

Stalin, Trotsky and the 1926 British general strike

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The British General Strike of May 1926 remains, after the passage of more than 80 years, a defining moment in the history of the workers' movement. Its lessons are essential for the development of a revolutionary strategy, not just in Britain but the world over.

The general strike was an event that should have signaled the beginning of a pronounced development towards revolutionary socialism by British workers and a political and organizational rupture with the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy. The strike had the potential to develop as a revolutionary confrontation between capital and labour. From its first days it involved millions of workers, including more than one million miners.

Yet for the most part, historians portray the strike as an exceptional episode in the otherwise reformist, law-abiding and pacific development of the workers' movement in Britain—a society characterized by sharp class antagonisms but ones which can be resolved through compromise within the framework of parliamentary democracy.

This interpretation is aided by the writings of the labour historians of a social democratic and Stalinist pedigree, all of whom insist that revolution was either never a possibility or, if the danger did present itself, its realization would have been the greatest disaster ever visited upon the British people. Had such a terrible outcome occurred, they claim, those responsible would have been the Tory grandees, whose incendiary actions risked undermining the efforts to secure an industrial settlement acceptable to both sides.

As a recent book, *A Very British Strike, 3 May-12 May 1926*, by *Guardian* journalist Anne Perkins, claims, "To a large extent, Britain's General Strike in 1926 was an almost accidental by-product of the fear of revolution; in a calmer atmosphere, there might have been no catalyst."

It was supposedly a terrible misunderstanding, resulting from an over-reaction domestically to a perceived threat that was actually external.

This picture is usually backed up with anecdotes about football matches between strikers and the police (which actually took place, courtesy of the union leaders—the strikers won 2-1), and about strike-breakers who were a comical assortment of students, members of the Women's Institute and Colonel Blimp types. Above all, the argument for the strike being an unfortunate incident rests upon its short duration and the subsequent course of development of the working class.

In fact, it was the estimation of the dangers inherent in the strike made by governing representatives of the British bourgeoisie, and not their latter-day interpreters, which was correct. It was one shared by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party leaders, who responded by selling out the strike after just nine days, leaving the miners to fight alone until they suffered defeat.

It was the rejection by the Communist Party of a revolutionary perspective, in favour of tailing the TUC General Council and the lefts, in particular, which politically disarmed the working class and facilitated

this historic betrayal. The Stalin faction of the Soviet Communist Party and the Comintern imposed this line on the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

Stalin and his allies drew from the defeat in Germany in 1923 the conclusion that capitalism was entering into a period of stabilisation in which there was no real chance of a revolutionary development in Europe. The central task was, therefore, to safeguard the Soviet Union from imperialist attack.

In Britain, this opportunist course was to take the form of the Anglo-Russian Committee established in 1925—an alliance between the Russian trade unions and the TUC made to ensure mutual aid and support between trade unionists in the two countries, oppose war and encourage friendly relations between Britain and the USSR.

This perspective was opposed by the Left Opposition, formed by Leon Trotsky in 1923.

In estimating the significance of the general strike and its betrayal, it is necessary to pose the question as to whether a pre-revolutionary situation existed in Britain.

Stalin denied any such possibility. Elaborating on his perspective of building socialism in one country and his struggle against Trotsky, he declared on February 10, 1926, "Well, as the victory of the revolution in the West is rather late in coming, nothing remains for us to do, apparently, but to loaf around... from the support of the workers of the West to the victory of the revolution in the West is a long, long way..."

What was Trotsky's position on the political situation in Britain and the policy of the Stalin faction? He explains in his autobiography *My Life*:

"England's fate after the war was a subject of absorbing interest. The radical change in her world position could not fail to bring about changes just as radical in the inner-correlation of her forces. It was clear that even if Europe, including England, were to restore a certain social equilibrium for a more or less extended period, England herself could reach such an equilibrium only by means of a series of serious conflicts and shake-ups. I thought it probable that in England, of all places, the fight in the coal industry would lead to a general strike. From this I assumed that the essential contradiction between the old organizations of the working class and its new historic tasks would of course be revealed in the near future. During the winter and spring of 1925, while I was in the Caucasus, I wrote a book on this—*Whither England?* The book was aimed essentially at the official conception of the Politbureau, with its hopes of an evolution to the left by the British General Council and of a gradual and painless penetration of communism into the ranks of the British Labour Party and trade unions."

