

# 1926: British general strike



A short history of Britain's only ever general strike which lasted 10 days and was called in support of locked-out coal miners.

Britain's only ever General Strike shook the British ruling class out of their thrones and showed brilliantly how collective working class action can change society.

It also showed how willing the ruling class and how unwilling labour leaders are to fight. Without wanting to sound too light-hearted: We could've done it if it wasn't for those pesky Trade Union bureaucrats!

The 1926 General Strike was the climax of increasing class struggle in Britain since World War 1. During the war, the miners, dockers and railway workers formed the Triple Alliance which united almost 1 ½ million workers. In 1919 an all out showdown was averted only by union and government deceit. 1920 actually saw a General Strike threatened to stop British attacks on the new Russian "workers' state". 1921 saw another confrontation after government announcements of selling off the mines and coal owners instantly introducing wage cuts. 1921 saw troops dispatched at coalfields and more sell-outs by union leaders in what was to be known as 'Black Friday': when sympathy strike notices were withdrawn leaving the miners to be crushed and wages cut by 10-40% across the country. This was of scary similarity to the events that would take place, but on a much bigger scale, five years later.

In 1925, Tory PM, Stanley Baldwin, appointed the deeply, deeply hated enemy of the working class, Winston Churchill; famous for such activities as breaking the 1921 miners' strike. His April 1925 budget he aimed to make the pound as valuable as the dollar and, as such, overvalued the pound by 10%. Industry bosses had to make up this overvaluation somehow: whose pay do you think took a slashing? Here's a clue, it wasn't the bosses'.

The coal owners were the first to announce wage cuts. Black Friday was still a bitter memory for the miners and their supporters who had been trying to set up a new Triple Alliance. This was supported by the TUC who said they'd place themselves "unreservedly at the disposal of the Miners' Federation." Other unions were joining the Triple Alliance as it became clear that workers across the board would be hurt by this new budget. It was clear to all that something big was going to happen. Baldwin introduced a nine-month subsidy to maintain the mines while an inquiry into the mining industry went underway. Previous inquiries had never been in the government's or coal owners' interests, always calling for some form of nationalisation. In reality, the Tories were not interested in reports. It was a ploy to buy time for the preparation of all out class warfare. Even the unions knew this. Arthur James Cook, ex-Communist Party member and union leader said that "we [the unions] shall be faced with the greatest struggle...ever known and we are preparing for it."

It was expected to be a victory for the workers, and it could've been. However, the main block on the workers was not the enemy of the state or the bosses, it was the 'ally' of the union leadership. Union leaders were terrified at the possibility of a General Strike. J.R. Clynes of the General and Municipal Workers union said clearly "I am not in fear of the capitalist class. The only class I fear is our own." The towel was about to be thrown in before the fight had even started, all the while, the capitalist class were lacing up their gloves. Lloyd George had set up the Emergency Supply and Transport Committee in 1919 and beefed it up for Black Friday in 1921. It was built up and joined by the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. The OMS were right-wing strike breakers including, amongst others, fascists as members.

And what was the TUC doing while the British ruling class were preparing for the biggest fight in British union history? Very little. The bosses had said clearly that miners would be locked out on May 1 if their demands weren't met. On April 27 1926, three days before the showdown was to begin, the TUC General Council met for the first time. The TUC asked to speak to the PM, desperate to find some way out of this conflict. While sipping on cherry and begging for mercy with government officials, the TUC did nothing to organise the workers for battle, so the workers organised themselves.

On May 1, one million miners were locked out and the TUC took over the dispute...immediately rushing to the government for talks. At 11pm the miners' leaders came to the table and rejected the ridiculous sell-out negotiated by the TUC. As a 'compromise' was drawn up, the state pulled out of talks after Daily Mail workers had staged an unofficial walk-out. The TUC, true to form, condemned the walk-out. The compromise was put to the miners' leaders who rejected it 12 – 6. The TUC General Council, however, was ready to accept it but found that by now the government wasn't listening. The TUC were trapped in their worst nightmare, both government and workers willing to fight.

