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 Trades Union Congress (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...

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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 John 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

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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 presented a withering sketch of the Stalin faction's stance and political calculations in the *Bulletin of the Opposition* in 1931:

"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."

Trotsky's urgings were to be suppressed, rejected and denounced, as the Comintern insisted that the Communist Party of Great Britain subordinate itself to the alliance with the Trades Union Congress and its left flank, making the central demand of the party and its press, "All power to the [TUC] General Council."

To understand just what a shift was being imposed, we can look at what the CPGB was saying prior to having been brought firmly behind the new line by the Comintern. There were already dangers in the conception of the National Minority Movement, but nevertheless the contrast is stark.

In August 1924, the first annual conference of the National Minority Movement called for the setting up of factory committees and for a strengthening of the powers of the General Council as a weapon against sectionalism. But this was combined with a call for a struggle against the union tops. A resolution stated, "It must not be imagined that the increase of the powers of the General Council will have the tendency to make it less reactionary. On the contrary, the tendency will be for it to become even more so... We can guard against the General Council becoming a machine of the capitalists, and can really evolve from the General Council a Workers' General Staff, only by, in the first place and fundamentally, developing a revolutionary class consciousness amongst the Trade Union membership..."

Writing in 1924 of the role of the lefts in the TUC in calling for relations with the USSR and making anti-war speeches, John Ross Campbell warned, "It would be a suicidal policy, however, for the Communist Party

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and the Minority Movement to place too much reliance on what we have called the official Left wing... It is the duty of our Party and the Minority Movement to criticize its weakness relentlessly and endeavor to change the muddled and incomplete left-wing viewpoint of the more progressive leaders into a revolutionary viewpoint. But the revolutionary workers must never forget that their main activity must be devoted to capturing the masses."

Rajani Palme Dutt wrote in 1925, "A Left wing in the working class movement must be based upon the class struggle, or it becomes only a manoeuvre to confuse the workers."

He stated that the greatest danger of the coming period was the ability of the "lefts," "owing to the weakness of revolutionary development in England, and to the authority and prestige of their positions, to win the ear of the masses with a handful of phrases and promises, so as to gather the rising movement of the masses to themselves and then to dissipate it in a comic opera fiasco... The Communist Party must conduct an unceasing ideological warfare with the left, exposing from the outset every expression that betrays confusion, ambiguity, vain bravado, frivolousness, opposition to actual struggle and practical subjection to the right wing."

Even on the setting up of the Anglo-Russian committee, the *Workers Weekly* commented:

"Unity that only means a polite agreement between leaders is useless unless it is backed up by mass pressure. Unity that confines itself to negotiations between Amsterdam and the Russian Unions only touches on the fringe of the question... Vast masses of workers everywhere are moving slowly forward. Those leaders who stand in the way are going to be swept aside. The class struggle cannot be limited to an exchange of diplomatic letters."

The political struggle against the lefts was linked to a revolutionary orientation. After Red Friday, 1925, J.T. Murphy wrote that the general strike had been postponed but was still inevitable: "But let us be clear what a general strike means. It can only mean the throwing down of the gauntlet to the capitalist state, and all the power at its disposal. Either that challenge is a gesture... or it must develop its challenge into an actual fight for power..."

Under the tutelage of Stalin, Zinoviev and company, such criticisms were abandoned and the revolutionary perspective previously advanced was denounced as ultra-leftism and Trotskyism.

Stalin in turn identified revolution with the TUC General Council—insisting in January 1925 that the "incipient split between the General Council of the TUC and the Labour Party" was a sign that "something revolutionary... is developing in Britain"—or rejected any possibility of revolution, writing in *Pravda* in March that year that capital had "extricated itself from the quagmire of the post-war crisis," resulting in "a sort of lull."

This was taken up by the CPGB. A resolution denouncing Trotsky was sent to Moscow and an article by Bukharin attacking Trotsky was published in the *Communist Review* for February 1925, with an editorial comment describing it as "a brilliant contribution to the theory and practice of Leninism."

In March and April, a joint plenum of the Comintern executive and the central committee of the Soviet Communist Party was convened to organize a campaign against "Trotskyism." Tom Bell reported that the CPGB had "no hesitation" in associating itself with the Soviet party leadership.

The *Workers' Weekly* of June 5, 1925 reported the CPGB's Congress as giving "no countenance to the revolutionary optimism of those who hold that we are on the eve of immediate vast revolutionary struggles. It recognized that capitalism had stabilized itself temporarily."

