownership of coal. Instead of acting themselves to secure these concessions, the miners' leaders decided to pass the buck to the TUC, apparently hoping it would organise general strike action in their support. These hopes were sadly misplaced. Not for the first time, nor the last, the result was a timid "educational campaign"; on this occasion the theme was "mines for the nation".¹⁶ Furious, the miners' federation demanded that the parliamentary committee of the TUC organise a special congress to consider a resolution calling for "trade union action in the form of a general strike".¹⁷ On March 4 1920 they got the former but by 3,732,000 votes to 1,050,00 not the latter. Like the 1993 parliamentary select committee report on coal, the Sanky commission sank without trace.

That did not mean class peace. In April 1920 Polish forces, armed and diplomatically backed by British and French imperialism, launched a wide ranging offensive against Soviet Russia. The Hands off Russia campaign wrote to every working class organisation emphasising that "more pious resolutions won't force the hand of the government, but resolutions backed by industrial action will".¹⁸ The need was pressing. Rolling back the Red Army, Polish forces had cut deep into the Ukraine. Things appeared exceedingly bleak.

But on June 12, the very day that *The Times* gleefully reported the Polish capture of Kiev as a "great triumph" alongside a congratulatory message from George V to the social fascist Marshal Pilsudski, the workers of our country delivered a blow against the Polish reactionaries worth more than ten fully equipped extra divisions to Trotsky's Red Army. After being told that there was the prospect of strike pay, the East India dockers loading Polish-bound munitions onto the *Jolly George* walked off the job. The work of Pollitt, Pankhurst and their comrades had at last paid off.

Suddenly the whole working class was ablaze with confident indignation and was rallying for battle. Demonstrations outside the Polish embassy drew huge crowds. The TUC and Labour Party were bombarded with resolutions. The dockers' union reaffirmed its support for the London men and demanded that no docker be used for sending arms to the enemies of Soviet Russia. Making matters even worse for reaction, the Red Army executed a brilliant counter-attack. The Poles had overreached themselves. Tukhachesky chased them out of the Ukraine, across the plains of northern Poland and to the very environs of Warsaw itself. If Poland fell it would unleash a revolutionary deluge. The German revolution would come back with renewed vigour and Soviet Russia would physically come to its aid. Central Europe could only but follow a sovietised Germany. The gravitational centre of world socialism would shift from Moscow to Berlin, from backward Russia to advanced Germany.

Stung by the prospect, the British lion instinctively spread its claws and let out snarling threats. Winston Churchill indignantly told the cabinet that: "We ought to take the transport workers by the throat".¹⁹ In the House of Commons the eloquent Lloyd George spoke the unmistakable

language of war and *The Times* warned that it was imminent and must be faced "with the same unanimity and the same courage with which we faced the crisis of 1914".²⁰ The Baltic fleet was given contingency orders. British troops were used against Danzig dockers, who had struck against the landing of munitions for the Poles. To leave no doubt, foreign secretary Lord Curzon dispatched a peremptory note threatening war unless there was an end to the Red Army's advance. The working class in Britain had its own answer. On July 21 1920 the Hands off Russia campaign issued a statement which highlighted the danger of war. It demanded "direct action to prevent it".²¹

There was an almost instant rallying of the working class, including the Labour Party. On August 4 1920 its headquarters wired all its branches and trades councils warning of the "extremely menacing possibility" of an escalation of the Polish-Russian war.²² "Citizen demonstrations" were announced on the following Sunday, August 8 1920. According to its own estimates they "met with an unparalleled response".²³ Suitably flushed, on August 9 Labour and TUC leaders, meeting in the House of Commons, set up a national Council of Action. Pressed on by the movement below, it cast caution to the wind and gave notice to the government that "the whole industrial power of the organised workers will be used to defeat this war". A message was sent notifying the executives of all affiliated organisations "to hold themselves ready to proceed immediately to London for a national conference" and advised them "to instruct their members to 'down tools' on instructions from that national conference".²⁴

One day after, the national Council of Action met the prime minister Lloyd George. He assured them that Britain's intentions were peaceful. It would continue to support the Poles and Russian whites, but there would be no deployment of British forces. Labour's claim that the government was engineering an "intolerable crime" against the Soviet republic was "ridiculous". All it wanted to do was to preserve Polish independence. This "promise" that there would be no British intervention "robbed" the national conference which met three days later in the Central Hall, Westminster "of some of its drama".²⁵ It also, as Ralph Miliband suggests, allowed some of the most rightwing figures in the labour movement the chance to stand on a political platform remarkably similar to the BSP's that they had flatly rejected little more than a year before. Parading themselves as principled leftists, JR Clynes, JH Thomas, AG Cameron and other Labour notables made near revolutionary speeches. Before the singing of the *Red flag* and the *Internationale* its thousand delegates fully endorsed the setting up of local councils of action and agreed to the threat of strikes "to resist any and every form of military and naval intervention against the Soviet government of Russia".²⁶

Such bold statements from the united body of the organised working class undoubtedly stayed the hand of British imperialism. As we have shown, this was not because of bureaucratic initiative but the determination of revolutionaries, grouped under the banner of the Hands off Russia campaign. Their pro-Soviet propaganda, their successful agitation among dockers, their skilful combination of official and unofficial avenues were responsible for winning virtually the entire labour movement to threaten a general strike. Labour leaders claimed that it was they who saved the country from war. But, as Miliband again points out, Labour was not in fact "called upon to challenge the constitution" and it is "impossible" to tell how its leaders "would have behaved had the government actually embarked on offensive operations against Russia".²⁷

Though it was plain that they had no revolutionary intentions, in spite of themselves they were swept along by events and, again in spite of themselves, they conjured into existence a potentially revolutionary force - the national Council of Action and 350 local councils of action.

3.1. Lenin and the councils of action

It is more than worthwhile repeating Lenin's thoughts on the Council of Action in Britain. Besides showing how backward Soviet Russia was able to defeat imperialism through proletarian internationalism, they point to the relationship between conservative officials and the self-movement of the working class. Though the military offensive into Poland failed to rouse the workers of Warsaw, and though the Red Army was soon forced to backtrack, Lenin had no hesitation in claiming a "great" victory. Lloyd George had been compelled to advise the Poles to sue for peace. Imperialism, for the moment at least, would have to suspend its plans to kill off Soviet Russia through force. For Lenin, the consummate proletarian politician, this victory could not be simply construed from the military viewpoint.

There was far more to it than the advance or retreat of this or that army. It was within the higher field of politics that the Soviet Republic had won its real victory, a "victory over the minds and hearts of the masses of the workers". As Lenin was never tired of repeating, the proof of that could be seen all too clearly in the national Council of Action in Britain; still then the world's number one imperialist power.

