# Trotsky and the British General Strike of 1926

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*One hundred years ago today, millions of workers defied the Trades Union Congress (TUC)'s back to work order, formally ending the British General Strike of 1926 on May 12 after just nine days. More people were out on strike on May 13 than on any of the previous days, reflecting the growing pressure of the working class for more decisive action against the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin—exacerbated by opposition to the victimisation of workers unleashed in the immediate aftermath of the TUC's betrayal.*

*The TUC had never wanted to call a general strike, only forced to do so under mass popular pressure, and worked throughout to cripple it—led by the Secretary of the TUC Walter Citrine and its lead negotiator with the government, Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen J.H. Thomas. Citrine, a fierce anti-communist, stamped on every expression of militancy he could.*

*By May 12, with violent confrontations breaking out between strikers and police across the country and workers' councils formed to run essential services, Thomas and Citrine were terrified, in Thomas's words to parliament the next day, that the situation might get "out of the hands of those who would be able to exercise some control".*

*Thomas continued, "Every sane man knows what would have happened… That danger, that fear was always in our minds." The spectre haunting the trade union leaders was the spectre of the Russian Revolution of 1917.*

*However, by 1926, the leadership of that revolution had undergone a bureaucratic degeneration, embodied in the person of Joseph Stalin. It facilitated the TUC's betrayal by sowing illusions in "left" trade union leaders whose socialist rhetoric covered for their subservience to the TUC. Under Stalin's direction, the Communist Party of Great Britain was prevented from playing an independent role and building a revolutionary vanguard in the working class.*

*Leon Trotsky fought against this policy, stressing the absolute and irreplaceable necessity of a Marxist party in waging a revolutionary fight against capitalism. When the strike was betrayed, a fierce debate erupted among the Russian revolutionary leaders in which Trotsky sharply drew the balance sheet of the Stalin-led policy.*

*The following lecture—*"Trotsky and the British General Strike of 1926"*—by Chris Marsden, the National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), examines that conflict, whose lessons are essential for socialists today. It was originally delivered at the SEP (US) 2025 International Summer School, as part of the series "Internationalist Socialism vs. Nationalist Reformism".*

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The general strike was launched May 3, 1926, in response to a massive attack on the wages of Britain's 1.2 million coal miners, amid a period of widespread labour unrest. The Trades Union Congress (TUC), terrified by its revolutionary potential, worked to bring it to an end, succeeding on May 12, after just nine days, in imposing a terrible defeat.

The antecedents of the strike lay in a militant response by the British working class to the efforts of the ruling elite to impose savage attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions. There were three times as many strike days between 1919 and 1921 as in the years leading up to the First World War—a strike wave only brought to a temporary end by "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.

Three years later, 1924, workers returned a Labour government to power, led by Ramsay MacDonald, which repressed strikes before being brought down after nine months as a result of an anti-communist witch-hunt—centred on the "Zinoviev Letter" forgery, which claimed the Communist International had instructed the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) to utilize the normalisation of British-Soviet relations under a Labour government to launch a revolution.

The most significant political expression of this sustained leftward shift was the growth of the Communist Party's influence in the trade unions. With just 4,000 members in 1923, the CPGB was instrumental in forming the National Minority Movement (NMM) which eventually encompassed more than a million members, a quarter of the total trade union membership, and led the campaign to elect A.J. Cook as general secretary of the miners' union in 1924.

The National Left-Wing Movement, formed in 1925, campaigned for the right of the CPGB to affiliate to the Labour Party and was backed at Labour's annual conference by over 400 delegates.

Against this background, Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government was determined to take on and defeat the miners, having concluded earlier, on July 31, 1925, "Red Friday," that it was not yet ready to carry out a plan to break a miners' strike promised the backing of the rail workers. It had given a nine-month subsidy to the mine owners while it set up the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) to head strikebreaking operations, involving the military and right-wing civilian volunteers.

On October 14, 1925, police raided the national and London headquarters of the CPGB, the Young Communist League, the National Minority Movement and the *Workers' Weekly*—arresting 12 CPGB leaders on sedition charges and incitement to mutiny and jailing them for six months to a year. Most were still incarcerated when the general strike began. Protests by thousands of workers took place. A total of 167 miners from the South Wales Miners Federation were tried in relation to a strike in July and August and 50 were sent to prison.

