

Public Lecture: Trotsky, Stalin and the 1926 British General Strike

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The following lecture was delivered by Socialist Equality Party (UK) National Secretary Chris Marsden to public meetings in Sheffield, Manchester, Inverness, London and Glasgow, marking the centenary of the 1926 general strike.

The events of the 1926 General Strike

The 1926 general strike was the high point of a process of political radicalisation of the British working class, stretching back to the close of the 19th century and the emergence of mass trade unions.

This period saw the formation of the Labour Party in 1906, largely in response to the attempt to criminalise strikes and destroy the trade unions through the Taff Vale judgement in 1901.

There followed the “Great Unrest” of 1910-14, with 80 million working days lost. This included the National Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union (NSFU) strike and sympathy action, during which troops were deployed and strikers shot dead in Liverpool and Wales, and the Dublin lockout in the winter of 1913-14.

The 1914 Triple Alliance was formed between the Miners Federation of Great Britain, which by 1926 had over one million members, the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), and the National Transport Workers’ Federation (NTWF) to coordinate simultaneous strikes.

But this development was curtailed by the outbreak of World War One that year.

Like the main socialist parties and trade unions throughout Europe, talk of international socialism and class struggle from the labour leaders gave way in the main to a nationalist defence of their own imperialist nation and to systematic class collaboration.

The end of the war saw the resumption of class struggle, but also a continuation and deepening of the role played by the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy during the war of policing the working class on behalf of the capitalists.

In 1920, the government passed the Emergency Powers Act, granting the king the authority to declare a state of emergency and allowing the government to take measures to protect essential services. It also returned the coal mines to private ownership after taking them over during the war.

When the miners sought a united fight against wage cuts, the leaders of the rail and transport unions backed off, and the Triple Alliance between them collapsed on “Black Friday”, the 15th of April 1921.

Socialist opposition to capitalism in those years took its most fundamental and significant expression in the October Revolution led by the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky,

This inspired the best elements in the British working class to form the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920.

Workers seeking a political solution also led to the election of the first Labour government in 1924, under Ramsay MacDonald, which was brought down through an anti-communist witch-hunt,

On the industrial front, Arthur Cook, an opponent of World War I and leader of the near one million-strong National Minority Movement of militant trade unionists, created by the CPGB, was elected general secretary of the miners’ union.

In 1925, Chancellor Winston Churchill returned the pound to the Gold Standard, creating a crisis by overvaluing sterling. This made British coal exports more expensive and less competitive. In June, mine owners gave notice to terminate the 1924 national wages agreement, demanding lower wages and longer hours.

On July 31, known as “Red Friday” to contrast it with Black Friday, the threat of unified strike action by the Triple Alliance forced a temporary retreat from the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin.

The government agreed to subsidise miners’ wages for nine months and to establish the Samuel Commission to find a long-term solution for the crisis facing the industry.

But it did so to prepare for conflict, by mobilising the police, the armed forces and the volunteer Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS), populated by fascists and middle-class social layers, to act as strike-breakers.

The Samuel Commission’s report insisted on immediate wage cuts for miners and the end of the government subsidy, which expired April 30. A national lockout by the employers began at the pits. King George V signed a proclamation of emergency.

On May 1, a special Trades Union Congress (TUC) conference overwhelmingly approved a general strike, even as desperate negotiations by the bureaucracy continued to prevent one. But the government wanted no compromise.

On May 3, negotiations collapsed and the strike was declared, beginning at midnight. Printers at the *Daily Mail* refusing to print an anti-strike editorial acted as a catalyst.

The TUC tried to sabotage the action from day one, calling out only one-and-a-half million “first-line” workers in transport, printing, and heavy industry alongside a million miners on May 4. They insisted on a staggered callout for a “national”, rather than a general, strike.

For days there were pitched battles across the country between strikers and their supporters, and police and strike-breakers.

Tanks and armoured cars were sent through the East End to the London Docks. They accompanied a massive convoy of over 100 lorries to break the strikers’ “siege” and deliver flour.