Here are Lenin's two most interesting comments on it. The first set of remarks were made in the course of his keynote speech delivered to the 9th Conference of the Russian Communist Party on September 22 1920. Lenin makes the point that despite retreat from the "walls of Warsaw", the whole fight to save the revolution had had a "powerful effect on the revolutionary movement in Europe". Crucially Britain, where the movement had been raised to "an unprecedented level". With hindsight some might suggest that Lenin was overly optimistic. But that is to miss the point and fall into the trap of what-is-had-to-be fatalism. Lenin was out to lead the masses in making history. He was not dealing in probability, but the *revolutionary possibilities* contained within a given situation. So the main point we should draw from what he had to say is the soviet-like features and inner logic of the Council of Action.

"When the British government presented an ultimatum to us, it transpired that it would first have to consult the British workers. The latter, nine tenths of whose leaders are out and out Mensheviks, replied to the ultimatum by forming a Council of Action.

"Alarmed by these developments, the British press raised a hullabaloo about what it called this 'duality of government'. It had every reason to say so. Britain found herself at the same stage of political relationships as Russia after February 1917, when the soviets were obliged to scrutinise every step taken by the bourgeois government. This Council of Action unites all workers, irrespective of party, just like our All-Russia Central Executive Committee of the period when Gotz, Dan and others were running things, a kind of association which runs parallel with the government, and in which the Mensheviks are forced to act in a semi-Bolshevik way. Just as our Mensheviks finally got confounded and helped win over the masses to our side, the Mensheviks in the Council of Action have been forced by the inexorable course of events to clear the way to the Bolshevik revolution for the worker masses of Britain. According to testimony by competent persons, the British Mensheviks already consider themselves a government, and are prepared to replace the bourgeois government in the near future. This will be the next step in the general process of the British proletarian revolution."

Lenin extended these remarks on the Council of Action and the "decisive turning point" it represented for Britain during his speech to the leather workers' congress a week or so later, on October 2 1920. He was quite clearly wildly wrong in thinking that the "old leaders of the British workers" had undergone some sort of a conversion to communism. But he was right to suggest they could play a *centrist* Menshevik role in the event of the Council of Action finding itself the real power in the land.

"When the red troops approached the frontier of Poland, the Red Army's victorious advance created an unprecedented political crisis. The main feature of this crisis was that, when the British government threatened us with war, and told us that if we advanced any further they would fight us and send their warships against us, the British workers declared that they would not permit this war. Let me tell you that Bolshevism is spreading among the British workers. However, the communists there are just as weak today as we were in March, April and May 1917, when we had one-tenth of the votes at conferences and congresses. At the First All-Russia Congress of Soviets in June 1917, we had no more than 13% of the votes. A similar situation exists in Great Britain: there the Bolsheviks are in an insignificant minority. But the point is that the British Mensheviks have always been opposed to Bolshevism and direct revolution, and have favoured an alliance with the bourgeoisie. Today, however, the old leaders of the British workers have begun to waver and have changed their minds: they were opposed to the dictatorship of the working class, but now they have come over to our side. They have set up a Council of Action over there in Britain. This is a radical change in British politics. Alongside parliament, which in Great Britain is now elected by almost universal suffrage (since 1918), there has arisen a self-appointed Council of Action which relies on support from the workers' trade unions with a membership of over six million. When the government wanted to begin a war against Soviet Russia, the workers declared that they would not allow it, and said they would not let the French fight either, because the French depend upon British coal, and should this industry come to a standstill it would be a severe blow to France.

"I repeat this was a tremendous turning point in British politics. Its significance to Great Britain is as great as the revolution of February 1917 was to us. The revolution of February 1917 overthrew tsarism and set up a bourgeois republic in Russia. There is no republic in Great Britain, but her thoroughly bourgeois monarchy has existed for many centuries. The workers can vote in the parliamentary elections, but all foreign policy is conducted outside parliament, for it is in the province of the cabinet. We have long known that the British government are waging an undercover war on Russia and are helping Yudenich, Kolchak and Denikin. We have often met with statements in the British press to the effect that

Great Britain has no right to send a single soldier to Russia. Who then voted for this measure? What act of parliament authorised war on Russia in the aid of Yudenich and Kolchak? There have been no such acts, and by actions like this Great Britain has violated her own constitution. What then is this Council of Action? Independently of parliament, this Council of Action has presented an ultimatum to the government on behalf of the workers. This is a step towards dictatorship, and there is no other way out of the situation. This is taking place in Great Britain, which is an imperialist country with 400 or 500 million people enslaved in her colonies. She is a most important country, which rules the greater part of the population of the earth. The advance on Poland has led to such a turn of affairs that the British Mensheviks have entered into an alliance with the Russian Bolsheviks. That is what this offensive has done.

"The whole of the British bourgeois press declared that the Councils of Action meant the soviets. They were right. It did not call itself by that name, but actually that is what it was. It is the same kind of dual power as we had under Kerensky from March 1917 onwards: a time when the provisional government was considered the only government, but actually could do nothing of significance without the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies; a time when we said of the soviets, 'Take over all power'. A similar situation has now arisen in Britain, and the Mensheviks on this 'Council of Action' have been obliged to adopt an anti-constitutionalist course. This will give you some idea of what our war with Poland has meant."²⁸

3.2. Bureaucratic 'solidarity'

The Communist Party of Great Britain was born in the post-World War I cauldron of class struggle. Inspired by the October Revolution, wanting to emulate the Bolsheviks, the revolutionaries in Britain sought to make the decisive break from centrism, localism and syndicalism. The Communist Unity Convention of July 31-August 1 1920, later known as the 1st Congress, primarily represented the *rapprochement* of the BSP and the majority of the SLP, organised in the Communist Unity Groups.²⁹ That the congress took place was of course a good thing. Arguably though, it could have taken place a couple of years before.

Unity was held up because of the endless and petty delays of the we-follow-our-members leaders of the SLP, WSF and other even smaller groups. Understandable and sincere though it was, the desire to secure unity with these comrades put off the formation of the Party time and time again. This mattered. After all, we have seen already how, during the last years of World War I and the two years following, the class struggle in Britain reached an intensity not seen since the days of Chartism. By providing leadership and a revolutionary perspective, a Communist Party would have further heightened the situation. Had the Party been formed in 1918-19, it too would have been positively affected. The whole organisation would have been steered and trained by the struggle itself.

Obviously individual members of the newly formed CPGB took part in the Hands off Russia campaign. Nonetheless its main *organised* contribution was limited to issuing revolutionary slogans and giving general advice. Valuable though such intervention was, more was needed - mass agitation, daring action and practical leadership. In part the limitations shown in Party work was due to the inevitable problems associated with the fusion of revolutionaries previously members of *opposed* organisations.