The government finally moved against the miners, posting lock-out notices at every pit on April 16, 1926, timed to expire 14 days later. Lockouts began on April 30. Faced with mass support for the miners, on May 1 the TUC held a special conference and announced plans for a general strike to begin May 3. Attempted negotiations were broken off by Baldwin.

The strike went ahead, hitting transport, printing, steel, chemicals, the building trades, electricity and gas. It was to involve over four million out of five-and-a-half million workers organized in the unions. A

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strikebreaking force of hundreds of thousands was deployed, with battleships stationed in all major ports. There were violent clashes with police and strike-breakers up and down the country, involving thousands.

Councils of Action were formed, acknowledged by the Directorate of Intelligence as "taking on more the form of soviets and in some areas forming plans for the seizure of private property and the means of transport." East Fife Council of Action set up its own workers' defence militia with 700 members. Reports of mutinies by the Welsh Guards and of other regiments refusing to attack the miners prompted mass arrests, with CPGB members accounting for 1,000 of the 2,500 arrests and many of the 1,000 later imprisoned.

At the earliest opportunity, May 12, the TUC General Council went cap in hand to 10 Downing Street. They appealed for limited measures to defend the coal industry and for no victimisation. The government refused and the TUC called the strike off anyway. Anger over this treachery was widespread, with more people out on strike on May 13 than during the nine days of official action. But after May 13, the miners were left to fight alone before being forced to return to work in October.

Central to the strike's defeat was the false political line imposed on the CPGB by the Comintern under the leadership of Stalin, Bukharin, Zinoviev and Kamenev. This was defined by Trotsky in the 1928 Critique of the Draft Programme of the Comintern, published as *The Third International after Lenin*, as an expression of "right centrist downsliding". This was a sharp reversal of the Comintern's previous line, and typical of the zig-zag course it would continue to pursue.

During the events of 1923 in Germany, the Comintern's policy was defined by Trotsky as "adventurist leftism". Even at the fifth congress in 1924, Bukharin authored perspectives based on the "permanent" development of the revolution, when the Left Opposition insisted that the revolutionary situation had been missed and that it was now time for defensive battles against an offensive by the class enemy.

Of course, political realities could not be denied forever. But when the Stalin/Bukharin faction finally acknowledged the emergence of a period of stabilisation, this was portrayed as an extended situation that was used to justify their nationalist and opportunist course. They did, so, moreover, towards the middle of 1925 when Trotsky stressed "profound fissures" were becoming apparent, particularly in England and China.

Trotsky explains:

> Taken as a whole, the course to the Right was the attempt at a half-blind, purely empirical, and belated adaptation to the set-back of revolutionary development caused by the defeat of 1923… This "tendency" required a year and a half to sense something new after the break in the situation in Europe in 1923 so as then to transform itself, panic-stricken, into its opposite.

The Soviet Union was at the time registering limited successes domestically, but on the basis of a stabilization of capitalism that resulted from "a whole series of defeats of the world revolution". But the external situation confronting the Soviet Union had in fact worsened considerably. Trotsky rejected objectivist explanations of capitalist restabilisation, insisting that this was above all a consequence of the false line of the Comintern and the defeats and missed revolutionary opportunities that led to.

In turn, Trotsky wrote, "A certain disappointment in the world revolution, which likewise partly seized the masses, pushed the Centrist leadership towards strictly national perspectives, which were soon wretchedly crowned by the theory of socialism in one country."

The ultra-Leftism of 1924-1925 gave way to a shift to the right, in which nothing must be done that risked "leaping over stages", which signified political adaptation to the colonial bourgeoisie, the labour and trade union bureaucracy, and domestically to the kulaks and functionaries. Arguing for "Building Socialism in our Country", February 10, 1926, Stalin wrote:

> The [14th] congress held that the working class, in alliance with the labouring peasantry, can deal the finishing blow to the capitalists of our country and build a socialist society, even if there is no victorious revolution in the West to come to its aid… [Otherwise] 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.

This nationalist and opportunist policy found political expression in Britain in the policies pursued following the formation of the Anglo-Russian Committee.