In Brighton, May 11, there was the “Battle of Lewes Road” where 300 police, mostly mounted, charged pickets and residents.

In Hull, there were four days of conflict beginning May 7. In Newcastle ten thousand protesters were attacked.

In Glasgow hundreds of miners confronted scabbing students.

In Edinburgh the police mounted pitched battles against thousands of

women and children, who fought back bravely.

And at Hatfield Main, Doncaster, May 12, a mass picket of 1,000 miners blocked main roads and were forcibly dispersed.

Raids were conducted against the homes of strikers.

The Communist Party was targeted throughout for state repression. Prior to the strike, in October 1925, the government arrested twelve senior CPGB leaders on charges of seditious libel and incitement to mutiny, sentencing them to prison to decapitate the party leadership before taking on the miners.

This provoked mass opposition, with thousands demonstrating in London.

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

During the strike, an estimated 1,200 to 2,500 communists were arrested. The upper figure would be half the party's membership.

Throughout, the TUC was seeking an end to the strike. The author of the Samuel Report, Sir Herbert, met with TUC leaders to draft the "Samuel Memorandum" as a basis for peace.

The next day, Sunday May 9, this rotten document was rejected by the miners as a rehash of previous wage-cut demands.

The strike expanded May 10 to Northern Ireland's docks, and the TUC was obliged to bow to mass pressure and call on the "second line" engineering and shipbuilding workers to prepare to walk out at midnight on May 11.

That day, the strike was declared illegal by Mr Justice Astbury.

The TUC calling out a second group of workers was the height of cynicism. They were set on betrayal. Defeat not victory was their preferred option.

Jimmy Thomas, general secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen in charge of negotiations, said before the strike began to TUC head Walter Citrine that once the state was mobilised, "It won't last more than a few days. A few of these people will get shot, of course. Many more will be arrested."

He begged the government on May 3 to "avert... the greatest calamity for this country."

He later admitted, "At one minute to 12 on Monday night I would have grovelled for peace; I would have grovelled to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, because I hated war."

His stated fear was that the "most decent, most loyal, the most conservative minded of men," would strike out of duty to the miners. But this would "create a revolutionary state of affairs."

He told a crowd in Hammersmith May 9, he had "never been in favour of a general strike... The only way we can replace this Government is by the exercise of our rights at the ballot-box."

Citrine noted of his meeting with Herbert Samuel during the strike, "Here we were, sitting in the house of a South African millionaire... soft carpets—deliberating on the National Strike. Rather a strange position for men supposed to be aiming at undermining the Constitution."

He said that by May 9 he had decided that "it was simply hopeless to continue the strike if the intention was that in no circumstances... would the miners accept any reductions... We must retreat."

When the miners' union again rejected the Samuel memorandum on May 11, the TUC moved to sell them out.

At noon on May 12, the TUC leaders went to 10 Downing Street cap in hand and begged an audience with Baldwin. At 1 p.m., the BBC broadcast the strike's end.

They were fully backed by the Labour Party, with MacDonald having concentrated his fire throughout on the Tories for forcing the strike, while working in secret to end it.

With the action expanded by the "second wave", most workers initially thought this was a victory and celebrated—until they learned the bitter

truth.

Those returning to work were met by employers demanding wage cuts or refusing to take back "agitators." This triggered a second wave of walkouts that saw more workers take part than during the official nine days.

Nevertheless, leaderless and absent a perspective, the strike came to a ragged end. The miners fought on alone for six months, before being forced back to work on the employers' terms.

Citrine's central conclusion on the strike's "outstanding lesson", it should be noted, was that "Authority must be invested exclusively and entirely in the directing body."

In other words, his aim was to ensure "All power to the TUC general council", which I will explain was in fact the politically disastrous demand of the Communist Party during the strike!

He dedicated himself subsequently to fighting what he called the "cancer of Communist influence", people with "no morals and no principles and [who] appear to believe the most foul and unspeakable means justify their ends."