That said, even after the Party's 2nd Congress in January 1921, which brought in the Communist Labour Party,³⁰ Communist Party (BSTI)³¹ and left members of the ILP, it has to be admitted that the style of Party work did not change much. Though historically the highest organisational achievement of the working class in Britain, for the first two years of its existence our Party operated as little more than an expanded and more authoritative version of the propaganda societies which provided its original constituent parts; a problem exacerbated by the capitalist offensive which ensued against the working class.³² The demoralisation this meant for the working class saw a stratum of trade union officials desert and thousands of ghostly paper members evaporate away.³³

Though still buffeted by the shock waves of World War I and the October Revolution, the ruling class in Britain needed to turn the screw at home. Britain emerged from the war victorious. It had, however, been transformed from a creditor to a debtor nation. Besides being in hock to the US to the tune of £8 billion, Britain faced a drive by Germany, desperate to meet the huge reparations demanded under the Dawes plan, to flood the market with cheap manufactured goods and coal. All that and determination to put sterling back on the gold standard meant collective capital was compelled once more to call for cheaper output, speed-ups, longer hours, welfare cuts and more and more competitive effort. Putting the "country back on its feet" necessitated a direct challenge to the existing conditions of workers. With unemployment spiralling and all too recent memories of the Hands off Russia campaign, the ruling class employed

both carrot and stick.

The Welsh wizard Lloyd George was the main advocate of the carrot. John Foster rightly thinks his "political future" depended on building some kind of "populist radical party" as an alternative to the Labour Party. So the 'great' war leader had to promise a land fit for heroes. In February 1919 he persuaded the cabinet to finance a reconstruction programme by "giving a probably quite genuine description of the direct action threat within the labour movement". At £71 million it was, he claimed, "a cheap insurance against Bolshevism". Again in January 1920 Lloyd George played on cabinet fears of revolution to get his way for populist measures. Tom Jones, the deputy cabinet secretary, comments in his well known memoirs that the "PM did a lot of unsuspected leg-pulling as he does not believe in the imminence of the revolution". Clearly though he could never have done that unless working class militancy was perceived as a threat. As we have seen, it was.

Instead of again going over the history of Britain since 1910, let us just quote the editor of *The Times*. Even before the end of World War I he was urging Lloyd George to call an early election so as to "re-establish the authority of parliament against attempts to 'hold up' the country by unconstitutional methods". Discontent was "due to sheer Bolshevism and not any genuine industrial grievance".³⁴ And after all on a number of occasions - January-February 1919, summer 1920 - the cabinet was preoccupied by the working class danger and negotiating political and economic concessions.

But British capitalism was in no position to keep on giving. Indeed it had to take back what had been paid out in anti-Bolshevik "insurance" and more. The Bank of England deflation finally wrecked Lloyd George's reconstruction programme and forced him to take up the stick.³⁵ The first battle was with the miners.

On March 31 1921 the miners were locked out because they refused to accept swingeing wage cuts and an end to national pay bargaining. Defeat was by no means a forgone conclusion. Alan Hutt writes that it was "only nine months since the triumph of the Council of Action" - the spirit of unity and determination "was very much alive".³⁶ The miners appealed for strike solidarity from their associates in the triple alliance. Against the threat of what would have amounted to a general strike the Lloyd George government now wanted to fight in order to put a stop to the militant menace.

After two years of waiting to 'press the button' the government moved quickly and decisively to take them on. 'Public opinion' had been prepared through a concerted £100,000 propaganda campaign. Free speech was curbed - the cabinet issued "instructions" for the "systematic prosecution" of those making "seditious speeches".³⁷ It invoked the new Emergency Powers Act, troops were brought in from Ireland, Malta and Silesia and machine gun posts were installed at pit heads. The NUR and Transport Workers' Federation leaders crumbled.

Bureaucratic sectionalism proved stronger than bureaucratic solidarity. On April 15 1921 JH Thomas stood on the steps of Unity House and handed waiting reporters an announcement to the effect that there would be no triple alliance strike. Despite strenuous efforts by the Communist Party there was no rank and file revolt. Black Friday, as it became known, had a stunning effect. The triple alliance had surrendered before fighting its Waterloo, the MFGB was left irate but alone. After a bitter 11-week lockout it ignominiously surrendered. With the miners down, one section after another followed. Shipbuilders, engineers, boilermakers, seamen, cotton workers, and agricultural workers all suffered wage reductions and erosion of organisational strength. Unemployment benefit was cut. Trade union membership, which had reached a record 8,340,000 in 1920, nearly halved, as a result of rising unemployment and the bosses' offensive, to 4,250,000 in 1923.

Desperate, the working class turned towards the Labour Party in an attempt to defend itself. Lloyd George had thrown down the working class industrially only to see it jump back in political form. His nemesis had arrived. The general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924 gave successive boosts to the on-going realignment in British politics. The two-party Liberal-Tory system was mutating into a two-party Labour-Tory system via an unstable and transitory three-party Liberal-Labour-Tory system.

At the very beginning of the 1850s Marx thought the Tories would soon be extinct. That the line of division in British politics would be that between liberalism and socialism. He assumed a quick development of revolution in Britain and mainland Europe. Confronted by revolution, the aristocratic landlords would have sought protection in the arms of the Liberal Party, making it the sole party of the propertied classes. But Marx's prediction was made on the eve of the 1851-1873 boom which yanked the

rug from under the feet of Chartism and pushed the workers' movement along the path of trade unionism. The factional struggles within the aristo-bourgeois ruling bloc continued to dominate politics. The electoral swing between Liberals (who had evolved from the aristocratic Whig party into what could be called the aristocratic party of the bourgeoisie) and Tories provided the vent for voter discontent.³⁸ However, failure of *laissez faire* and the turn to imperialism created a terminal weakening of the Liberal Party via a series of fissures and defections. The Liberal doctrine of free trade became ever more removed from the needs of managing Britain's decline. Worried by foreign competition, working class militancy and the rise of the Labour Party, the industrial capitalists looked to the certainties of aristocratic tradition. They decamped from the Liberal to the Conservative Party, transforming it into *the* party of capitalism. The ruling bloc underwent a final 'bourgeoisification'. By no effort of its own Labour was left as the only vehicle for social reform.

