

Socialist Equality Party (UK) announces public meeting series on 1926 general strike

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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There are few more bitterly contested and less clearly understood historical experiences than the general strike of 1926, despite it being a decisive moment in the history of the British and international working class.

Begun on May 3 and officially lasting nine days, it was the first and remains the only general strike ever to have taken place in the UK.

The action was launched in response to a massive attack on the wages of Britain's 1.2 million coal miners, amid a period of widespread labour unrest. Overseeing the strike, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was terrified by its revolutionary potential and worked to bring it to an end, succeeding on May 12 and enforcing a crushing defeat.

The Socialist Equality Party is holding a series of meetings around the country (**Sheffield, Inverness, Manchester, London and Glasgow**) aimed at arming workers with the lessons of this experience for the political battles they face today: against a right-wing Labour government of austerity and war, and trade union bureaucracies suppressing a struggle against it.

A global and revolutionary event

The events of 1926 had their origins in the profoundly revolutionary consequences of the decline of British imperialism and its eclipse by the United States, and of the political impact of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. No longer able to grant economic concessions to preserve social peace, Britain's ruling elite determined to take on and defeat the miners as the most powerful section of the working class.

The general strike was the response by the working class to this offensive and had a potentially revolutionary character—objectively posing the fundamental question of which class is to rule society. What was absent in this situation, however, was the subjective factor: a party dedicated to the pursuit of socialist revolution with a clear perspective for taking power.

Our meeting will examine in detail the role played by the

architects of the defeat: the trade union and Labour bureaucracy that still led the working class and for whom revolution was anathema—which is why the TUC has never allowed another general strike to be called in the past century.

Crucially, the workers were not betrayed by the overt right-wingers alone, but by “lefts” like Arthur Purcell and George Hicks, who used radical rhetoric to keep the rank and file tethered to the TUC apparatus. It was the “lefts” that acted as the final line of defence for the capitalist state.

This is an essential lesson for today, with figures such as Jeremy Corbyn, Zarah Sultana, Zack Polanski and their trade union counterparts still using militant and radical rhetoric to manage political and social discontent while systematically suppressing the class struggle.

What will distinguish our meeting from the slew of commemorative articles and books on 1926 is an examination of the general strike primarily from the standpoint of the disastrous line pursued by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) under the direction of the Communist International (Comintern) led by Joseph Stalin and his allies.

This appraisal rests on the writings of Leon Trotsky, leader of the revolutionary opposition to the Stalin faction, and therefore provides a genuinely Marxist assessment of the strike and its defeat.

Trotsky's critique of how the potential for a revolutionary confrontation between the British working class and the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin was squandered by the Comintern leadership explains that the key mechanism of the strike's betrayal was the Anglo-Russian Committee, which had the support of many of the trade union “lefts”.

Under the Comintern-inspired slogan, “All Power to the General Council”, the “left” leaders of the National Minority Movement in the trade unions—organising over a million workers—allowed the TUC to lead the strike to defeat.

“Stalin's line,” as Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden has written, “was based on:

“1) Deep scepticism 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.”

Trotsky explained that had the small and only recently formed CPGB been armed with a correct political line, this would not have been a guarantor of success, let alone of the revolutionary overthrow of British capitalism. But it would have massively weakened the grip of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy over the working class, strengthened the authority of the CPGB and paved the way for subsequent revolutionary struggles.

Instead, the betrayal of 1926 was part of a series of political disasters and betrayals of an ever more fundamental character that saw the transformation of the Third International under the Stalinist bureaucracy into a conscious agent of counter-revolution—and which ensured the survival of imperialism and paved the way for fascism and world war.

Lessons for today: a revolutionary party and rank-and-file movement

The lessons of 1926 still resonate today. The degeneration of the trade union bureaucracy and of the old reformist parties is now complete. The trade unions have become hollowed-out corporatist syndicates, which abandoned even a limited defence of their members’ social interests with the onset of globalisation in the 1980s.

The Labour Party of Keir Starmer is a naked party of the financial oligarchy, dedicated to the destruction of what remains of the welfare state and the imposition of savage austerity, and an accomplice to genocide and US and NATO-led imperialist wars.

The crisis confronting not just British but world imperialism is far worse than it was in 1926. The social position of the working class is desperate, fascist and far-right movements are on the rise and humanity is being dragged ever closer to disaster by a series of wars, now centred on Iran, that threaten a global conflagration.

Under these circumstances, opposition in the working class to the betrayals of the unions must become an active political and organisational break with them, with rank-and-file committees of workers seizing control from the bureaucrats.

This requires above all else a new political perspective, programme and leadership.

The lesson of the 1926 General Strike is that militant struggle

alone, especially when directed to pushing the bureaucratized organisations to the left, is a road to defeat. An independent, internationalist, socialist and revolutionary party must be built to lead the renewed movement of the British and world working class emerging in response to the social offensive and political crimes of the ruling class.

Make plans today to attend a meeting near you. Prepare for the discussion by reading the new pamphlet by Mehring Books (UK), “*Trotsky, Stalin and the 1926 British General Strike: Lessons For Today*”.

Sheffield

Tuesday, May 12, 7pm

Showroom Cinema

Paternoster Row

Sheffield, S1 2BX

Get tickets here

Manchester

Monday, May 18, 7pm

Friends' Meeting House (behind Manchester Central Library)

6 Mount Street

Manchester, M2 5NS

Get tickets here

Inverness

Sunday, May 24, 2pm

Royal Highland Hotel (Magnus Hall)

Station Square

Academy Street

Inverness, IV1 1LG

Get tickets here

London

Saturday, May 30, 2pm

Elizabeth House

2 Hurlock Street

London, N5 1ED

Get tickets here

Glasgow

Sunday, May 31, 2pm

Premier Inn Glasgow City Centre

187 George Street

Glasgow, G1 1YU

Get tickets here



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