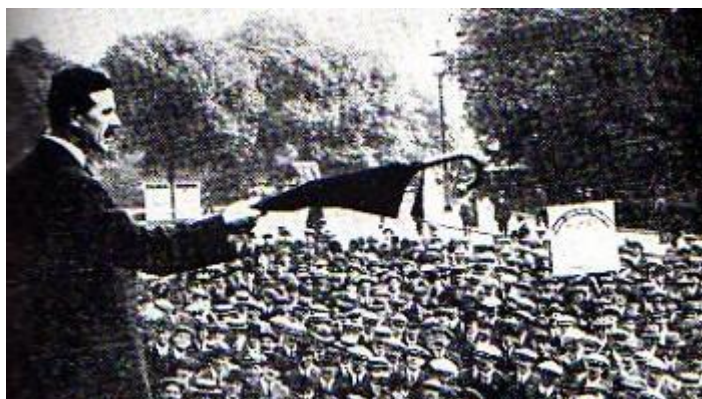


A short history of the police strikes of 1918-1919



Ken Weller of Solidarity's brief history of the two strikes of London police officers during and after World War I. Libcom does not support strikes of police officers as such but reproduce this text as an important bit of the mass upheavals of the time.

The police had a rough time during the War. Added to the already existing draconian discipline there was a massive amount of unpaid overtime and cancellation of leave. At the same time their wages had lagged far behind inflation - by 1918, police constables with 20 years' service were receiving less wages than the average rate for unskilled labourers before overtime. In such a situation petty corruption was rife; for many policemen it was a choice between accepting the occasional backhand from local bookmakers and publicans for looking the other way, and starving.

The National Union of Police and Prison Officers had been founded in 1913 by ex-inspector John Syme.¹ Syme, a notable figure in radical circles, who had been victimised in 1909 for 'undue familiarity' with his men, had been waging a campaign for his re-instatement ever since.

The union had a largely underground existence until 1918, although five union members had been sacked in December 1916.² In February 1917 there were a further 17 dismissals following a raid by the military police on a meeting of the London Branch of the Union.³

The first strike started on August 30th, 1918. There were two issues: the dismissal of PC Tommy Thiel for union membership, and the demand for a wage increase. One of the first stations to be affected was Kings Cross Road, where meetings were held in the station yard, the men then forming a procession and marching to Whitehall.

The strike spread like wildfire. Over half the men at Upper Street Station joined in immediately, and within a few hours 6,000 men throughout London were out, and with more joining all the time; even the Special Branch was affected.

The strike was robust. Flying pickets forcibly entered a number of stations and section houses in search of blacklegs who, if found, were forced to join the strike. There were also a number of assaults on special constables who had been hurriedly drafted in to take over strikers' work.⁴

The next day - August 31st - began with a mass meeting of nearly 1,000 strikers at the Finsbury Park Empire. These then marched to Whitehall where they joined up with contingents from other parts of London. The men's delegates negotiated directly with Smuts

and Lloyd George; the authorities caved in; the wage demand was conceded and Tommy Thiel was reinstated. The men returned to work triumphant.

In the months which followed, the police union mushroomed to a claimed 50,000 members, and it became an accepted part of the labour scene. Its Islington Branch met at the NLHL's premises in Green Lanes, and was affiliated to Islington Trades Council. It is possible that there were subliminal connections and influences between the police and the radical movement long before the strike. The police in those days were far less isolated from the working class than is the case today, whether it was standard of living, style of life, or their fundamental value system. While this in no way undermined the role of the police as an institution in defending the established order, it is an interesting fact that there had been considerable police unrest in both 1872 - which began in 'N' Division, covering Islington and Stoke Newington - and 1890, both years of industrial unrest in their own right. The police on both occasions tried to form unions, in the latter case with the help of the socialist movement. Edward Hennem indicated another possible route of influence, when he describes how in 1917 he:

and one or two other youngsters [from the NLHL] took an apple box to Fairfax Road, Harringay, outside the baker's shop at 8 pm one murky November evening, to proclaim our baptism for the Red Flag - one chairman, one heckler, plus me -17 years of age.

