

Socialist Equality Party intervenes at Unite event in Barnsley marking centenary of 1926 General Strike

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Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened at a rally staged by Unite, Unison and other trade unions to mark the centenary of the 1926 General Strike. The event was held Saturday in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, a town formerly at the heart of the coal mining industry.

An SEP stall next to Glass Works Square, where the rally assembled, promoted the party’s public meetings this month across the UK. A banner featuring the meeting in nearby Sheffield, “Trotsky, Stalin and the 1926 British General Strike: Lessons for today”, drew the attention workers and youth.

The official commemorative gathering organised by Unite and Unison, mustered fewer than 400 attendees and was dominated by union bureaucrats who sought to draw a veil over the lessons of 1926.

But hundreds of passers-by stopped to take leaflets from SEP campaigners, buying copies of a new pamphlet on the centenary of the general strike, along with tickets for the party’s meeting in Sheffield on May 12.

Several workers also bought copies of a pamphlet marking the fortieth anniversary of the 1984–85 miners’ strike. The betrayal of that monumental strike by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Labour Party resulted in the closure of all deep coal mining by 2015, leaving towns like Barnsley devastated.

Mining jobs in Barnsley have since been replaced by low-wage work in mega-warehouses run by Amazon and ASOS, which the Labour authority has welcomed under the guise of economic “regeneration”.

Nat, a young software engineer and Unite member, attended a morning discussion with historians at the

Barnsley Civic. He explained why:

“I have come across a lot of people who are fed up with the system and looking for a way to fight back. But trade union membership is quite low, especially among young people. Many jump to the idea of a general strike, so I wanted to learn about the differences between now and then.”

Nat added, “The unions had more influence back then. Industries like coal mining connected workers directly in whole towns and cities. Now many people work remotely, like myself. A company’s workforce can be spread across the country or even internationally. The unions haven’t adapted—there’s no serious effort to find new forms of organisation, like digital pickets. How do you unify and connect workers under these conditions?”

An SEP member explained that the trade unions’ failure to defend workers stemmed from their nationalist foundations and their acceptance of capitalism. The globalisation of production posed the need to coordinate the class struggle across national borders in opposition to trade wars and imperialist military conflicts that are threatening to drag workers into a world war.

In response, Nat denounced Unite’s role in blocking solidarity action against the genocide in Gaza and its support for the UK arms industry: “The TUC passed a motion, ‘Welfare not warfare,’ but Unite voted against it because it represents workers in the arms industry. I think workers should take action—blacklisting and blocking military equipment, like what happened against the Pinochet regime in the 1970s.”

Nat said he would study the SEP material on the

General Strike and the fight being waged by the International Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Other workers who stopped to speak with the SEP expressed anger over the depth of social inequality and the urgent need for mass working-class action. They were eager to learn about the 1926 General Strike and recognised its importance for today.

Avery, who is self-employed, bought a meeting ticket and pamphlet. “It’s important to educate people about the class struggle,” they said. “Especially now, when immigrants are being scapegoated. In some ways, things are worse than 1926—the wealth gap is enormous. People are struggling just to get by, but not doing anything about it.”

SEP members referred to the 2022–23 strike wave in the UK, when millions of workers took action against the Conservative government, which the trade union bureaucracy shut down in order to prepare the way for a Labour government under Keir Starmer.

“I voted Labour just to keep the Tories out,” Avery said, “but they’re pandering to the right with anti-immigration policies. They’re backing Trump and the war against Iran, providing UK military bases. It’s all so unfair—I find it hard to understand.

“We can’t afford to sleepwalk into this. It’s about controlling wealth and resources. The root cause is capitalism. We’re being pitted against each other while the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

Ben, a subcontractor for Barnsley Council, described the insecurity of his employment. Outsourcing by the Labour-run authority meant heavy out-of-pocket expenses for workers like himself.

“I’d support a general strike today,” he said. “The cost of living is going up, but wages aren’t. Everyone’s skint. People are clutching at straws.”

He continued: “The gap between rich and poor is getting bigger. You’ve got billionaires like Virgin, paying minimum wage while workers rely on food banks. It’s not fair. And there’s too much division—divide and rule, that’s what they’re doing.”

On the war against Iran, Ben added, “It’s all about control of oil and resources.” Referring to the rise of authoritarianism in the US and Europe, he said: “The world is becoming more like 1984,” citing state surveillance and the expansion of AI.

Members of the SEP explained that technology itself was not the problem, but how it is used. Under capitalism, AI has been weaponised to monitor workers, slash jobs,

and increase exploitation to concentrate wealth and power. Under workers’ control and a socialist system, such technologies could be used to reduce working hours and meet social needs.

Ben said the Soviet Union had “spiralled into a dictatorship” under Joseph Stalin. This led to a discussion of Leon Trotsky’s fight against the nationalist degeneration of the first workers’ state, his opposition to the theory of “socialism in one country,” and his defence of the internationalist principles of the October Revolution. Ben said in response, “That’s why people need educating.”

The discussion of Trotsky’s fight for socialist internationalism against the Stalinist bureaucracy and its promotion of an alliance with the trade union bureaucracy that betrayed the 1926 General Strike was a recurring theme.

Emma, a student at Hallam University in Sheffield, who also purchased a ticket for the meeting, said: “I got a ticket because I am doing a report on my course about the 1926 General Strike. I do consider myself a socialist, and I think it will be a very interesting meeting to attend. I’m interested that it will be talking about Trotsky and Stalin. I did that at A-Level and really enjoyed it.”

Emma agreed there were major parallels between the 1920s and today, with the ruling class in many countries moving towards dictatorship and fascistic policies: “It’s very similar, isn’t it? I don’t know if there is the same sense of solidarity today between workers, especially as there are not as many of the previous industries left. I think it would be great if workers could band together and you could see the same level of solidarity now. I would love to see that happen.”

During the course of the campaign, SEP members directed workers and youth to the thirteenth online May Day meeting held by the WSWs. Speakers at that event described the massive growth of the working class worldwide and fought to revive the traditions of class solidarity and revolutionary internationalism by building a new leadership in the working class. Several workers and youth left their details to learn more about the Socialist Equality Party.



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