The second annual conference of the National Minority Movement in August made its central demand the granting of full powers to the TUC General Council, with hardly any qualification.

Dutt, writing in November and seeking to excuse the left allies of the Comintern for not having opposed the expulsions of Communists from the Labour Party in 1925, explained that they lacked "self-confidence." To "overcome this weakness" was "an essential task for the future," he declared.

Three days before the general strike erupted, on April 30, 1926, Murphy wrote on the front page of the *Workers' Weekly*, "Our party does not hold the leading positions in the Trade Unions. It is not conducting the negotiations with the employers and the government. It can only advise and place its forces at the service of the workers—led by others... To entertain any exaggerated views as to the revolutionary possibilities of this crisis and visions of new leadership 'arising spontaneously in the struggle' is fantastic..."

(Quotes taken from M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, *Essays on the History of British Communism*, New Park, 1975)

The role of the CP in disarming the working class is underlined by the subsequent statement of Murphy that "the shock" of the strike's betrayal "was too great to make any quick throw-up of a new leadership possible."

So too with the comments of George Hardy, acting secretary of the National Minority Movement during the General Strike, in his memoirs, that, "Although we knew of what treachery the Right-wing leaders were capable, we did not clearly understand the part played by the so-called Left in the union leadership. In the main they turned out to be windbags and capitulated to the Right Wing. We were taught a major lesson; that while developing a move to the left officially, the main point in preparing for action must always be to develop a class-conscious leadership among the rank and file."

If taken at face value, such statements demonstrate that, bereft of any revolutionary guidance from the CPGB, the working class had no possibility of arming itself against the role of the lefts who were being continually boosted under the Comintern's orders.

The lefts were thus able to play a direct and instrumental role in the betrayal of the strike. The right-winger Thomas of the National Union of Railwaymen was in charge of negotiations with the government and worked deliberately to ensure its defeat. But the lefts allowed him to do so, under conditions where millions had no confidence in the TUC General Council or the Labour Party leadership. The chairman of the Strike Organization Committee was Purcell, while Swales negotiated alongside Thomas with the Baldwin government. Hicks and others also occupied leading posts.

The CPGB leaders succeeded in transforming the party into a left ginger group for the trade union bureaucracy, while the Russian trade unions served as mere advocates of industrial militancy. The entire apparatus of the Communist International was mobilized to deny the need for the general strike to be pursued as a political struggle against the state and to insist that united trade union action alone would bring victory.

As for the CPGB leaders having not been warned about the lefts' betrayal, this is a simple lie.

Trotsky wrote on May 6, in the very midst of the strike, in his preface to the second German edition of "*Where Is Britain Going*?": "It has never yet been possible to cross a revolutionary stream on the horse of reformism, and a class which enters battle under opportunist leaders is compelled to change them under the enemy's fire."

The CPGB sought to suppress these warnings. *Where is Britain Going?* was not published in England until after the TUC's betrayal.

Brian Pearce was a member of the History Group in the CPGB, alongside E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. He was recruited to the Trotskyist movement by Gerry Healy following Kruschev's secret speech in 1956 and wrote some of the best material on the General Strike and the history of the Communist Party. He notes that the preface cited above to the American edition of *Where is Britain Going?* was omitted, as well as an entire paragraph that includes the words, "The most important task for

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the truly revolutionary participants in the General Strike will be to fight relentlessly against every sign or act of treachery, and ruthlessly to expose reformist illusions."

Thanks to the Comintern, the general strike was headed not merely by people who did not believe in revolution, but by a leadership that was the most convinced and determined opponent of revolution. The TUC's attitude to the strike, and by implication the service rendered to it by the Stalin faction of the Comintern, was summed up by Thomas in Parliament on May 13, the day after the betrayal of the strike. He said, "What I dreaded about this strike more than anything else was this: 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 danger, that fear was always in our minds..."

The strike took place only because the TUC was pushed into a dispute it could not avoid and the government *wanted* a dispute for which it had long prepared. The government-appointed Coal Commission under Sir Herbert Samuel had reported on March 10, recommending wage cuts and restructuring. On April 8, the miners asked the TUC to support their demand for "not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day" and for no departure from national agreements. The TUC Special Committee supported a reduction in wages and recommended further talks.