To this brief outline of events must be added the role played by the trade union "lefts" during the general strike. Because it was based on their standing in the working class, seen as a means of securing support in the British labour movement for the Soviet Union, that the Communist Party framed its line in the strike.

This strategy was basically one of supporting the TUC leadership while urging the left to put militant and political pressure on that leadership.

Notwithstanding their calls for friendly relations with the Soviet Union, and their leftist rhetoric opposing war against it by Britain, the union leaders proclaimed as "class fighters" by the CPGB such as Alf Purcell, Alonzo Swales and George Hicks colluded with the right wing during the strike—to the point of their near invisibility.

History is a battlefield

The general strike is, to this day, the most important industrial struggle in the history of Britain. Moreover, for Marxists, all such events are strategic experiences whose lessons must be assimilated, not just by workers in Britain but by the international working class.

Contained in such a study are such vital issues such as the counter-revolutionary role of the trade union and labour bureaucracy, the limitations of trade union militancy, and the initial impact of the Stalinist degeneration of the Bolshevik Party on the struggles of the international working class.

History is not the mere recounting of "the facts" but choosing which facts to highlight and how they should be interpreted.

This is always the case, whichever historian is involved. Acknowledged or not historians, good, bad and indifferent, base themselves on the defined interests of a definite class which in turn depends upon a historically derived world outlook.

History is a battlefield. The past must be conquered to win the future.

We study history to extract lessons for the contemporary struggles of the working class against the capitalist system that is plunging the world into savage austerity, right-wing reaction, climate disaster and planetary destruction through war.

The Socialist Equality Party said in the leaflet advertising this meeting that we would examine the role played by the architects of the defeat of 1926, the trade union and Labour bureaucracy, and by the lefts who used radical rhetoric to keep the rank-and-file tethered to the TUC apparatus.

We explained that what will distinguish this meeting from the current 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 CPGB under the direction of the Communist International (Comintern) led by Joseph Stalin and his allies.

This rests on the writings of Leon Trotsky, leader of the revolutionary opposition to the Stalin faction.

He argued that arming the CPGB with a correct political line would by no means have guaranteed success for the strike, nor 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.

Trotsky's central argument then, and ours today, is that militant struggle alone, directed to pushing the bureaucratised workers' organisations to the left, is a road to defeat. An independent, internationalist, socialist and revolutionary party must be built.

Only such a party can today 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.

As for the above-mentioned slew of books published this year on 1926, I will cite from four of the most prominent.

Some have revolution in their titles, and some don't. But almost all are essentially arguments against revolution or the possibility of revolution. And all, openly or otherwise, have a name in mind embodying everything which they oppose—Leon Trotsky.

There are some wistful passages about the inspiring example of what the working class can do provided by 1926, and sometimes suggestions this may play a part in a future rebirth of class struggle.

But the central message is that the impact of revolutionary sentiment had on the working class and the strike was slight, given that, in Britain, even the Communist Party understood revolution to be a pipe dream.

There is, strikingly barely any mention of events outside Britain.

To explain the radicalisation of the working class and even the existence of a Communist Party, the October 1917 Revolution must of course be mentioned. But after that, the strike is generally treated as a purely British affair.

Those authors who openly raise the conflict between Trotsky and the Stalin-led leadership of the Communist International argue that this too had no real significance. And when a verdict is delivered on this conflict, it is to proclaim that Stalin was essentially correct in rejecting any possibility of pursuing a revolutionary strategy.

The two most prominent books are openly a defence of the TUC for its "realism".

David Torrance's *The Edge of Revolution* argues that Britain was nowhere near such an edge.

He writes: "As several scholars have concluded, it marked not a turning point in British industrial relations but, rather, consolidated an existing trend towards a more constructive form of collective bargaining later symbolized by beer and sandwiches at Number 10 Downing Street..."

The leadership of the trade unions afterwards "became more realistic and more technocratic", accompanied by a "more pragmatic understanding between Number 10 Downing Street and the Labour movement, beginning with the 'national' governments of the 1930s and followed by the exceptional demands" of the Second World War.