Despite the efforts of Bonar Law, who led the Tories out of the Lloyd George coalition government, fearing that it was creating "an amalgamated 'bourgeois bloc' which leaves the socialists as the sole alternative", in the mid-1920s Labour had for the first time become an (if not *the*) alternative party of government.³⁹

Though in terminal decline and with the followers of Asquith and Lloyd George at loggerheads, the Liberal Party could within the three-party system play the role of king maker. Because Labour was seen as the "best bulwark against violent upheaval and class wars", the Liberals were in January 1924 prepared to forgo the chance of another coalition with the Tories and instead place in office a minority Labour Party administration.⁴⁰ It could be educated. The Tories reasoned along the same lines. JCC Davidson, later chair of the Conservative Party, rejected coalition on the grounds that "any dishonest combination of that sort which means sacrificing of principles by both Liberal and Tory to deprive Labour of their constitutional rights - is the first step down to the road of revolution".⁴¹

MacDonald's government proved eminently worthy of their trust. Because it was not just a ready pupil but a teacher's pet, the Labour government was though "a great joke for the popular press". Ministers grabbed the fat salaries, donned top hats and tails, learned to speak proper and carried out an undeviating imperialist policy at home and abroad. Labour did everything to prove to the establishment it was fit to govern. Snowden's budget omitted a levy on capital, and in the words of Robert Graves "did nothing more newsworthy than provide a 'free breakfast table' by reducing the import duties on tea, coffee, sugar, and chicory".⁴² All foreign office material was referred to the Tory leader Baldwin for 'bi-partisan' consultations. Blunting its own already clipped programme, it gave two Liberals government portfolios - Lord Chelmsford, an ex-colonial governor, and Lord Haldain, the former War Minister and architect of Britain's post-1914 centralised war machine, who entered the 'socialist' government as chair of the Committee of Imperial Defence.

Not surprisingly, industrial action was condemned and when London tramworkers struck for higher pay the anti-trade union Emergency Powers Act was evoked, which meant the military would be deployed. A special cabinet committee consisting of Arthur Henderson, Sidney Webb, Josiah Wedgewood and JH Thomas was put in place to oversee preparations. Only the speedy ending of the strike, "coupled with a strong private protest from the general council⁴³ of the TUC, who were said to have hinted at the possibility of a general strike if the act was enforced, smoothed the matter over".⁴⁴

The TUC and Labour Party NEC might protest against the government's anti-working class measures. But in what was to become a standard response ministerial grandees brushed all objections aside. Workers had to stop being greedy. The Labour government was not for one class, but the nation. Strong arm measures had to be used because the "epidemic of labour revolts" was frighteningly reminiscent of "what was happening in Russia in 1917 against the Kerensky government".⁴⁵

3.3 Strategic confrontation - the stage is set

The decision to recognise the Soviet Union and begin trade negotiations did ruffle anti-Bolshevik sensibilities. But it was on a different, though related, issue that the government "chose to invite defeat". Ralph Miliband is right to say that, in view of his government's "meticulous observance of constitutional rules and procedures", there is a "certain irony" that MacDonald left office over his opponent's claim that it had been "guilty of grave constitutional impropriety".⁴⁶

The issue was the decision not to proceed with

the prosecution of JR Campbell, editor of the CPGB's *Workers' Weekly*. No wonder. After he was charged with inciting mutiny for his *Open letter to the fighting forces* - in which he exhorted soldiers and sailors to "turn your weapons on your oppressors" - there was a storm of protest from all sections of the workers' movement.⁴⁷ All of a sudden the Director of Public Prosecutions thought better of it, supposedly because of Campbell's magnificent war record. Anyway for whatever reason the case was dropped. Delivering a schoolmasterly whack over the knuckles, the Liberals and Conservatives tabled a censure motion. MacDonald had been wounded in such parliamentary skirmishes before. Now though, with Labourite reformism standing exposed and a growing challenge from the left, he felt a compelling need to unite the official labour movement around him and use the communists as a scapegoat. So he treated the matter as one of confidence. He was defeated and resigned. Thus ended the first Labour government.

On October 24 1924, in the closing straight of the subsequent election campaign (polling day was only five days away), the Foreign Office published the so-called 'Zinoviev letter'. It purported to show the existence of a Moscow plot to subvert British civilisation. Addressing the Central Committee of the CPGB, Zinoviev, president of the Comintern, was said to have urged the greatest pressure to ensure ratification of trade treaties with the Soviet Union. There were also bloodcurdling references to communist cells in the army and preparations for the revolutionary seizure of power. No matter how transparent a forgery it was, it did the trick. Though the Labour vote increased, the Liberal vote collapsed in a middle class rush to the Conservatives. The Tory vote soared by two million and gave them 152 extra MPs and, in Allan Hutt's descriptive phrase, an "oppressively swollen" majority.⁴⁸

With a Conservative landslide and, in April 1925, a return to the gold standard, the stage was set for a strategic confrontation between the working class and capital - a confrontation which again found the miners in the front line. For long the sick man of British capitalism, the coal industry was in a particularly bad state. In pursuit of an elusive profit margin, on June 30 1925 the mineowners issued a demand for the repeal of the seven-hour day and a return to eight hours. They also proposed drastic wage reductions and the abolition of the principle of the minimum wage. The miners refused to surrender their hard won gains and appealed to the TUC.

Surprisingly a special meeting of the general council on July 10 pledged its "complete support" for the miners, and "undertook to cooperate wholeheartedly with them in their resistance to the degradation of the standard of life of their members".⁴⁹

Why this sudden determination to stand firm against the government? Some have suggested it was due to the changed composition on the TUC general council. JH Thomas had stood down to become a Labour minister. He and other inveterate rightwingers had been replaced by left reformists such as Swales, Hicks and Purcell.

However, as John Foster says, the "key factor" was "pressure from below", spurred on by the erosion of wages, rising unemployment and an improved bargaining position for British workers because of the French occupation of the Ruhr.⁵⁰ This pressure from below was given political form and an organisational cutting edge by the National Minority Movement, launched in August 1924 by the CPGB and its united front allies.

In that sense it was the CPGB which was responsible for Red Friday. If the TUC did not take the lead, its leaders were well aware that the CPGB could do so. Without the TUC Ernest Bevin said he feared "unofficial fighting in all parts of the country" and "anarchy".⁵¹ Ramsay MacDonald admitted he was haunted by similar visions: "Had no general strike been declared industry would have been almost as much paralysed by unauthorised strikes."⁵²

As it turned out the government was not yet ready. Faced with the miners' intransigence and TUC willingness to threaten a general strike, Baldwin's government decided to manoeuvre. Making a swift tactical retreat, on July 31 1925 - Red Friday - it announced a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the coal industry and agreed to subsidise the mineowners for nine months, after which the commission was to deliver its report. The government had been humiliated. The gold standard was thrown into jeopardy. Baldwin was subjected to a whispering campaign by Churchill and Birkenhead, advocates of an anti-socialist 'bourgeois bloc'. And on behalf of the Tory old guard Lord Salisbury submitted a long cabinet memorandum:

"The precedent we are setting leads straight to nationalisation. I need not say that, to a government pledged as we are, this conclusion is absolutely unacceptable Is there any ground on which, in our retreat, we could hope to make a stand; and if there be such ground, which I do not perceive,

have we the strength to hold? ... For good reason or bad we retreated because we did not venture to fight. We have not only thought it right to give way to force, but we have condoned the breaking of their contracts by the allied unions, and we have actually agreed to pay a large sum for the arrangement. Whatever our ultimate intentions, there is no doubt that this is how the trade unions themselves and the world regard the event. Who will believe us, after the experience of the last few days, when we say we will die in some ill-defined ditch rather than accept the nationalisation of the coal industry, the nationalisation of every other distressed industry? ... the moral basis of the government seems to me to have dropped out."⁵³