Lock-out notices were posted at every pit on April 16, timed to expire 14 days later. The government demanded that the miners accept the Coal Commission's report and the General Council agreed with the government. But the miners refused. Lockouts began on April 30 and the king signed an Emergency Proclamation for May 1.

Thomas explained how he "begged and pleaded" as never before. "We have striven, we have pleaded, we have begged for peace, because we want peace. We still want peace. The nation wants peace," he said. But the lockouts continued.

On May 1, the TUC held a special conference and announced plans for the strike, set to begin May 3. The strike call was endorsed by a massive majority by the conference. The union tops continued to make frantic efforts to reach an agreement with the government and the mine owners. But when printers at the *Daily Mail* refused to print an editorial condemning the General Strike as "a revolutionary move which can only succeed by destroying the government and subverting the rights and liberties of the people," Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin used their action as an excuse to call off negotiations.

He told the chairman of the TUC negotiating committee, "It is a direct challenge, a direct challenge, Mr. Pugh, and we cannot go on. I am grateful to you for all you have done, but these negotiations cannot continue. Goodbye. This is the end." He said to Walter Citrine, "Well, I have been happy to meet you and I believe if we live we will meet again to settle it. If we live."

And then he showed them both the door.

The strike began on May 3 and immediately hit transport, printing and the productive industries—steel, metal, heavy chemicals, the building trades, electricity and gas. It was to involve four million out of five-and-a-half million workers organized in the unions.

Workers responded not merely only out of sympathy for the miners, but because they knew they would be next. Many remembered Baldwin's declaration in 1925 during negotiations with the miners' leaders that "all the workers of this country have got to take reductions in wages to help put industry on its feet."

The Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) was set in motion, focusing attention on keeping transport running. The battleships Ramillies and Barham were recalled from the Atlantic and anchored in the Mersey and warships were anchored in most other major ports.

On May 6 Baldwin described the strike as "a challenge to the Parliament" and "the road to anarchy." Barrister Sir John Simon told the House of Commons that the strike was illegal and strikers were in breach of their contracts. Therefore, he said, the 1906 Trade Disputes Act protecting individual trade unionists and trade union funds from damages was not valid. The very next day the TUC met with Sir Herbert Samuel of the Coal Commission and made proposals to end the dispute, but these were rejected by the Miners' Federation.

In contrast to the TUC's cowardice, as far as the ruling class was concerned, this was war. They organized a force of hundreds of thousands—the OMS, 240,000 specials, the armed forces—to break the strike. To cite two major offensives, early in the morning of Saturday, May 8 more than a hundred lorries formed a convoy escorted by over twenty armoured cars bearing soldiers to get goods moving on the London docks.

Lorries broke the picket line and transported food to Hyde Park. The government also tried to use the OMS at the docks in Newcastle under the guns of two destroyers and a submarine, provoking a walkout by dockers handling food. Police action caused clashes up and down the country.

Was the situation pre-revolutionary? Let me read the following somewhat lengthy passage on the type of conflicts that developed from Christopher Farnam's account (*The General Strike 1926*, Panther, 1972).

"Mass pickets gathered in the main roads of London's East End before seven o'clock on Tuesday morning 4th of May, and during the day scores of vehicles suspected of carrying goods or office workers to and from the City were stopped and quite frequently wrecked. Several vehicles were set alight, others thrown into the river. After a night of fierce street battles, thirty civilian casualties were taken to Poplar Hospital. One man dies of his injuries on Wednesday morning...

"On Tuesday night there were also disturbances in Newcastle and at Chester-le-Street near Durham, mounted police broke up a crowd that had invaded the railway station."

On Wednesday, "There were further baton charges in Poplar and Canning Town and violent clashes around the Blackwall Tunnel, where cars were smashed and set alight. In Hammersmith seven buses were wrecked, strikers and Fascists fought a pitched battle, and police made forty-three arrests. Attacks on trams and buses also led to sporadic clashes in Leeds, Nottingham, Manchester, Stoke, Liverpool, Glasgow and Edinburgh. In Sheffield four men were charged with unauthorized possession of a machine gun.

"On Thursday there were more clashes in the East End and at the Elephant and Castle mounted police broke up an angry crowd after a bus, which was trying to dodge strike pickets, had crashed onto a pavement killing a man. In the same area another bus was set alight. The *Manchester Guardian Bulletin*'s London correspondent reported that 'Things seem more serious today with the streets emptier through the taxicab drivers joining the strike. There are more buses now, each with one or two policemen beside the driver. A new strikers' plan has been tried this morning in Camberwell; some women laid their babies on the road in front of commercial vehicles and when the cars stopped, men jumped on the footboards and turned out the drivers and smashed machinery in the cars.' There were renewed clashes in Nottingham when strikers tried to march on factories where work was still continuing, and strikers and police fought pitched battles in Cardiff, Ipswich and Leeds...

