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The 1926 General Strike and the fight for Trotskyism today

Thomas Scripps
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This speech was delivered by Thomas Scripps, Socialist Equality Party (UK) assistant national secretary, at the 2026 May Day Online Rally, organized by the WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

One hundred years ago, almost to the day, a deep economic and political crisis of British imperialism erupted into the general strike of 1926.

This historic struggle—whose immediate cause was the question of who would decide the fate of Britain’s mining industry: the workers or the capitalists—posed a direct and revolutionary threat to the capitalist state at the heart of the largest empire the world had ever seen.

But the general strike was betrayed by the trade union leaders and the Labour Party after just nine days.

From the essential standpoint of revolutionary political leadership, it was the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union which was responsible for the defeat of 1926, replacing the struggle for world socialist revolution with a search for opportunist alliances to preserve “socialism in one country.”

The consequences were catastrophic, including the drowning of the 1927 Chinese revolution in blood. Within four years of the general strike’s defeat, the world had been plunged into the Great Depression. Within seven, the Nazi party was in power in Germany. Within 14, the Second World War had begun.

Today we confront fundamentally the same issues, and far more urgently. The first conflicts of a third global war are already being fought. The world economy, laden with debt, is teetering on the edge of a crash. The far right are in power, or the leading electoral challengers for power, in country after country.

Britain is like a ship tossed about in this storm. Pulled between the US and Europe, dwindling on the international stage, the British ruling class is seeking victories abroad to stabilise its position. It is dragging the country into the maelstrom of the war against Russia and the whirlpool of the war on Iran, Lebanon and Gaza, hoping for a share of the spoils.

However, imperial nostalgia for the violence wielded against these regions in the past cannot substitute for the economic and military power British capitalism has lost. Instead, it must be made up through an assault on the living standards of the working class unprecedented in its brutality.

“Turn welfare spending into warfare spending!” That is the rallying cry of the ruling class. And this will be met with increasingly fierce resistance.

The scandal over the arch Blairite Peter Mandelson—friend to Jeffrey Epstein and ruthlessly promoted by Keir Starmer’s Labour government—has put a face to the already widely recognised fact: Capitalist politics—based on inequality, secrecy and the unaccountable power of a financial oligarchy—is rotten to the core. It moves ever further to the right, epitomised by the rise of Nigel Farage’s billionaire-backed Reform UK.

None of the pro-capitalist parties purporting to be on the “left,” or the protest movements which appeal to them, is capable of defending the working class.

Former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn’s Your Party is barely functioning, while Corbyn himself stands exposed as a miserable anti-socialist witch-hunter. Zack Polanski’s Greens are a paper-thin Corbynite tribute act.

Meanwhile, the official anti-war movement continues

to preach the sort of empty pacifism denounced by Lenin for turning the working class “into a plaything in the hands of the secret diplomacy of the belligerent countries”—in this case, the rapidly rearming European powers.

Bourgeois and pseudo-left politics—their ability to suppress the activity of the working class—has never been weaker. That is why Conservative and Labour governments have spent the past years building up a battery of laws against protest, critical journalism and political activity.

The ruling class knows very well that the spread of global war means the growth of global class struggle, which is the only real route to peace.

The central lesson of the 1926 general strike is the *irreplaceable* role of a Marxist party in providing a revolutionary leadership to this struggle, without which it cannot succeed.

Leon Trotsky, in his masterful book *Where is Britain Going?*, fighting against the Stalinist policy, correctly warned ahead of the strike that the Communist Party in Britain would be able to “take the lead of the working class only in so far as it enters into an implacable conflict with the conservative bureaucracy in the trade unions and the Labour Party.”

It could “prepare itself for the leading role only by a ruthless criticism of all the leading staff of the British labour movement and only by a day-to-day exposure of its conservative, anti-proletarian, imperialist, monarchist and lackeyish role in all spheres of social life and the class movement.”

Trotsky’s ideas are the indispensable guide to the coming decisive battles of our own lifetime.

By turning to Trotskyism, represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party, workers in Britain will rise to and exceed the heights of 1926, and put an end to the bloody reign of British imperialism once and for all.



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