Though Red Friday had seen government humiliation, the Communist Party argued it was not in any definitive sense a working class victory. The editorial of the *Workers' Weekly* explained why:

"What has been achieved is the imposition on the capitalist class of an unstable truce, which cannot lead to industrial peace but only to renewed class conflict. Behind this truce and in the industrial peace talk which will accompany it, the capitalist class will prepare for a crushing attack upon the workers. If the workers are doped by the peace talk and do not make effective counter-preparations then they are doomed to shattering defeat ... The government, acting upon the behalf of the capitalist class, is certain to prepare for a new struggle with the working class under more favourable conditions than this time."⁵⁴

While Ramsay MacDonald lamented Baldwin's surrender to "militants" and "agitators", the government made speed for the impending "new struggle". Within five days of Red Friday it had underway a complete overhaul of its machinery of repression. Once this was concluded, the government would be ready for civil war. The police, army and navy had been given detailed contingency orders. The country was arranged into ten areas, each under a minister as a commissioner. Civil service staff were appointed for each division. They were to handle transport, food, postal services and coal. Within each area local structures were created with a chairman selected by the government to convene and preside over a volunteer service committee. All officials were given plenary powers conferred on the government by the Emergency Powers Act. They could requisition, fix prices and order arrests. To put the whole thing in motion all that was needed was a telegram from Whitehall containing the single word - "action".

Moreover the government was determined that Britain, in the words of Winston Churchill (now chancellor of the exchequer), was to be governed by parliament rather than "some other organisation not responsible by our elective processes".⁵⁵ It gave behind-the-scenes backing to the "strictly neutral" Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. An overt general-strike-breaking organisation, it pretended to support the "legitimate efforts of trade unions", only opposing "unconstitutional" activity.⁵⁶ It recruited some 100,000 mainly middle class volunteers, who were secretly trained as drivers, telegraph operators and for "protecting the public services".

The ruling class had one last line of defence - the British fascists. In the words of home secretary Joynson-Hicks, recorded in cabinet minutes, this counterrevolutionary scum was "at the disposal of the government".⁵⁷ The fascists had made the fight against "a general strike designed to paralyse the country" the core of their programme. To second the "efforts of the OMS" they drilled, attacked communist meetings and even kidnapped Harry Pollitt (his assailants were caught, tried and acquitted).

In contrast preparations by the TUC and Labour Party were noticeable by their absence. Nevertheless, as if controlled by a political law of opposite and equal reaction, the TUC's studied inertia was matched by the most high pitched leftist rhetoric. At the Scarborough TUC, held in September 1925, extraordinarily militant sounding resolutions were passed. Even CPGB initiatives won resounding majorities. Believing that the government would back down as it had in 1920 over Russia, and as it had on Red Friday, and wanting to keep the loyalty of the left-moving rank and file, bureaucrats gave their bloc votes 2,456,000 to 1,218,00 for a declaration seconded by Harry Pollitt that "the union movement must organise to prepare the trade unions in conjunction with the Labour Party and the workers to struggle for the overthrow of capitalism".⁵⁸

Abandonedly, bureaucrats went on to pledge support for factory committees and the right of self-determination for the colonies. Opposing the last point, the NUR's JH Thomas, the anchorman of class collaboration, desperately implored the congress not to make itself appear "ridiculous". He was defeated by 3,082,000 to 79,000 votes - a margin which reflected the almost universal desire to pose left.

Needless to say bureaucratic leftism was a mask of convenience. The trade union leaders showed their true face when it came to concrete questions. Asked to re-affiliate trades councils, they ruled the motion out of order. Asked to extend

the powers of the TUC, they referred it back. And when it came to elections to the general council, right reformists - including, after an absence of two years, the very self-same JH Thomas - found themselves returned. The same block votes were used at the Liverpool conference of the Labour Party, which not only endorsed the general record of the short lived MacDonald government, but - albeit with a thin majority - barred communists from individual membership of the Labour Party.

3.4. Britain's aborted general strike

Immediately after Red Friday the Communist Party launched a concerted campaign to alert the working class to the oncoming battle. The *Workers' Weekly* carried a front page box in every issue showing how long remained before "the termination of the mining agreement and the opening of the greatest struggle in the history of the British working class ... we must prepare for the struggle".⁵⁹

Up and down the country the CPGB ceaselessly called for the class to be put on a war footing and for agitation in the army and the navy. While urging "the organisation of workers' defence corps" the Communist Party attacked the OMS as "the most complete scheme of organised blacklegging and strikebreaking yet devised, and is the most advanced form of fascism yet reached in this country".⁶⁰

The government was so disturbed by the communist danger that police raids were ordered on the Party's King Street headquarters and the offices of the London District, the Young Communist League and the National Minority Movement. Large quantities of papers were seized as well as busts of Lenin and Zinoviev and a mysterious metal sphere (the King Street lavatory ballcock).

Twelve leading comrades were arrested and charged on three counts: conspiracy to "publish a seditious libel", incitement to "commit breaches" of the 1797 Incitement to Mutiny Act and conspiracy to "seduce persons serving in His Majesty's forces to whom might come certain published books and pamphlets, to wit, the *Workers' Weekly*, and certain other publications". The trial of the communist leaders became a trial of communism. The prosecution was out to prove the *illegality* of the Party. Communism was financed from Russia, it seeks to establish "forms of government by force", creates antagonisms between different classes and "involves the seducing from their allegiances of the armed forces of the crown".

Despite widespread condemnation of the trial and clever defence arguments the jury only took 20 minutes to return guilty verdicts. In his summing up Judge Rigby Swift stated that it was no "crime to be a communist" or "hold communist opinions", but "it was a crime to belong to *this* Communist Party". Harry Pollitt, William Gallacher, Wal Hannington, William Rust and Albert Inkpin got one year. The remaining comrades - Ernie Cant, Tom Bell, Tom Winttingham, Arthur MacManus, JT Murphy and Robin Page Arnot - were sentenced to six months. Tom Bell does not overstate his case when he says: "No better testimony could be given to the influence of the Communist Party in this period."⁶¹

The imprisonment of the communist leaders did nothing to diminish the Party's standing nor halt the growing response to its message. Membership, though still pitifully low, had more than doubled since 1922 to 5,000. A measure of our immediately realisable mass base however was the highly successful National Minority Movement.⁶²

The March 20 1926 national conference of the NMM had a record 883 delegates 'representing' nearly one million organised workers (almost a fifth the number affiliated to the TUC). The Minority Movement called for every trades council to be reconstituted as a council of action "by mobilising all the forces of the working class movement in its locality". It also demanded the TUC General Council convene a National Council of Action. The communists were not at all complacent about the danger of sectionalism. From the chair Tom Mann pointedly condemned the royal commission, which reported on March 6 - it "very cunningly continued the policy of splitting the workers".⁶³