"A mob of 4,000 wrecked goods and passenger stations at Middlesbrough and chained lorries to the railway line. While naval ratings struggled to clear the line, fighting also erupted at the bus terminus and outside a nearby police station... In Aberdeen police baton-charged a crowd of more than 6,000 who were smashing the windows of passing buses and trains...

"On Friday there was fresh violence in Polar, Ipswich, Cardiff and Middlesborough, and disturbances in Sheffield, Newark, and Darlington. A mob of 1,500 demolished a brick wall in Wandsworth to obtain missiles and a member of the British Fascisti was almost lynched when he deliberately drove his van into a crowd of demonstrators on Wormwood

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Scrubs, severely injuring a man."

In Hull, "As rioting spread, trams were attacked and burned and the civil authorities appealed for help to the captain of the Ceres, the light cruiser responsible for protecting Hull Docks. While fifty of his men faced the crowd with rifles and fixed bayonets, the captain addressed them from the balcony of the City Hall. Explaining that it was his duty to safeguard the city's property, he warned that if another tram was attacked, he would man them all with naval ratings."

The development of councils of action during the dispute contained nascent elements of dual power—the equivalent of soviets in Britain. A National Council of Action had first been formed in August 1920 to oppose intervention against the Soviet Union and had prompted many local versions that the Directorate of Intelligence wrote "were taking on more the form of soviets and in some areas forming plans for the seizure of private property and the means of transport."

During the strike, the councils of action came to the fore across the country. A Clydeside striker explains, "The central strike committees and the councils of action were twenty-four hours a day in session. They had their own transport; they stopped all other forms of transport but they had their own courier system to carry messages because there was no such thing as postal services, no such thing as the press. The press had turned in 100 percent and stopped all the papers, and so the council of action had to carry out its work by getting bicycles, old and new, motorcycles, old vans—anything that could run on wheels was used by the couriers and also to take leaders in the strike to certain fronts in the strike."

East Fife council of action had set up its own workers' defence militia with 700 members, and regularly battled with the police.

That this initial expression of dual power did not go further was due solely to the leadership of the Communist Party and the Comintern.

Brian Pearce notes that the CP's fealty to the TUC General Council had rendered it impotent to the point where the social democratic theorist Harold Laski could write in 1927, "It was noteworthy that in the British General Strike of 1926 the communists played practically no part at all," and the journalist Hamilton Fyfe wrote in his diary, "The communists have kept very quiet... On the Continent, in America even, it is the extremists who come to the top in crises. Here they have sunk out of sight."

As for the government and the state, they were doing all they could to eliminate the communist threat. Reports in the Communist press that the Welsh Guards had mutinied and were confined to barracks and that other regiments had refused to proceed against the miners were seized on by police to justify arrests and raids on Communist Party headquarters on grounds of sedition.

As Margaret Morris makes clear in her work, *The General Strike* (Journeyman Press, 1976), the targeting of the CP continued apace throughout the strike.

"Many of those arrested for producing or distributing bulletins containing 'sedition' or 'false rumour' were Communists involved in handling the Communist Party's Workers bulletin or local versions of it. The mere possession of a copy of these was deemed sufficient grounds for prosecution... the raiding of the Communist Party offices and the concentration on stamping out their publications sent the Communists underground: the leading members changed their address every night so that they could avoid arrest..."

In the aftermath, "The home secretary told the House of Commons that 1,760 people had been summoned for offences in England and Wales during the strike, of whom 150 were accused of 'incitement' under the Emergency Powers Act and the rest of 'disorder'; 632 were imprisoned and the rest were fined. The total number of those prosecuted in Scotland was not given, but 409 people were sentenced to terms of imprisonment, of whom 140 were sentenced under the Emergency Powers Act and the rest for intimidation, breach of the peace, assault, etc... The Communist Party... estimated that between a quarter and a fifth of its membership had been arrested during the strike."

The CPGB itself gives a figure of 2,500 arrested and estimates that 1,000 party members were in that number, with miners especially targeted.

Communist Member of Parliament Shapurji Saklatvala was arrested in 1926 following a speech in support of striking coal miners and was jailed for two months.