In 1921, the Comintern had formulated the policy of the "unified workers' front." Epitomised by the slogan, "To the masses!", the goal was to actively challenge the domination of the social democratic parties and trade unions by advocating cooperation ''in the struggle for the interests of the proletariat." In this way, the practice of the class struggle and implacable criticism of the social democrats would demonstrate the superiority and necessity of a revolutionary perspective and leadership.

The Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee was portrayed by the Comintern as a realisation of this perspective. It was formed at a joint London conference of the Soviet and British trade unions on April 6–8, 1925, with the declared aim of restoring the unity of the international trade union movement, ensuring mutual aid and support, opposing war and encouraging friendly relations between Britain and the USSR.

However, as Trotsky explains in Problems of the British Revolution, rather than viewing the committee as "an episodic bloc" to be broken with "at the very first serious test in order to compromise the General Council," Stalin, Bukharin, Tomsky, and Zinoviev saw it as: "an instrument for the systematic revolutionization 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."

Adaptation to the British trade union bureaucracy centred on political accommodations with its "left representatives", in the persons of Alonzo Swales of the engineering union, Alfred Purcell of the furnishing trades, George Hicks of the bricklayers, and Miners' Federation leader A.J. Cook, once a member of the CPGB.

These initiators of the Anglo-Russian Committee happily struck left poses on issues that did not commit them to anything practical or cut across their relations with the right wing. Most dangerous of all, Trotsky stressed: "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."

As 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 [Bob Stewart and Arthur MacManus were CPGB leaders] or through some other door.

The precondition for any agreement with the "lefts", Trotsky wrote in the *Bulletin of the Opposition* in 1931, was that the Communist Party preserve its "complete independence, even within the trade unions, act in its own name in all the questions of principle, criticize its 'left' allies

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whenever necessary, and in this way, win the confidence of the masses step by step."

Instead, Stalin et al. considered that in order to draw the "broad left current" towards the Communist International, criticism should be avoided at all costs. As a result, the CPGB disappeared in practice as a visible political force, to be almost wholly replaced in the eyes of workers by the National Minority Movement as a purely syndicalist formation.

Trotsky saw his political tasks as two-fold: To refute the position that capitalism had entered a prolonged period of stabilisation, with no prospect of a revolutionary development. And to oppose the right-centrist adaptation to social democracy, the trade union apparatuses and the colonial bourgeoisie carried out with the supposed aim of safeguarding the Soviet Union and facilitating the construction of Socialism in One Country.

To this end, in 1925 he wrote *Whither England?*, published as *Where is Britain Going?*, explaining the global dimensions of the pre-revolutionary crisis engulfing the British bourgeoisie and, through a scathing critique of the labour movement, carrying out a veiled critique of the Comintern's line and a defence of the central role to be played by a Bolshevik party in the coming revolutionary struggles.

He explains in *My Life* that *Where is Britain Going?* "was aimed essentially at the official conception of the Politburo, 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."

In the May 24, 1925, introduction to the US edition, 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."

Britain's fate was determined first of all by its eclipse as the world's premier power by the United States, whose striving towards expansion on the world market could only be at the expense of Britain. It was also faced with growing competition from Germany as it recovered from defeat in the First World War, especially regarding coal from the Ruhr, at a time when the British Empire was under threat from national movements in India, Egypt and elsewhere. Coal mining was at the centre of the struggle to reorganize British economic and social life—with protectionist subsidies to be replaced by savage cuts, even at the risk of provoking ferocious opposition from the working class.

"On the tempo and time-scale of the Revolution", written in February 1926, made clear Trotsky was not predicting an imminent socialist revolution:

> Today in Britain the question is not one of assigning a "day" for the revolution – we are a long way from this! – but in clearly understanding that the whole objective situation is bringing this "day" closer and into the ambit of the educational and preparatory work of the party of the proletariat and at the same time creating conditions for its rapid revolutionary formation.

The maturing revolutionary crisis was creating the objective conditions for a profound shift in the political consciousness of the working class. *Where is Britain Going?* provides a scathing critique of the conservatism and gradualism that permeated the labour movement. But Trotsky's extended polemic was framed in recognition of two things:

• The objective basis for 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.