Yet one has to admit that the main solution proffered by the CPGB was part of the problem. It advocated binding powers, even "all power" for the TUC (after that was achieved, the idea was to fight for a change in its composition).⁶⁴ Moved by rank and file miners' leader Arthur Horner, a resolution was adopted which stated along these lines that it was "imperative that all the forces of the working class movement should be mobilised under one central leadership to repel the attack and to secure the demands of every section of the workers".⁶⁵

The royal commission's agreement with the

coal owners' case that to make the industry profitable meant heavy wage cuts and an end to national agreements dashed TUC hopes but confirmed the Communist Party's expectations. Among ordinary workers there was deep felt anger, recognition that if the miners lost the whole class would lose too and a consequent determination to stand together. Pushed on by mass pressure for action and effectively committed to unleash it on May 1 1926 - unless the government backed down on the miners - the TUC at last summoned union executives to a meeting in order to explain and affirm its plans. This was on April 29! The TUC had only discussed its plans for the first time 48 hours before!

Not surprisingly then, the underlying purpose of these plans amounted to a last ditch attempt to secure a negotiated settlement. Ernest Bevin tried to excuse the general council's irenic complacency. But all he could do was pathetically wag the moral finger at the government and promise to remain the victim. We are "not going to begin wielding the big stick," he told Mr Baldwin. "We did not start it."⁶⁶

Talks began on the night of April 29 and dragged on till the next day. The government would not budge. Baldwin took an "extremely simple but very stubborn line" throughout the General Strike. The TUC had, he knew, no intention of risking a bloody civil war. But it was trying to intimidate the government with the threat of "political revolution - the destruction of the constitution". Baldwin was now in a position to demand that "the perpetrator must surrender".⁶⁷ Thus even in the midst of talks his side was already provocatively firing the opening salvo. The coal owners began their lockout. OMS recruiting posters were put up throughout the country. In Buckingham Palace the king signed a state of emergency proclamation. Orders in council were issued in the form of emergency regulations. Local authorities were told to prepare themselves. So against its wishes and compromising instincts the TUC General Council found itself the general staff of a general strike. It was to prove incompetent, suffocating, apologetic and treacherous.

The TUC's first move was to claim the right to negotiate for the one million miners. Little did the MFGB imagine that meant selling them out. The TUC was also concerned that the strike would take place in carefully controlled discreet stages. Workers would not be brought out *en masse*. They would be ordered to strike one wave after another - with the more moderate transport and general unions going first - and individual unions having responsibility for their members and ensuring the continued functioning of health, food and sanitary services.

By marching the workers into battle in sectional columns, a tight bureaucratic control was to be maintained. Organised in this two-wave and vertical way, it was calculated that the class-wide self-activity witnessed in Russia could be prevented or marginalised. These tactics, which owed more to fear of the rank and file than determination to beat the enemy, meant of course that the impact of the strike was lessened. The general strike would be a series of independent sectional strikes and for some considerable time it would only be partial. Finally, while it was quite correct to maintain essential supplies and services, the TUC was willing to see existing management continue to manage. There was no call or thought of imposing workers' control over these vital areas of the economy.

With such blundering safeguards in place the trade union bureaucracy discovered the courage, in the immortal words of a gentle Beatrice Webb, to behave "like pigs". A roll call of the union executives was taken. The response was overwhelming. In block vote terms there were 3,653,527 for the strike, a mere 49,911 against (unions with a membership of 319,000 had to consult their governing bodies).

Bevin announced that trades designated in the "first line" would begin their strike at 11.59pm on May 3 1926. Raising himself to what he doubtless imagined were the heights of stentorian rhetoric (which, as any psychologist could tell, unconsciously revealed his real financial fears and mind set), the bureaucracy was described by one of its own in heroic terms: "We look upon your 'yes' as meaning that you have placed your all upon the altar for this great movement and, having placed it there, even if every penny goes, if every asset goes, history will ultimately write up that it was a magnificent generation that was prepared to do it rather than see the miners driven down like slaves".⁶⁸ Jumping to their feet the leaders of Britain's trade unions hurrahed and sang the 'Red flag' before joining the biggest May Day demonstration London had seen for years.

However despite the song, with its barbed reference to flinching cowards, and the obvious willingness to fight below, the TUC still hoped and prayed that "something will happen" - ie, a negotiated settlement. On May 2 1926 instead

of readying its army TUC leaders were closeted with Baldwin attempting to come to an accommodation based on acceptance of the royal commission's recommendations. The TUC's determination to avert the General Strike, not bring it off, left Baldwin in no doubt. Certain that the general council did not believe in the strike, certain it would not take it through to a struggle for power, he reckoned he was on a sure winner. Baldwin demanded "unconditional" surrender. That was too much ... for the moment.

So the strike began because of the government not the TUC. The government was determined on confrontation and a strategic defeat of the working class. The TUC was supine and unsure. Courts and establishment figures lined up to denounce the strike as illegal. The TUC said all it wanted was to safeguard the miners. John Reith gave unlimited BBC air time to Baldwin but decided that neither Ramsay MacDonald nor the Archbishop of Canterbury nor even Lloyd George would be allowed to broadcast.

In its *British Worker* the TUC called for football matches with the police and insisted that the whole thing was nothing but a non-political trade dispute. In parliament and in Churchill's unbridled *British Gazette* the government claimed to be defending "freedom and the constitution" and rained down accusations that the TUC was opening the way for revolution. The TUC pleaded its innocence. The government deployed the army and navy and used OMS volunteers - shambolic on the rails, docks and trams, effective as brutal special constables. The TUC turned down Soviet workers' aid and urged strikers to quietly sit it out for the duration at home or in the garden.⁶⁹

Broadly speaking TUC instructions were faithfully obeyed by trade unionists. Even though the weakest sections were in the first columns, there were only a tiny number of scabs. From every locality, from every union, TUC headquarters at Eccleston Square received countless daily reports - all giving details of a strike that was solid beyond even the most optimistic expectations. Government plans began to break down. Nevertheless for the moment the mass of workers remained under TUC control.

Despite provocation the overwhelming majority of strikers bent over backwards to avoid the violence the TUC was so concerned to prevent. With only the minimum of trouble the authorities were allowed to move food, unload goods at the docks and run a decimated train, bus and tram service. Inevitably though, whatever TUC intentions, a general strike remains a general strike.

It can be dressed up as a purely economic dispute between workers and employers, its initiators can speak the language of compromise and negotiation. Yet whatever the heartfelt wishes, orders and beliefs of those at the top, a general strike can never be a routine industrial dispute. It has a political dynamic which propels the working class against the state. With the country at a standstill workers can only but instantly gain a sense of their own collective strength. The demands of picket line, publicity, decision making, coordination, looking after the young, the old and the infirm and enforcing the strike lead to new, invariably unofficial and unconstitutional, answers. Initiative, inventiveness and latent energy are released. Old leaders find the situation slipping out of their hands. Workers think, debate, discover and gravitate towards revolutionary ideas.