The TUC had its version of the same anti-communist policy, insisting that only propaganda it approved could be circulated. It issued a declaration against spies and others "using violent language in order to incite the workers to disorder." Union branches and strike committees went so far as to insist that meetings ended with the singing of "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia" instead of the "Red Flag."

Far from opposing this bureaucratic suppression, the CPGB did its best to enforce cooperation on its members. Hardy of the NMM explained, "We sent out from the Minority Movement headquarters instructions to our members to work for the establishment of councils of action in every area. We warned, however, that the councils of action were under no circumstances to take over the work of the trade unions... The councils of action were to see that all the decisions of the General Council and the union executives were carried out."

On May 12, the TUC General Council visited the prime minister to announce its decision to call off the strike. The sole demand was that the proposals of the Samuel Commission be adhered to and that the government should guarantee that there would be no victimisation of strikers. When the government refused to make such a promise, the TUC predictably ended the strike anyway. Lord Birkenhead later wrote that their surrender was "so humiliating that some instinctive breeding made one unwilling to even look at them."

It is testament to the scale of the betrayal that 100,000 came out after the General Strike was called off and there were more people out on strike on May 13 than at any time during the nine days the strike was official.

The headline in the *Northern Light* read, "There is only one explanation for this treachery—our leaders do not believe in Socialism." The *Newcastle Workers Chronicle* wrote, "Never in the history of workers struggle—with the exception of the treachery of our leaders in 1914—has there been such a calculated betrayal of working class interests."

Even at this hour, the possibility existed for reversing the disastrous course pursued by the CPGB. If a correct line had been fought for, tens if not hundreds of thousands would have responded. As Perkins acknowledges, "The strike was over. But neither government nor TUC believed that the status quo ante could be restored overnight. Both sides were aware that for the extremists, an unprecedented opportunity had arisen. Millions of men idle, many of them bewildered and angry that the strike had ended in defeat when they had been ready to continue the fight, were a recruiting ground for Communism that Lenin himself might have dreamed of creating...

"Throughout the nine days, the nightmare that had haunted both the government and TUC was that a 'revolutionary situation' of the sort that the Communist strike strategists envisaged might develop. Now the actions of each appeared perilously close to achieving it."

Thousands did indeed flood into the CP, whose membership doubled in the year from 6,000 to 12,000. The Stalinist *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Volume 2*, written by James Klugmann, (Lawrence & Wishart, 1969) explains that "the real influx into the Communist Party began in the last days of and immediately following the General Strike... This was something new in the history of the Party, and very exhilarating it was. The General Council had sold out the strike. The miners fought on. In all the coalfields great mass meetings were held at which workers, above all miners, turned to the Communist Party in scores, and even in hundreds. The July 14, 1926 Executive could report 3,000 new members

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since the General Strike and *Workers Weekly* sales up to 70,000."

Klugmann writes correctly, "With this new influx a tremendous task and responsibility opened out for the Communist Party. It was a very excellent thing, to win to the Communist Party so many militant workers, mainly from the pits. But these were for the most part men and women who had come to hate the guts of the right-wing leaders, to see them as traitors, to feel hatred and disgust for the system of capitalism. They wanted a new, better, juster system of society, they desired a radical change... But they were not yet Marxists in their theoretical outlook..."

Far from training these workers in Marxism and giving theoretical form to their hatred of those who had betrayed them, the CPGB and the Comintern worked to disorient them by insisting on maintaining the alliance with the TUC in the Anglo-Russian Committee.

In his shameful biography of Trotsky, (*Trotsky*, Routledge, 2003), Ian D. Thatcher once again defends Stalin from Trotsky's criticisms, claiming:

"An important element of the United Opposition's critique of Stalin's rule was, of course, the view that the world revolution was being betrayed by socialism in one country. In the autumn of 1926 Trotsky famously called Stalin 'the grave-digger of the revolution.' If by this it was meant that Stalin wilfully wasted revolutionary opportunities, the criticism is clearly unfair. In the British General Strike of 1926, for example, Stalin insisted that communists work within the Anglo-Russian trade union committee established in 1925, not so that reformism should triumph (as he was accused by Trotsky), but so that the reformists could more easily be unmasked. One may question the sense of the united-front strategy employed here, but Stalin sincerely thought that it would bring the communists more influence than any alternative."