He concludes: "Today, even the industrial battles of the 1970s look like an alien world let alone those of a hundred years ago."

Nine Days in May by Jonathan Schnee has the same message, but less crudely put. It has been promoted by the TUC, chosen as the subject of a seminar in London at which Schnee appeared alongside General Secretary Paul Nowak.

Summarising the seminar's message, Nowak went on to write in his "Reflections on the General Strike, 100 years on":

"Some have argued the defeat was rooted in the TUC's failure to

properly prepare for the strike and prosecute it with a view to bringing down the government. But I think it is fair to posit that the leadership of the TUC, our unions and—more importantly—the three million workers who answered the call to action were motivated by a desire to bring ministers and mine owners back to the negotiating table. Their goal was to win a fair deal for the miners, not overthrow the government or usurp parliamentary democracy. The General Strike was a moment of solidarity, not revolution."

Schnee makes the same claim but dragged out over hundreds of pages.

He argues: "If only the spectre haunting Britain in 1926 really had been communism, then the British Communist Party (CPGB) might have played a bigger role in the General Strike than it did."

However, Britain's government "was not morally bankrupt" or hated "as the Russian tsar's had been in 1917" and sat firmly in the saddle.

On this basis, he stresses:

A majority of the Bolshevik leadership in Russia, of whom Stalin was chief, already had faced facts about Britain and drawn the logical conclusion" of "joining trade unions, applying for membership in the Labour Party, and infiltrating other relevant organizations..."

"True, in May 1926, a developing 'left opposition' in Russia, headed by Leon Trotsky, had reached different conclusions about the temper and possibilities in Britain, and called for British Communists to take more drastic action, but British Communists paid little attention.

Schnee adds that revolution "was neither Russia's nor the CPGB's immediate goal, whatever the fulminating Leon Trotsky might say".

Naturally, the mass murderer Stalin draws logical conclusions, while Trotsky merely fulminates!

Schnee closes with what he considers to be the supreme argument against revolution—the might of the capitalist state: "No Workers' Defence Corps or any other working-class organization in Britain in 1926 could have coped with police and military both, and it is a good thing that Communists did not encourage them to try."

As for today, the general strike should be looked on as a sepia-tinted working-class version of *Downton Abbey*—a picture of a "world that is long gone."

Following 1926, he writes, "Militant trade unionism, 'direct action' as militants called it, specifically the national General Strike, had been permanently discredited. Henceforth, when Labour had a political objective, it would tread the parliamentary road to attain it."

And a good thing too, he argues, as Clement Attlee's third Labour government "attained more for miners through Parliament than the miners had dared even to hope to gain by direct action twenty years earlier. Lesson reinforced, and relearned: since Attlee's day, there has been loose talk, but no serious consideration, of another General Strike."

"Self-activity" versus socialist leadership

Britain's Revolutionary Summer by Edd Mustill and *The Future in Our Past* by Callum Cant and Matthew Lee both take a more friendly approach to working-class industrial struggle.

But both, while relying on Trotsky for their critique of the TUC, are just as hostile to his revolutionary perspective.

Mustill asks, "Could the general strike have won? And how close was

Britain really to revolution?”

He compares the position of “the Communist Party and its fellow travellers” that “no revolution was possible in 1926” with “their estranged Trotskyist siblings” who “see it as a cautionary tale: that of a crisis of leadership.”

And he concludes cynically, “It is certainly the case that the prospects for a successful revolution in 1920s Britain suffered due to a paucity of revolutionary leadership.” Nevertheless, “there is more to be learned from the incredible feats of working-class self-organisation and the kernel of alternative leadership that was beginning to develop during the strike.”

What we must hope for in future is a possible renewal of industrial militancy and rank-and-file action “to put it into practice.” By pushing “union leaders into more radical action”.

Cant and Lee are pseudo-left advocates of the same type of militant “self-activity” of the working class.