• For this shift in consciousness to assume conscious revolutionary forms depended on the work of the revolutionary party.

*Problems of the British Labour Movement*, published shortly after the General Strike, Trotsky quoted passages from his correspondence in the months prior to the event, in which he explained:

> The ideological and organizational formation of a genuinely revolutionary, that is of a communist, party on the basis of the movement of the masses is conceivable only under the condition of a perpetual, systematic, inflexible, untiring and irreconcilable unmasking of the quasi-left leaders of every hue, of their confusion, of their compromises and of their reticence.

In a letter written March 5 but published in Pravda on May 25, 1926, Trotsky makes a penetrating analysis of the relationship between the objective crisis of British and world imperialism and the political tasks this placed before the party:

> In Britain more than in all the rest of Europe the consciousness of the working masses, and particularly that of their leading layers, lags behind the objective economic situation. And it is precisely in this direction that the main difficulties and dangers lie today.
>
> …The whole of the present-day "superstructure" of the British working class – in all its shades and groupings without exception – represents a braking mechanism on the revolution. This portends over a prolonged period the heavy pressure of a spontaneous and semi-spontaneous movement against the framework of the old organizations and the formation of new revolutionary organizations on the basis of this pressure.
>
> One of our principal tasks is to assist the British Communist Party to understand and think out this perspective fully.

On May 6, he wrote:

> A general strike is the sharpest form of class struggle. It is only one step from the general strike to armed insurrection. This is precisely why the general strike, more than any other form of class struggle, requires clear, distinct, resolute and therefore revolutionary leadership. In the current strike of the British proletariat there is not a ghost of such a leadership, and it is not to be expected that it can be conjured up out of the ground.
>
> …Everything must be done on an international scale to aid the fighters and improve their chances of success. But it must be clearly recognized that such success is possible only to the extent that the British working class, in the process of the development and sharpening of the General Strike, realizes the need to change its leadership, and measures up to that task.
>
> There is an American proverb which says that you cannot change horses in midstream. But this practical wisdom is true only within certain limits. The stream of revolution has never been crossed on the horse of reformism, and the class which has entered the struggle under opportunist leadership will be compelled to change it under enemy fire.

The Comintern rejected all of Trotsky's warnings and insisted that the CPGB subordinate itself to the alliance with the TUC through the medium of its left flank, and by making the central demand of the party and its press, "All power to the [TUC] General Council."

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During the general strike, therefore, the CPSU and the Comintern were also reduced to impotence by this false political line. As Trotsky noted, the first discussion of the strike on the Politburo lasted just 20 minutes and the second five minutes. As a result, a commission was established in Paris led by Tomsky with support from the Comintern and the Profintern, the communist trade union federation, to discuss aid to Britain.

By May 7, two-and-a-quarter million roubles had been sent to Britain, routed through the Anglo-Russian Committee. But the TUC General Council, responding to howls from the government about "red gold," refused the money. Stalin responded with a telegram to Tomsky in Paris, pleading, ''Please help, what can we do?" The money was later accepted by the miners' union.

When news of the general strike's end arrived in Paris, Tomsky sent a letter to the CPGB recommending that it proclaim "the failure of the Conservatives' ideas and the partial moral victory of the proletariat." Stalin was forced to telegraph Tomsky following a Politburo session of May 14 politely suggesting that, ''We are inclined to believe that what happened was not compromise but treason. Submission to the Trade Union Council's decision is not appropriate when the workers wish to continue the strike."

In the strike's aftermath, Trotsky and the Left Opposition insisted that the Comintern break immediately with the TUC, and bring an end to the Anglo-Russian Committee. Millions of workers were furious at the betrayal of the strike and were looking for an alternative leadership. Thousands had flooded into the CPGB, whose membership doubled in the year from 6,000 to 12,000. Sales of the *Workers' Weekly* soared to 70,000. But the Stalin faction of the Comintern made their opportunist errors during the strike still worse by insisting on maintaining the Anglo-Russian Committee.

Zinoviev, increasingly critical of the Comintern line that he had once helped shape, denounced this as a massive betrayal. His and Kamenev's conversion to Trotsky's appraisal of the general strike as proof that the "prolonged stabilisation" perspective was false, and a shared critique of the Anglo-Russian Committee and other questions, played a central role in the decision to form the Joint Opposition in the summer of 1926.