As with much of what Thatcher writes, this is not merely a defence of Stalin—whose "sincerity" is hardly the issue—that flies in the face of the historical record. It is a defence that might have come straight from the mouth of Stalin himself.

In the strike's aftermath, Trotsky and the Left Opposition insisted that the Comintern break immediately with the TUC. In a letter to *Pravda* on May 26, 1926, Trotsky declared, "The entire present 'superstructure' of the British working class, in all its shades and groupings without exception, is an apparatus for putting a brake on the revolution."

Stalin denounced this appraisal as ultra-leftism and defended the continuation of the ARC—as a united front that would serve to unmask the reformists!

In a speech on the Anglo-Russian Unity Committee of July 15, 1926, Stalin claimed that the issue was whether "we, as Communists, work in the reactionary trade unions. It is essentially this question that Trotsky put to us in his letter recently in Pravda....

"Can we, as Leninists, as Marxists, at all skip over and ignore a movement that has not outlived its day, can we skip over and ignore the backwardness of the masses, can we turn our back on them and pass them by; or ought we to get rid of such features by carrying on an unrelaxing fight against them amongst the masses?"

Getting to the point, Stalin declared that "if the reactionary trade unions of Britain are prepared to join in a bloc against the counter-revolutionary imperialists of their country, why should we not welcome such a bloc?"

In line with Stalin's sophistry, the theses of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) plenum on the lessons of the General Strike, 8 June 1926, stated that "for the English union leaders to break up the committee would be such a demonstratively anti-working class act that it would greatly accelerate the leftward movement of the English working masses.

"In these circumstances, for the Soviet unions to take the initiative in leaving the committee... would deal a blow to the cause of international unity, a thoroughly 'heroic' gesture, but politically inexpedient and infantile."

The 15th All Union Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) passed an October 26, 1926 resolution declaring: "The Party holds that the advanced capitalist countries are, on the whole, in a state of partial, temporary stabilization; that the present period is an inter-revolutionary one, making it incumbent on the Communist Parties to prepare the proletariat for the coming revolution... The opposition bloc starts out from entirely different premises. Having no faith in the internal forces of our revolution, and falling into despair owing to the delay of the world revolution, the opposition bloc slips away from the basis of a Marxist analysis of the class forces of the revolution to one consisting of 'ultra-left' self-deception and 'revolutionary' adventurism; it denies the existence of a partial stabilization of capitalism, and, consequently, inclines towards putschism.

"Hence the opposition's demand for a revision of the united front tactics and the break-up of the Anglo-Russian Committee, its failure to understand the role of the trade unions and its call to replace the latter by new, 'revolutionary' proletarian organisations of its own invention."

For its part, the All Russian Council of Trade Unions published a manifesto on the General Strike stating that it had been betrayed by the TUC and the Labour Party right wing, but insisting that "in spite of the fact that the Trade Union leaders have inflicted a heavy blow upon the British working class, upon the cause of international unity and upon the Anglo-Russian Committee, we not only do not propose the abolition of the Anglo-Russian Committee, but call for its whole-hearted revival, and a strengthening and intensification of its activity."

Naturally this line demanded that the CPGB continue to do everything in its power not to antagonise the trade union leaders.

Following the general strike, the TUC General Council issued an ultimatum to trades councils forbidding them to affiliate to the Minority Movement. This was opposed by trades councils including Glasgow, Sheffield and Manchester, but the CPGB leadership urged compliance!

Pearce quotes Murphy as explaining, "The workers could not understand this new alliance of the communists and the General Council, and their resistance was killed."

Similarly, in September 1926, Harry Pollitt wrote of the TUC's congress that year, "In view of the overwhelming decision for complete solidarity registered at Scarborough, the new General Council will simply *have* to prosecute more vigorously the fight on behalf of the workers. True, the right wing of the Council is strengthened by the return of one or two people who do not support the idea that we are involved in a class struggle, but I think that the mass pressure from behind will force even them to toe the line."

It was left to the TUC to officially quit the ARC at its 1927 Edinburgh Congress, to which the Soviet delegates were refused a visa.

The terrible impact of the betrayal of the general strike cannot be overstated. Trotsky had argued that the very survival of British imperialism now rested not on the right-wing social democrats, but on the supposed lefts, without whom the right wing could not maintain its position in the labour movement.