The 1926 General Strike had all the marks of a stage managed bureaucratic affair. It was consciously infused with sectionalism, religion, respectability and a daft TUC sense of fair play. The general council rightly thought itself the epitome of law abiding responsibility. Nor can there be any doubting that the mass of workers had no idea of breaking the law, let alone making revolution. Yet with each day that passed things began to change.

The situation itself eroded and broke down the barriers that kept apart the parallel sectional strikers. With every street corner 'Hello' and 'How's it going?' a collective mass strike took shape. The 400 or so councils of action and strike committees stood as the organised overcoming of sectionalism and to a greater or lesser degree secured an inchoate, unified, horizontal approach to the struggle. True, none of them experienced a sudden influx of workers demanding their transformation into organs of insurrection and dual power. But then there was no fusillade of bullets to teach British workers. Britain 1926 was moving according to a slower dialectic than Russia 1905. Workers were still reformist and the British state was infinitely more skilful and resourceful. Yet things moved.

Within the first few days the TUC was being inundated with demands that the strike be extended to all workers. Those who had not yet been ordered to strike were clamouring to join the struggle. Local officials telegraphed that they were having the utmost difficulty in keeping them at work. There were many reports of 'sec-

ond wave' workers coming out in spite of the TUC plan. In all 50% of engineering workers came out before they were given the official call. Non-unionised workers - 'nons' - were joining the strike: another piece of evidence exposing as a lie the TUC claim that the strike was called off because it was collapsing. In point of fact there were 100,000 more workers on strike the day after the TUC had capitulated and "ended" the strike than the day before.

The TUC called the strike off on the ninth day not from fear of failure, but success. Throughout the strike treacherous negotiations had been proceeding via all sorts of circuitous routes. Confronted by a government which showed not the least sign of compromise, and increasing assertiveness and independence below, the TUC was squeezed as if by a vice. To maintain its existence as intermediary between labour and capital and preserve its funds the bureaucracy had to betray its own social base and sabotage the General Strike.⁷⁰ If it lasted another week or fortnight, let alone the holy month, the bureaucratic straightjacket would have broken and our Labourites would have been in real trouble. The mad dogs would not only be free, but in control.

Clashes between workers and police were becoming more and more frequent in the second week. Surely given a few more days or a week they would have spiralled into full scale battles. The cosy relationship between strike committees and the local authorities could not survive that. Indeed in the hurricane of self-activity that would have resulted as soon as the TUC's facade of normality was shattered, the councils of action would begin to take over aspects of state power and start to see themselves as alternatives to the existing state structure. The intervention of troops might have momentarily driven the workers from the streets.⁷¹ That is true. But then at the same time the whole ideological apparatus of rule by consent in this country would have come crashing down. More, if there was a serious fight-back, then the minds of the workers in uniform would surely be receptive to the revolutionary call - join your brothers and sisters, form soldiers' and sailors' councils of action.

Nowhere did things go anyway near that far. Despite that there were many, many examples of strike committees and councils of action beginning to show the first signs of developing into soviets and an alternative government. Because most militant workers realised they were not only fighting against the miners' wage cuts but against a future attack on themselves, because they had gained a sense of themselves as a class, they were increasingly willing to circumvent the TUC's pacifistic instructions.

Towards the end of the strike certain councils of action began to enforce aggressive picketing so as to gain control over the movement of food and other supplies, and prevent blacklegging. Even on the fourth day of the strike "the cabinet was told that the use of mass pickets and a shortage of police was seriously hampering the movement of supplies".⁷² Intervention by the Civil Constabulary Reserve and the subsequent show of military force was answered by elementary measures of self-defence ranging from pickets carrying walking sticks to full blown workers' defence corps. In short, where necessity demanded it, workers took the initiative and developed the methods of organisation and violence that terrifies reformist leaders.

Jack Conrad

¹Quoted in R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, pp 44-45.

²Hyndman *The future of democracy*, London 1915, p 20.

³After his defeat in the BSP Hyndman and other pro-working elements broke away and formed the National Socialist Party.

⁴Hyndman *The future of democracy*, London 1915, p 25.

⁵See J Hinton *The first shop stewards' movement*, London 1973.

⁶For example, though Jack Murphy was a prominent member of the SLP, his widely circulated pamphlet *The workers' committee* contained no discussion whatsoever of the war.

⁷Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 17.

⁸Connolly *Selected Writings*, London 1988, pp 253, 259.

⁹The Easter Rising was condemned as treason by the Parliamentary Labour Party. In effect it collectively signed Connolly's death warrant. Wanting to be "consistent" in its opposition to war, the ILP denounced it as "militaristic".

¹⁰R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, pp 67, 69.

¹¹Quoted in J Mahon *Harry Pollitt*, London 1976, p 77.

¹²*Ibid*, p 78.

¹³Quoted in R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, p 70.

¹⁴Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 37.

¹⁵Quoted in R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, p 72.

¹⁶*Ibid*, p 76.

¹⁷Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 31.

¹⁸Quoted in J Mahon *Harry Pollitt*, London 1976, p 80.

¹⁹Quoted in P Addison *Churchill on the home front*, London 1993, p 216.

²⁰*Ibid*.

²¹Quoted in J Mahon *Harry Pollitt*, London 1976, p 82.

²²Quoted in R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, p 78.

²³*Ibid*, p 78.

²⁴Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, pp 38-39.

²⁵R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, p 79.

²⁶Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 39.

²⁷R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, p 81.

²⁸VI Lenin *CW Vol 31*, Moscow 1977, pp 266, 272, 276, 277, 306-8.

²⁹Tony Cliff's and Donny Gluckstein's book *Marxism and trade union struggle* incorrectly dates the CPGB's foundation congress as July 21-August 1 1920.

³⁰The Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) was the grand name Pankhurst's WSP adopted before the formation of the CPGB. Needless to say, it was not the British Section of the Third International.

³¹The organisation set up on September 11 1920 by elements of the Scottish shop stewards' movement and various other left groupings. After returning from the 2nd Congress of Comintern and being weaned away from leftism by Lenin, William Gallacher played a leading role in ensuring that the CLP entered into unity negotiations with the CPGB rather than attempting to rival it from a nationalistic and anti-parliamentary angle. Gallacher "drew attention to the fact" that there could only be "one Communist Party in any country" and suggested a negotiating committee to "bring about unity" (W Gallacher *The rolling of the thunder*, London 1947, p 25).

³²The shortcomings of the young CPGB were pointed out in self-confessed "bad English" by Lenin in his August 1921 note to Tom Bell. "I am afraid," said Lenin, "we have till now in England [he was referring to Britain - JC] few, very feeble propagandist societies for communism (inclusive the British Communist Party) but no really mass Communist movement." His main solution was to "start a daily paper of the working class", not as a business but as "an economic and political tool of the masses in their struggle" (Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, pp 72-73).