They pitch their account as a “story” of rank-and-file militants which can inspire their contemporaries, on a day when “we may wake up as they did on that 4 May and find that the walls of our own social world are fracturing too.”

If they don’t think the walls of our social order are fracturing already, I suggest that they both wake up.

The pair speak of a struggle between the “vanguard” of the working class and the “labour aristocracy”. But the vanguard is defined only as whichever group of workers are thrust into struggle at any given time—whatever they may or may not think.

The labour aristocracy, they say, is well-organised and has a political leadership in the TUC and the Labour Party, while the political allegiance of the “vanguard” to a party and the programme of that party is treated as having relatively little importance.

The CPGB is repeatedly accused of being too enamoured of the “lefts” in the National Minority Movement and of not waging political war against the TUC, without once acknowledging that Trotsky was alone in making this criticism at the time.

The Communist Party is also identified as the only “organisation that could have facilitated the successful continuation of the General Strike”. But its inability to do so is attributed above all its “lack of emphasis on the independent development of rank-and-file structures.”

It is left to a footnote for the authors to state in a single dismissive and politically ignorant line: “We would also differ from Trotsky’s contemporary analysis, which places far too much emphasis on the Anglo-Russian Freedom Committee and Soviet foreign policy.”

They conclude by referencing their own wistful search throughout the book in former hotspots of the general strike for “small sparks” of opposition from a class that has been fragmented beyond all recognition. And they ask, “What experiences, struggles and ideas will turn isolated workers into a united class force?”

Certainly not the construction of a socialist leadership. Instead, we are told that “We all make the world every day. It only requires a collective decision to make it another way.”

Amen.

This is political idiocy with a long pedigree.

When Lenin was explaining in *What Is To Be Done?* that the working class could only arrive at revolutionary consciousness through the action of a genuine political vanguard, the revolutionary party, educating the advanced workers as Marxists, he did so in opposition to the Russian version of Cant and Lee, the Economists.

They too argued that workers would understand the necessity for revolution purely by waging an “economic struggle against the employers and the government”.

Likewise, this tendency arose under conditions in which Lenin described the class struggle in terms of “stagnant waters... overgrown with fungus” and wrote of those who “kneel in prayer to spontaneity, gazing with awe

(to take an expression from Plekhanov) upon the ‘posterior’ of the Russian proletariat.”

Lenin understood that a genuine upsurge in the class struggle would create the conditions for a very different movement, one where “we will get rid of this fungus. The time has come when Russian revolutionaries, guided by a genuinely revolutionary theory, relying upon the genuinely revolutionary and spontaneously awakening class, can at last—at long last!—rise to full stature in all their giant strength.”

That was Trotsky’s understanding of the revolutionary possibilities opened up objectively by the eruption of class struggle during the general strike, which he insisted could only find genuinely revolutionary expression through the building of the CPGB.

In contrast, those who today argue that exclusive emphasis must be placed on the “self-activity” of the working class, on one or another form of militant rank-and-file activism, are arguing against a political challenge being mounted against the existing, real, opportunist, nationalist, pro-capitalist bureaucratic misleaders of the working class.

That is what recommends Cant and Lee’s work to the *Jacobin*, the journal of the Democratic Socialists of America, whose central purpose is to promote the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. It published excerpts and asked separately: “Were the workers betrayed? This remains a matter of debate.”

The same approach is advocated by the Socialist Workers Party in the UK. Judy Cox and Charlie Kimber are authors of the SWP’s book on the general strike, *Nine Days of Hope that Shook the World*.

They explain in the *Socialist Worker* that “Our comrades Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein wrote a great book about the General Strike in 1986, just after the defeat of the Great Miners’ Strike of 1984-5. They emphasised how trade union leaders always sell workers out—which is true. But we emphasise the self-activity of the strikers, the new organisations they created, and how they could have won.”

“It was a defeat, absolutely,” they state. But “It’s also a story of resistance to defeat.”

This is patronising nonsense. The general strike is a story of how resistance to defeat failed, which demands the adoption of an opposed method of resistance that can succeed.