Trotsky added, "...within a few months the strike of the coal miners became a general strike. I had not expected such an early confirmation of my forecast."

In the May 24, 1925 introduction to the US edition of *Whither England*, published later as *Where is Britain Going?*, Trotsky wrote:

"The conclusion which I reach in my study is that Britain is

approaching, at full speed, an era of great revolutionary upheavals... Britain is moving towards revolution because the epoch of capitalist decline has set in. And if culprits are to be sought, then in answer to the question who and what are propelling Britain along the road to revolution we must say: not Moscow, but New York.

"Such a reply might seem paradoxical. Nevertheless, it corresponds wholly to reality. The powerful and ever-growing world pressure of the United States makes the predicament of British industry, British trade, British finance and British diplomacy increasingly insoluble and desperate.

"The United States cannot help striving towards expansion on the world market, otherwise excess will threaten its own industry with a 'stroke.' The United States can only expand at the expense of Britain."

Coal mining came to be at the centre of the struggle to reorganize British economic and social life. It had been brought under government control during the war and was heavily subsidised.

In the face of fierce global competition for markets, particularly with the resumption of production in the Ruhr, government subsidies had to end—even at the risk of provoking ferocious opposition from the working class.

The conservatism and gradualism that permeated the labour movement in Britain are subjected to scathing critique by Trotsky. But he also knew that the objective basis of these features—the domination of an aristocracy of labour and the deliberate fostering of class collaboration by the ruling class—was collapsing along with Britain's global hegemony.

The radicalization of the British working class had already manifested itself immediately after the war, with three times as many strike days between 1919 and 1921 as in the pre-war years.

But this militant wave had rescinded after Black Friday, April 15, 1921, when the leadership of the rail and transport unions reneged on their Triple Alliance commitment to strike in support of the miners.

Large numbers of workers ripped up their union cards in disgust, and they were determined that no such betrayal would take place in future—a key reason, along with the rejection of any compromise by the government, why five years later the TUC felt compelled to call a general strike.

The working class had looked to a political solution, returning a minority Labour government in 1924. That government was brought down as a result of an anti-communist witch-hunt after only nine months.

The militant and revolutionary temper of the working class was also expressed in the growing influence of the Communist Party of Great Britain, formed in 1920. The CPGB, which had only 4,000 members in 1923, formed the National Minority Movement (NMM) in the trade unions, which in the ensuing years grew to embrace around a quarter of the total membership of the unions and succeeded in electing Arthur James Cook as leader of the miners' union in 1924. It also formed the National Left-Wing Movement in the Labour Party in 1925, campaigning for the right to affiliate and against Labour's expulsion of Communists.

Communists had succeeded in becoming trade union delegates to Labour constituency committees and the Labour Party conference. At the 1923 conference there were 430 Communist delegates, and in the December 1923 general election the CP put forward nine candidates, seven of whom stood for the Labour Party. The CP candidates received 66,500 votes. The *Workers' Weekly* was by then selling 50,000 copies, more than any other socialist weekly.

As Trotsky was finishing *Whither England?*, the coal owners were pushing for a head-on confrontation with the miners. But the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin decided that it was not ready, and on July 31, 1925, "Red Friday," it backed down and granted a further subsidy to the mine owners to postpone demands for massive wage cuts and restructuring.

Over the next nine months the ruling class made concerted preparations

for a general conflict with the working class. It set up the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) to head strike-breaking operations, including the training of military forces and the recruitment of civilian volunteers. The OMS became an official home for virtually every fascist and far-right element in Britain. The Emergency Powers Act of 1920 allowed for the arrest without warrant of anyone even suspected of being guilty of an offence and for searches without warrant and by force if necessary. The secretary of state was empowered to use the armed forces at his discretion.