³³Among the trade union leaders who left were Albert Purcell (FAT), George Hicks (Bricklayers), Alonzo Swales (AEU) and Arthur Cook (MEGB). As to Party membership, James Klugmann, the 'official' antiquarian of the CPGB, estimates that in 1922 it was round about 3,000 (J Klugmann *History of the CPGB Vol 1*, London 1968, p 198). Despite that after the 2nd Congress, in 1921, the CPGB reported to the Communist International a membership of 10,000. In his *Pioneering days* Tom Bell explains how this much-exaggerated figure was arrived at. "Our first census, after the Second Unity Conference, revealed no more than 2,000 to 2,500 members. I found that many names given to us as branches only existed on paper. Even when the Scottish Communist Labour Party came in, though they talked of 4,000 members, I doubt if they brought 200 into the Party. It was the same when the 'left wing' of the ILP came over. They talked of tens of thousands; in point of fact, they too, only added one or two hundreds. But it was difficult to reach final conclusions: each section protested, insisting on its membership as given. That is why the figure of 10,000 got into the records of the CI as the membership of the CPGB in 1921" (Quoted in J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 197).

³⁴*Ibid*, pp 33-34.

³⁵John Foster quotes a revealing cabinet discussion as recalled in the memoirs of Tom Jones, a Fabian and then deputy cabinet secretary: "Macready said that there were a number of soldiers among the Metropolitan Police who could use rifles and Auckland Geddes pointed to the Universities as full of trained men who could cooperate with clerks and stockbrokers. (During the discussion Bonar Law so often referred to the stockbrokers as a loyal and fighting class that one felt that potential battalions of stockbrokers were to be found in every town.) Horne suggested the preparation of secret lists of reliable men by the chief constables and Eric Geddes suggested having the mayors up, but in view of the number of Labour mayors and the difficulty of keeping the matter secret, there was opposition to the suggestion" (*Ibid*, p 34).

³⁶A Hutt *A post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, pp 58-59.

³⁷J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 36.

³⁸It has to be emphasised again that the basis of aristocratic wealth was not feudal but capitalist. The ground rent obtained from their estates had long ago been transformed into a capitalist form. In *Capital* Marx distinguished between industry and agriculture, but declared that "in the 'categorical' sense the farmer is an industrial capitalist as much as the manufacturer" (K Marx *Capital*, Moscow 1970, p 750n).

³⁹Quoted in J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 37.

⁴⁰A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 69.

⁴¹Quoted in J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 39.

⁴²R Graves and A Hodge *The long weekend*, London 1991, pp 153-154.

⁴³In 1921 the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC was replaced by the General Council.

⁴⁴A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 85.

⁴⁵Arthur Henderson's reported remarks quoted in R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism*, London 1973, p 109.

⁴⁶*Ibid*, pp 114-115.

⁴⁷Quoted in T Bell *British Communist Party*, London 1937, p 98.

⁴⁸A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 98.

⁴⁹*Ibid*, p 109.

⁵⁰J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 42.

⁵¹Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 34.

⁵²Quoted in J Klugmann *Marxism, reformism and the general strike* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 99.

⁵³Quoted in J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 42.

⁵⁴*Workers' Weekly* August 7 1925.

⁵⁵Quoted in R Page Arnot *The miners: 1910-1930*, London 1953, p 383.

⁵⁶Initial OMS communiqué quoted in R Page Arnot *The general strike*, London 1926, pp 50-52.

⁵⁷Quoted in J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 43.

⁵⁸Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 117.

⁵⁹*Workers' Weekly* August 28 1925.

⁶⁰*Ibid* October 2 1925.

⁶¹Quoted in T Bell *British Communist Party*, London 1937, p 109.

⁶²The Minority Movement was formed in August 1924. Led from the beginning by communists - Harry Pollitt was its most famous leader - the National Minority Movement was an imaginative and brilliant application of the united front tactic. Organising the militant minority in the trade unions, its object was to bypass the petty sectionalist prejudices of the trade union bureaucracy and hasten the day when capitalism could be overthrown. Though having affiliations from sections of the official trade union structure, the Minority Movement was in essence an anti-trade union bureaucracy movement. Organised along industrial lines, there were for example miners', metal workers' and transport minority movements. Each in its own way was seen as a precursor for a powerful single union in its industry.

⁶³Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 125.

⁶⁴The Party's attitude towards the TUC General Council was the subject of debate in 1922. Against the argument that the TUC could be transformed, Rajani Palme Dutt wrote that: "The cry for the general council as the solution for the labour movement is as foolish as the cry for the League of Nations in the international field ... And the parallel is so exact because the error at bottom is essentially the same: the belief that a combination of the existing forces will achieve a solution, when it is the existing forces that are at fault ... Only the political struggle of the working class as a class can unite the workers; the only uniting force of the working class movement can be a political party of the working class. The trade unions are by their very nature separatist: only a political party can be the combining force ... Unless that party develops, the working class movement will continue to drift in sectionalism and confusion. Only when a political party of the working class can unite the workers around the common demands of the political struggle and so rally around those demands the manifold organisations of the working class, only then and by those means will the unity of the working class be achieved" (*Labour Monthly* October 1922). Unfortunately Palme Dutt was defeated.

⁶⁵Quoted in A Hutt *The post-war history of the British working class*, London 1937, p 125.

⁶⁶*Ibid*, p 128.

⁶⁷P Addison *Churchill on the home front*, London 1993, p 262.

⁶⁸*TUC The mining crisis and the national strike*, London 1926, p 34.

⁶⁹After receiving news of the General Strike the All-Union Central Committee of the Soviet trade unions called upon its members to donate one-quarter of a day's pay in support of the workers in Britain. On May 5 it remitted 250,000 roubles to the TUC and on May 7 it sent 2 million roubles. On May 9 the TUC informed the AUCCTU that it refused to accept the money or any other support from Soviet workers.

⁷⁰Except for the miners, most trade unionists received strike pay during the General Strike. Trade union coffers ended the strike much depleted and might have become exhausted if it had continued for a third week. The TGWU, the richest union, spent £600,000 during the nine days, the NUR over £1 million. In total the General Strike reduced trade union funds from £12.5 million to £8.5 million; ie, it cost the trade unions around £4 million.

⁷¹In the months before the strike the government built up an unprecedentedly large home army and positioned a good part of the fleet around the coast. Using official documents PRO ADM 1/8697, HO/46/252 and WO 75/123, John Foster estimates that there were nearly 80,000 troops garrisoned in Britain as well as a naval force of 11 battleships and cruisers and 58 other vessels (J Foster *Imperialism and the labour aristocracy* in J Skelley (ed) *The general strike: 1926*, London 1976, p 47).

⁷²*Ibid*, p 46.