A State of Emergency was called. Food, coal and petrol were stockpiled. Regional Civil Commissioners were given dictatorial powers and were ready to go into action at the delivery of a telegram. This telegram was sent on May 2. Army and navy leave was cancelled and reinforcements were sent to Scotland, South Wales, London and Lancashire. Warships docked all over Britain. The OMS handed its services to the government.

But by now there were four million workers out on strike who willing to fight. Transport was crippled with London being solid. on May 4, 15 out of 315 tubes ran, 300 out of 4,400 buses (by the end of the week this was down to 40), nine out of 2,000 trams operated. By the end of

the first day builders, printers, dockers, iron, steel, metal, heavy chemical, transport and railway workers were out on strike. All with the TUC stuck like rabbits in headlights. The working class was truly in the driving seat. Nothing moved unless the workers said it could move.

Churchill started printing the British Gazette whose sole aim was to print lies about the strike and spread ruling class propaganda. In response the TUC produced The British Worker. The stated aim of this paper was to rally the working class around the strike and increase the militancy of the movement. However what it actually did was mainly refute Gazette accusations that the unions were organising revolution. It attempted to keep control of the millions of men and women involved in the strike. Jimmy Thomas of the TUC admitted to the Commons on May 13 that "If by any chance it should have got out of the hands of those who would be able to exercise some control, every sane man knows what would have happened...that fear was always in our minds".

But locally, the workers were very well organised. Councils of Action were set up and grew in both size and authority across the country. They organised transport, picketing, entertainment and financial assistance for those in need. East Fife set up a workers defence militia which had a membership of 700 and had regular clashes with state forces. In many areas, workers produced high-quality strike bulletins. All this, however, was condemned by the TUC.

Control of roads, transport and distribution was in the hands of the Councils of Action. However, their main failing was in not co-ordinating nationally.

Undoubtedly, they could have acted as an alternative government and taken the struggle forward from a defensive battle over miners' pay to an offensive battle over who holds power. This, in the face of both TUC and Communist Party inactivity, would have been astounding. Russia gave the British Communist Party their lead. It was simple: "this is not a revolutionary movement. It is a simple wage dispute."

Some wage dispute! A General Strike, Councils of Action and dual power in parts of the country. It may have been over miners' pay but everyday it was increasing the confidence of the working class. The TUC, trying to control its members, issued a statement calling for workers to "Stand firm. Be loyal to instructions and trust your leaders." Those leaders who all the while were looking for a way out. Once they realised the ruling class wasn't budging, they saw only one option, all out surrender. Excuses like people drifting back to work (when more workers were coming out every day) were used to justify the sell-out.

The new proposal did not even meet basic trade union assurances. No guarantee that strikers would be protected from victimisation, no guarantee of further negotiations and no guarantee of an end to the lock-out. Regardless, on May 11, just one week into a strike growing in confidence, the TUC called off the strike. Union leaders claimed "assurances had been given". Some assurances! After the strike, over 3,000 people were prosecuted and wages were slashed. The working class had been betrayed and the bosses took their advantage.

The day after the strike was called off, 100,000 more workers were out than on the first day of the strike. It would be a big mistake to confuse the unions' spineless acts with the workers. After the strike was called off "the temper of the workers was more militant than ever...feeling was bitter – bitter against employers who were everywhere victimising the local

strike stalwarts, and bitter against the TUC General Council. It looked as though the end of the strike might be the beginning of the revolution.” However, after a week, without knowing where they wanted the strike to go, the workers saw no way forward but to go back to work.

The ruling class had spent hundreds of millions of pounds but they would have lost had it not been for the concerted campaign of sabotage carried out by the TUC. Had the workers organised themselves into independent rank and file organisations and had the same revolutionary vision as their [Spanish counter-parts did ten years later](#), then the results may have been very different. As it was, working class radicals today can learn some very valuable lessons from the great strike of 1926.

*By libcom*