The SWP frame their work as containing “lessons for ‘Generation Palestine’ today”. But the only lesson offered is one that will ensure defeat of any action taken by the working class at the hands of a trade union bureaucracy.

That is what “Generation Palestine”, those revolted by the Gaza genocide and other imperialist crimes, needs to know and that is what the SEP will teach it.

Trotsky’s line in the General Strike

What did Trotsky’s critique of the Stalinist led Comintern consist of and why was he supposedly “overly concerned with foreign policy”?

The conflict between Trotsky, as leader of the Left Opposition, and the Stalin-led faction that included at that time Gregory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and Nikolai Bukharin was not just over the possibility of revolution in Britain but of socialist revolution anywhere.

Under conditions of the isolation of the Soviet Union, a bureaucracy was emerging within the state and party bureaucracy. This bureaucracy was beginning to articulate a nationalist perspective, reflecting its concerns with preserving its own relative privileges and growing scepticism in the prospects for the revolutionary overturn of capitalism in the imperialist centres of Europe.

This found political expression in the Stalinist call to “build socialism in

one country” and insistence that tying the fate of the USSR to the world socialist revolution was an ultraleft deviation, given the name Trotskyism.

Stalin and his allies drew from the defeat in Germany in 1923, one produced by their own policies, that capitalism was entering into a prolonged period of stabilisation in which there was no real chance of a revolutionary development in Europe. The central task was to safeguard the Soviet Union from imperialist attack, and this must be the goal of the parties of the Third International.

In Britain, this meant securing friendly relations with British trade union and Labour leaders through the Anglo-Russian Committee, pledged to mutual aid and support between trade unionists in the two countries, and opposition to war.

Trotsky did not oppose the founding of the committee; he supported it. Likewise, he both supported and argued for a move by the Comintern towards a systematic “Turn to the masses”, to the reformist-minded workers in the aftermath of the initial revolutionary defeats suffered by the European working class and the young communist parties.

But for him this was support for the policies of a United Front, a limited collaboration with reformist parties and organisations on issues furthering the interests of the working class. This would counterpose in practice the revolutionary perspective of the Communist Parties to the bankrupt leadership of the reformists and create the best conditions for winning reformist minded workers to communism.

What he opposed was the conception that united front organisations such as the National Minority Movement, and through this the trade unions, would provide an alternative route to socialism, of far greater importance than the Communist Party.

This opportunist course led to the painting by the Comintern leaders of the minority movement’s left affiliates in the UK in glowing colours, and then the extension of this opportunism to the call during the general strike, “All power to the TUC General Council.”

Trotsky explained that the necessary retreat forced in the Soviet Union by the defeat of revolutionary struggles, and a certain stabilisation of capitalism this enabled, was now being continued against clear evidence that this stabilisation was breaking down, particularly in Britain.

British imperialism was in decline, its industry was outmoded and it faced challenge from more vital imperialist powers, such as the US, and competition from cheap and plentiful German coal seized as reparations.

From this he concluded that major class struggles were on the order of the day.

He wrote in his autobiography *My Life*:

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.

This prognosis was laid down in *Where is Britain Going?*, published in the Soviet Union in 1925, and which was a disguised polemic against the Politburo’s “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.”

The foreword declared: “The conclusion which I reach in my study is that Britain is approaching, at full speed, an era of great revolutionary

upheavals.”

The CPGB had won significant support in the years leading up to 1926. But the united front tactics that facilitated this growth demanded the party advancing itself in struggle as a revolutionary alternative through constant critique of its temporary reformist allies. This was especially true of the lefts, so that their rhetorical flourishes could not act as a shield for the bureaucracy of which they were a vital component part.

Outside of this, talk of a “united front”, both then and now, always conceals political capitulation.

Based on what Trotsky explained was an “impatient urge to leap over the young and too slowly developing Communist Party,” the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee was transformed from an episodic bloc—to be broken, he insisted, “at the very first serious test”—into “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”—courtesy, it should be added, of the Soviet Union’s “left” friends.