In his autobiography, Trotsky asks, "What were the results of the Stalinists' British experiment? The Minority Movement, embracing almost a million workers, seemed very promising, but it bore the germs of destruction within itself. The masses knew as the leaders of the movement only Purcell, Hicks and Cook, whom, moreover, Moscow vouched for. These 'left' friends, in a serious test, shamefully betrayed the proletariat. The revolutionary workers were thrown into confusion, sank into apathy and naturally extended their disappointment to the Communist Party itself, which had only been the passive part of this whole mechanism of betrayal and perfidy. The Minority Movement was reduced to zero; the Communist Party returned to the existence of a negligible sect. In this way, thanks to a radically false conception of the party, the greatest movement of the English proletariat, which led to the General Strike, not only did not shake

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the apparatus of the reactionary bureaucracy, but, on the contrary, reinforced it and compromised Communism in Great Britain for a long time."

He wrote in 1928: "Temporary agreements may be made with the reformists whenever they take a step forward. But to maintain a bloc with them when, frightened by the development of a movement, they commit treason, is equivalent to criminal toleration of traitors and a veiling of betrayal...

"Given such a condition of the working masses as was revealed by the general strike, the highest post in the mechanism of capitalist stabilization is no longer occupied by MacDonald and Thomas, but by Pugh, Purcell, Cook, and Co. They do the work and Thomas adds the finishing touches. Without Purcell, Thomas would be left hanging in mid-air, and along with Thomas also Baldwin. The chief brake upon the English revolution is the false, diplomatic masquerade 'Leftism' of Purcell, which fraternizes, sometimes in rotation, sometimes simultaneously, with churchmen and Bolsheviks, and which is always ready not only for retreats but also for betrayal."

Replying to Stalin's claim that a revolutionary strategy was putschism due to the stabilization of capitalism, he continued, "*Stabilization is Purcellism*. From this we see what depths of theoretical absurdity and blind opportunism are expressed in the reference to the existence of 'stabilization' in order to justify the political bloc with Purcell. Yet, precisely in order to shatter the 'stabilization,' Purcellism had first to be destroyed. In such a situation, even a shadow of solidarity with the General Council was the greatest crime and infamy against the working masses."

As to the impact of this infamous political crime on Britain, the miners returned to work in October 1926 and the victimizations and job cuts began. By the late 1930s, employment in mining had fallen by more than one-third, while productivity per man rose by the same proportion.

In 1927, the British government passed the Trade Dispute and Trade Union Act, which made sympathy strikes and mass picketing illegal, barred civil servants unions from affiliating to the TUC, and stated that union members must contract-in to pay the political levy to the Labour Party.

In 1928, under the instigation of Citrine and Hicks, talks were held between TUC Chairman Ben Turner and Sir Alfred Mond, chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries. Their aim was to establish the machinery for joint consultation about the general problems of industry between the employers' organisations and the trade unions. The plan for corporatist class collaboration they hatched out was never formally adopted, but it might as well have been.

In June 1929, Labour came to power once again, under Ramsay MacDonald. By November that year the Wall Street Crash plunged the world into recession. MacDonald responded by pushing for austerity measures demanded by the civil service, which were not accepted by the cabinet.

On August 24, 1931 the government fell. MacDonald, along with JH Thomas and others, crossed the floor to form the National Government with the Conservatives and Liberals. Thomas was put in charge of employment. The "devil's decade," the Hungry Thirties, when unemployment reached three million in 1932, had begun.

Thomas, it should be noted, was forced to quit Parliament in May 1936 after being found guilty of leaking budget secrets to his stockbroker son Leslie, Conservative MP Sir Alfred Butt and businessman Alfred Bates.

The line taken by the Comintern also had a terrible impact on the Soviet working class. They had been told that the lefts on the TUC General Council were in the forefront of the struggle of the international working class and had responded accordingly. During the strike, they had collected the equivalent in rubles of over a £1 million—in 1926!—to help the British strikers.

At the height of the strike, the TUC refused to accept the money, with Hicks of the Anglo-Russian Committee reportedly calling it "this damned Russian gold." Days later these same lefts signed off on the strike's betrayal, but were still hailed for months afterwards as vital allies of the Soviet workers in the struggle for peace and against intervention.

It was an experience that could not have been designed to better spread disorientation and political cynicism—a mood that helped consolidate the grip of the Stalinist bureaucracy over the state and party apparatus, and which helped pave the way for the expulsion of the Opposition from the CPSU in December 1927. Moreover, it was an alliance bound up with another that was to prove to be far more deadly—with the Kuomintang in China under Chiang Kai-Shek.

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