Winston Churchill was then Chancellor of the Exchequer. He was to play the key role in working to crush the general strike, alongside Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks.

On October 14, 1925, police raided the national and London headquarters of the CPGB, the Young Communist League, the NMM and the *Workers Weekly*. Twelve of its leaders were arrested in total—eight then, four later—including Willie Gallacher, Harry Pollitt, and Robin Page Arnott—almost the entire political bureau. They were imprisoned and charged with sedition and inciting others to mutiny under an act dating from 1797. They remained in jail for six months or a year, and most were still incarcerated when the general strike began.

A total of 167 miners from the South Wales Miners Federation were also brought to trial in relation to a strike in July and August. Fifty were sent to prison.

The arrest of the CP leaders evoked mass protests. There were marches, one of 15,000, to Wandsworth Prison every weekend and a rally at Queen's Hall, London on March 7, described by Labour's George Lansbury as "one of the biggest meetings ever held in London." Lansbury noted that Labour MPs at the meeting used seditious language to challenge the home secretary to arrest them.

Some 300,000 signatures were gathered on a petition demanding the release of the 12, and one CPGB prisoner, Wally Hannington, was elected to the executive committee of the London Trades Council.

At the heart of the advances made by the CPGB was a political line directing the party to the working class and to a challenge for leadership against the trade union and Labour bureaucracy. This policy was based on the line developed by the Comintern in 1921 under the slogan, "To the masses." But the success of such a challenge depended above all on exposing the pretensions of the bureaucracy's left-talking representatives.

While right-wingers like Walter Citrine and Jimmy Thomas of the National Union of Railwaymen were explicit opponents of communism, lefts like Alonzo Swales of the engineering union, Alfred Purcell of the furnishing trades and George Hicks of the bricklayers cuddled up to the CPGB and spouted radical and even Marxist rhetoric in order to better deceive the working class.

Purcell was president of the TUC and Bromley its secretary. Their election was a measure of the militant mood in the trade unions. Purcell had joined the CPGB in its earliest days, along with Miners' Federation leader A.J. Cook. Both left soon after and established a degree of independence, while maintaining a useful connection to the party that gave them left credentials.

Their most radical statements were usually made on foreign policy questions—opposing war and calling for the establishment of relations with the USSR, issues they felt did not commit them to anything practical and did not cut across their alliance with the right wing. At the 1925 Liverpool Labour Party conference that took the decision to exclude Communists from Labour membership, they said nothing.

It was on the lefts' initiative that the TUC Congress of 1924 decided to send a delegation to visit Russia in November-December. The visit led to the formation of the Anglo-Russian (Unity) Committee in April 1925.

Trotsky had not opposed the formation of the Anglo Russian Committee. It was, he said, correct to take advantage of the actual leftward shift in the working class to which the lefts were rhetorically

adapting themselves. But the task was to expose the TUC lefts and, in so doing, wage a struggle against the entire bureaucracy and thereby build the influence of the Communist Party.

The Stalinist line was the polar opposite of such a perspective. As Trotsky explained in *On the Draft Programme of the Comintern* in 1928, "The point of departure of the Anglo-Russian Committee, as we have already seen, was the impatient urge to leap over the young and too slowly developing Communist Party. This invested the entire experience with a false character even prior to the general strike.

"The Anglo-Russian Committee was looked upon not as an episodic bloc at the top which would have to be broken and which would inevitably and demonstratively be broken at the very first serious test in order to compromise the General Council. No, not only Stalin, Bukharin, Tomsky and others, but also Zinoviev, saw in it a long lasting 'co-partnership,' an instrument for the systematic revolutionisation of the English working masses, and if not the gate, at least an approach to the gate through which would stride the revolution of the English proletariat. The further it went, the more the Anglo-Russian Committee became transformed from an episodic alliance into an inviolable principle standing above the real class struggle. This became revealed at the time of the general strike."