As Trotsky wrote in *The Lessons of October*, analysing the defeat of a revolutionary situation in Germany 1923 and recalling the central lesson of October 1917:

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 support of the campaign against “Trotskyism” declared by the Comintern in May 1925, the *Workers’ Weekly* of June 5 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.” Indeed, *Where is Britain Going?* was not published in England until after the TUC’s betrayal.

Through this political suppression of Trotsky’s opposed line, and not the fact that “no one was listening”, the left-leaning workers and the most revolutionary elements were politically disarmed.

As George Hardy, acting secretary of the National Minority Movement during the General Strike, wrote in his memoirs:

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.

A lesson learned far too late, however.

The legacy of the General Strike—in the twentieth and twenty-first

I want this to be understood clearly. Defeats always extract a price from workers, and sometimes a heavy one. But even so, defeats, even the most bitter, are not the worst thing that can happen. The working class can learn from defeats and eventually emerge politically strengthened in subsequent battles.

There was never a guarantee of success for the general strike, even had Trotsky's line won through. And neither did Trotsky suggest that the strike would immediately pass over into social revolution.

The CPGB was small, the bureaucracy led mass organisations and its left layers enjoyed popular support. Developing a cadre and the mass base necessary for a struggle for power would take time.

Trotsky was always sober and realistic in his expectations because he was advising the working class on life-and-death issues.

He wrote in February 1926:

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.

Trotsky made clear that the impact of a general strike would be determined not simply by objective possibilities it raised, but by the perspective and intentions of those leading it.

Writing March 5, before the strike began, he explained: "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."

To underscore the need to build an alternative revolutionary leadership, he then declared, in words that everyone here should memorise: "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."

On May 6, during the strike, 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.

In the aftermath of the strike thousands of workers joined the CPGB, looking for a revolutionary alternative, doubling its membership from 6,000 to 12,000 in a year. But instead of finding such a revolutionary agenda, the Comintern under Stalin insisted on maintaining the Anglo-

Russian Committee and its alliance with the TUC!

The disillusionment and disorientation created by betrayal, and the failure to combat that betrayal and learn its lessons, set the British working class back and put it on the defensive for years in the face of vicious attacks on its living standards and democratic rights.

These same sentiments helped consolidate the grip of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and over the Communist International, leading to the historic defeat of the Chinese revolution and later the coming to power of Hitler without a shot being fired by the German working class.

It is too much to go beyond this here, other than to say that the world today would be a vastly changed place had the series of political defeats begun in 1926 and the consolidation of the Stalinist dictatorship not taken place.

However, today, we live in a world in which the Stalinist bureaucracy is no more, having completed its counter-revolutionary mission with the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union and China.

The Labour Party here in Britain is on the brink of utter collapse, and the trade unions are a shadow of what they once were and are seen by few outside the ranks of the pseudo-left as having any remote connection to the class struggle.

This is an entirely new political situation.

Capitalism has entered a period of crisis worse even than when Trotsky stood against the Stalinist counter-revolution. And while it is the case that workers have no real organised means of opposing the ruling class, they are being moved into struggle nevertheless. And they will seek out such organisations and also build new ones.

We in the Socialist Equality Party see this as an opportunity to work for a fundamental shift in the political allegiance of the working class, especially of "generation Palestine", the young workers and students who hate this system and the horrific crimes committed by its representatives, Donald Trump, Keir Starmer and their ilk.

And we take forward this shift towards revolutionary struggle by systematically exposing the efforts of the SWP, the Revolutionary Communist Party and their like to trap workers once again behind the trade union bureaucracy, or pro-capitalist political frauds such as Jeremy Corbyn, Zarah Sultana and Zack Polanski.

This is the party you should join, the British section of Trotsky's Fourth International, led by the International Committee. It is in our ranks that you must prepare for the battles ahead here in the UK and in the worldwide struggle against right-wing reaction and war and for the world socialist revolution.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)