With Trotsky's support, Zinoviev, then still chairman of the Comintern, pressed for a discussion on the Politburo of the general strike and the ongoing strike by miners. This was reluctantly agreed to, against Stalin's advice given while he was on vacation to tell them to "go to hell", and took place on June 3. On June 2, in anticipation of the Politburo meeting, Trotsky wrote a note outlining his position, which he argued for the next day. These excerpts give an indication of the power of Trotsky's critique:

> Today, those who advocate leaving things as they are often say, "Who didn't know that the General Council was made up of reformists and traitors?" The overwhelming majority of our Party (to say nothing of the non-Party people) did not know what the General Council was, because we have never explained it as we should have done in recent years.
>
> …In the articles we write: the General Council betrayed the English workers; it turned out to be a strikebreaker; it pursued the policy of a lackey of the bourgeoisie. From this follows the organizational conclusion: we remain in fraternal cooperation with the General Council. No worker will understand this. No one in the world will understand this, neither friends nor enemies.
>
> …What should we now be guided by in our attitude towards the General Council: is it the fact that "we" have always known everything, or the fact that the British working masses have for the first time learned something new and extremely important? Subjective apparatus arrogance is put in place of a policy based on the real course of development of the English working class.

In replying to the accusation, 'So you are against the united front?", he wrote:

> If by front we mean the artificial maintenance of apparatus hypocrisy, then it is impossible not to be against it. The front is a combat concept. The front is now in the hands of the British miners against the bourgeoisie, the state and the General Council.
>
> …It is not a question of preserving the devastated apparatus, but of intensifying the struggle for the consciousness of the British proletariat, and above all of that part of it which is now fighting outside of the General Council and against it.

The minutes of the June 3 meeting are available online in Russian and can be automatically translated. They are a powerful record of a principled political struggle, especially regarding Trotsky, and of the venal and unprincipled character of the Stalin, Bukharin, Tomsky and Molotov block.

To give a flavour of Trotsky's interventions, he said in reply to Tomsky:

> In the course of a year, at every meeting with you, I told you: Comrade Tomsky, if you think that Purcell or Cook will make a revolution, you are mistaken. And you answered me: "And your Communists will certainly not make a revolution." What is this, the correct attitude of a Bolshevik towards a young Communist Party? You have an incorrect, trade-unionist attitude towards the British labour movement. It was you who pushed me with your attitude to the path of writing the book "Where is Britain Going?" And this book is entirely devoted to the historical mission of the British Communist Party against the contemptuous view of it by various "statesmen".

Later he says:

> "We always knew they were traitors." Of course, we are arch-knowers, we always know everything. But before the general strike, the British working masses did not know in the same way what the General Council is. And since we did not criticize it and prevented the British Communist Party from criticizing it by our conduct, we thereby strengthened the authority of the General Council in the eyes of the revolutionary workers…
>
> And now, when the vast masses have learned from a gigantic experience what the General Council is, we say to these masses as a consolation: we propose that the Anglo-Russian Committee be left as it is, since we knew before that traitors were sitting there, but we forgot to tell you this. Isn't it monstrous?
>
> …The masses value action, the masses value clarity …How do you say to a worker: Change the leaders, because they are traitors, when you yourself cannot find the determination to break away from these leaders?

The position of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev was, of course, rejected and then ruthlessly repressed.

The June 8 Executive Committee of the Communist International plenum on the lessons of the General Strike insisted that "for the Soviet unions to take the initiative in leaving the committee... would deal a blow

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to the cause of international unity, a thoroughly ‘heroic’ gesture, but politically inexpedient and infantile.”

To reinforce this rotten line, the 15th All Union Conference of the CPSU passed an October 26, 1926 resolution declaring of the Opposition: “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.”

Trotsky concisely estimated the impact of the betrayal of the general strike in *My Life*:

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

Fundamentally, it fuelled political disorientation and demoralisation in the Soviet Union, helping consolidate the grip of the Stalin faction on the party and state apparatus and strengthening its malign influence globally as expressed through the Comintern, especially regarding the Chinese Revolution.

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