To sum up, Stalin's line was based on:

- 1) Deep skepticism about the possibility of revolution, as evidenced by his assertion of a new period of capitalist stabilization.
- 2) A turn away from the task of building the Communist Party in favour of opportunist alliances with the trade union bureaucracy.
- 3) The assertion that these forces could eventually be pushed to the left by militant pressure and act as a substitute for the party.
- 4) The abandonment or diminution of criticism of Moscow's allies, at least of the lefts, and a refusal to draw any practical conclusions even when it became impossible to remain silent.

Zinoviev declared in 1924 at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, "In Britain we are now going through the beginning of a new chapter in the Labour movement. We do not know exactly whence the communist mass party of Britain will come, whether only through the Stewart-MacManus door [i.e., the CPGB—Bob Stewart and Arthur MacManus were CPGB leaders] or through some other door."

Trotsky presents a withering sketch of the Stalin faction's stance and political calculations in *My Life*:

"Stalin, Bukharin, Zinoviev—in this question they were all in solidarity, at least in the first period—sought to replace the weak British Communist Party by a 'broader current' which had at its head, to be sure, not members of the party, but 'friends,' almost Communists, at any rate, fine fellows and good acquaintances. The fine fellows, the solid 'leaders,' did not, of course, want to submit themselves to the leadership of a small, weak Communist Party. That was their full right; the party cannot force anybody to submit himself to it. The agreements between the Communists and the 'lefts' (Purcell, Hicks and Cook) on the basis of the partial tasks of the trade union movement were, of course, quite possible and in certain cases unavoidable. But on one condition: the Communist Party had to preserve its complete independence, even within the trade unions, act in its own name in all the questions of principle, criticize its 'left' allies whenever necessary, and in this way, win the confidence of the masses step by step.

"This only possible road, however, appeared too long and uncertain to the bureaucrats of the Communist International. They considered that by means of personal influence upon Purcell, Hicks, Cook and the others (conversations behind the scenes, correspondence, banquets, friendly back-slapping, gentle exhortations), they would gradually and imperceptibly draw the 'left' opposition ('the broad current') into the stream of the Communist International. To guarantee such a success with greater security, the dear friends (Purcell, Hicks and Cook) were not to be

vexed, or exasperated, or displeased by petty chicanery, by inopportune criticism, by sectarian intransigence, and so forth... But since one of the tasks of the Communist Party consists precisely of upsetting the peace of and alarming all centrists and semi-centrists, a radical measure had to be resorted to by actually subordinating the Communist Party to the 'Minority Movement.' On the trade union field there appeared only the leaders of this movement. The British Communist Party had practically ceased to exist for the masses."

This was the cardinal political betrayal of the Stalin clique. In *Lessons of October*, Trotsky had warned:

"Without a party, apart from a party, over the head of a party, or with a substitute for a party, the proletarian revolution cannot conquer. That is the principal lesson of the past decade. It is true that the English trade unions may become a mighty lever of the proletarian revolution; they may, for instance, even take the place of workers' soviets under certain conditions and for a certain period of time. They can fill such a role, however, not apart from a Communist party, and certainly not against the party, but only on the condition that communist influence becomes the decisive influence in the trade unions."

In an article published in the *Communist International* shortly after the General Strike, *Problems of the British Labour Movement*, Trotsky quoted passages from his correspondence of January-March 1926, immediately prior to the general strike, in which he explained:

"The opposition movement headed by the lefts, semi-lefts and the extreme lefts reflects a profound social shift in the masses."

However, he continued, "The woolliness of the British 'lefts' together with their theoretical formlessness, and their political indecision not to say cowardice makes the clique of MacDonald, Webb and Snowden master of the situation, which in turn is impossible without Thomas. If the bosses of the British Labour Party form a bridle placed upon the working class, then Thomas is the buckle into which the bourgeoisie inserts the reins..."

"The present stage in the development of the British proletariat, where its overwhelming majority responds sympathetically to the speeches of the 'lefts' and supports MacDonald and Thomas in power, is not of course accidental. And it is impossible to leap over this stage. The path of the Communist Party, as the future great party of the masses, lies not only through an irreconcilable struggle against capital's special agency in the shape of the Thomas-MacDonald clique, but also through the systematic unmasking of the left muddleheads by means of whom alone MacDonald and Thomas can maintain their positions."

To be continued

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