We got no audience, a cat sitting on the hot grills of the bakehouse, and a policeman. . . . after a speech lasting 25 minutes. . . the copper asked us if we were going home - we were depressed that we had not influenced the nation. But, that policeman became the local leader of the police strike and an active worker in the movement. I like to think that my speech started him thinking.

Among the local activists of the Police Union were Alf Pack⁵ of Upper Street Station, who was a member of the Union's Executive, and Sergeant Fred Hillier who was the local Branch Secretary. Both stayed at work during the 1919 strike and left the Union.

The authorities had been caught unawares by the first strike and used the breathing space created by the settlement to prepare for the next round. General Cecil Macready was appointed Metropolitan Commissioner⁶ and he used the ensuing months to get ready. Militants were isolated, moderates won over, and a number of partial reforms introduced, and when everything was ready the authorities introduced a new Police Bill which, apart from wages, nullified the men's gains.

The second police strike started on July 31st, 1919. It was a disaster. Only about 1,000 men struck in London, all of whom were instantly dismissed, and although a bitter struggle continued for some time -for example, strikers broke into the Islington section house to force the inmates to join them, eventually being forcibly ejected - the strike was absolutely crushed, and along with it the Police Union.

There were numerous arrests during the strike, and there were even a couple of sympathetic stoppages - of railwaymen at Nine Elms, and the tube motor men. One other interesting feature of the dispute was when Inspector Dessent of Stoke Newington Station - the only Inspector to strike - formed his men up in a body and marched them to the main strike meeting at Tower Hill.

The sacked men never got their jobs back, but many of them became active in the socialist and labour movements. After the defeat, the NLHL's paper, Rebel, noted a large influx of new members from the Police Union. Tommy Thiel,⁷ on whose behalf the first strike had been fought, joined the Communist Party, as did a number of others. A local striker, Henry Goodridge, joined the Labour Party and eventually became Mayor of Hackney. Another

Islington man, Sergeant William Sansum, who had been arrested and bound over during the 1919 strike, was arrested again for his support of the General Strike in 1926. Sansum, by this time a boot salesman, got three months in prison.

There had been considerable support for the 1919 strike from the socialist movement, but many supporters, looking back on police harassment, or police inaction while they got bashed by jingoes, felt a bit awkward - to put it mildly - with their new allies.

Excerpted from ['Don't be a soldier!' The radical anti-war movement in north London 1914-1918 - Ken Weller](#)

- [1.](#) John Syme, 1872-1945. In his incredible fight against his victimisation, Syme was arrested literally scores of times and was frequently imprisoned, when he would go on hunger strike. In this struggle Syme destroyed his physical and mental health and in 1924, after making threats against the King, he was certified and sent to Broadmoor. He was released the following year. There were two official enquiries into his case. The first, in 1924, found against him, but the second substantially supported him, and he was then granted an inspector's pension back-dated to the date of his sacking. Syme never fully accepted this decision and continued to protest for the rest of his life.
- [2.](#) One of these sacked men was PC Horace Herbert of 'Y' Division (Highgate and West Islington) who had become prominent in the Union. After his victimisation he refused to be dragooned into the army, became a CO, and went to prison.
- [3.](#) PC Ernest Harrison was one of these men. He lived in Islington and became the Union's secretary; as a result of his dismissal he too became liable for military service, refused to serve, and got six months' imprisonment. (While he was inside his wife acted as the Union's secretary.) After his release, Harrison still refused to be conscripted and got a further sentence. On his release from the second term he did a deal with the Police Commissioner, joined the Military Police and was reinstated in the Met, but he was then expelled by the union.
- [4.](#) 'Specials' became deeply hated in working-class areas. For years afterwards children used to follow them in the street shouting 'blackleg', and they weren't much loved by the regular police either.
- [5.](#) In later years Alf Pack became Secretary of the Police Federation.
- [6.](#) Macready was an expert in 'aiding the civil power'; in 1910 he had commanded the troops during the unrest in South Wales which culminated in Tonypany; the following year he was called in for the same job in Manchester and Salford; and in 1914 he was in charge in Belfast.
- [7.](#) Thiel died only a few years ago in South East London. In this section I have depended heavily on *The Day the Police Went on Strike*, by G. W. Reynolds and Anthony Judge, 1968.