Two syndicalists gut the 1926 General Strike of its political lessons—Part One

Callum Cant and Matthew Lee's *The Future in our Past: The General Strike, 1926/2026*

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This is the first part of a three-part article.

Callum Cant and Matthew Lee's *The Future in Our Past* uses the experience of the 1926 British General Strike, with some references to contemporary events, to advance a struggle based solely on trade union militancy. It makes clear the dangers posed to the working class by such a syndicalist outlook: distorting and denigrating the questions of political programme and history which are essential to understanding the defeat of the General Strike and which are of fundamental relevance today.

This is epitomised by the book containing just one mention of the strike's most significant and farsighted contemporary observer, Leon Trotsky—in a footnote which writes off his analysis for placing "far too much emphasis on the Anglo-Russian Freedom [sic] Committee and Soviet foreign policy."[1] The name of Joseph Stalin, whose policy destroyed any potential for a revolutionary road forward for the British working class, does not appear once.

The defeat of the General Strike and the role of the Anglo-Russian Committee

Cant and Lee oppose the claim of many bourgeois authors that the strike was doomed from the start, "that further development of the General Strike was objectively impossible".[2] They argue that "When the General Council [of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which betrayed the strike] threw in the towel, only one organisation could have facilitated the successful continuation of the General Strike: the Communist Party."[3] But their diagnosis of the failure of the strike and the errors of the Communist Party is false.

According to *The Future in Our Past*, "a lack of emphasis on the independent development of rank-and-file structures meant that it [the strike] was organisationally hamstrung at the vital moment."[4] Therefore, "The CP's fundamental mistake was failing to build or coordinate rank-and-file structures before or during the strike."[5] The Communist Party, write Cant and Lee:

> took for granted that the TUC bureaucracy would betray the strike, and treated that betrayal as an educative process: workers would endure defeat, realise the bankruptcy of their leaders, and then turn to the Communists to construct an alternative leadership. Two problems followed. First, by setting preparation aside until after the bureaucracy collapsed, the CP in effect accepted defeat in advance. Unless new leadership emerged almost instantly, the strike was doomed. Second, waiting until after defeat meant trying to build in the worst possible conditions, when militants were demoralised and Communists were under attack.[6]

This is a gloss on the opportunist and disastrous policy of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), pursued under the direction of the dominant Grigory Zinoviev-Joseph Stalin bloc in the Communist International (CI). It turns 1926, a critical moment in the degeneration of the Communist Parties worldwide under the growing influence of Stalinism, into an episode of tactical misjudgment.

In fact, the Stalinist leadership betrayed the revolutionary potential of the General Strike by subordinating the CPGB to the opposed class forces represented by the trade union and Labour Party leaders. As Zinoviev declared at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1924:

> 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.[7]

This line culminated in the CPGB's slogan during the General Strike, "All power to the General Council!"—the leadership body of the Trades Union Congress, an avowedly counter-revolutionary organisation working to sabotage the strike from the off. The policy in 1926 was part of a longer process of surrendering the leadership of the working class to the TUC.

The Anglo-Russian Committee (ARC) was central to this. As Trotsky explained in 1928 in *The Third International after Lenin*:

> Zinoviev gave us to understand that he counted upon the revolution finding an entrance, not through the narrow gateway of the British Communist Party, but through the broad portals of the trade unions. The struggle to win the masses organized in the trade unions through the Communist Party was replaced by the hope for the swiftest possible utilization of the ready-made apparatus of the trade unions for the purposes of the revolution. Out of this false position sprang the later policy of the Anglo-Russian

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Committee…[8]

Formed in April 1925, the Anglo-Russian Committee was a joint body of British and Soviet-Russian trade unions. The left-wing pressure of the masses at the time forced certain British trade union leaders to make friendly overtures to the Soviet Union to preserve their reputations. This opportunity was seized by the Soviet leaders to formally commit them and their organisations to the defence of the Soviet Union and collaboration in the international class struggle.

Such a commitment was a potentially powerful tool for the young Communist Party: a promise which could be used to mobilise workers and hold their leaders to account, and then as a weapon against those leaders when they betrayed it. This approach would demonstrate the commitment of the CPGB to defending the essential interests of the working class, combating accusations by the trade union bureaucracy of sectarianism, while enabling workers to judge in practice the actual merits of the reformist bureaucracy on the one hand and the communist revolutionaries on the other.

The problem was not that this delayed the struggle for communist leadership of the working class, but that the CPGB under the leadership of Stalin and his allies never fought for that leadership. Instead, in Trotsky's words, the Anglo-Russian Committee was transformed from an "episodic bloc of the tops which would have to be broken and which would inevitably and demonstratively be broken at the very first serious test" into "a long lasting 'co-partnership'... and if not the gate, at least an approach to the gate through which would stride the revolution of the British proletariat… an inviolable principle standing above the real class struggle."[9]

In January 1925, Stalin was pointing to a supposed "incipient split between the General Council of the TUC [on which sat members of the Anglo-Russian Committee] and the Labour Party" as a sign of "something revolutionary… developing in Britain."[10] In Trotsky's later description, Stalin and the other leaders of the Communist International at the time "considered that by means of personal influence upon [British trade union leaders] Purcell, Hicks, Cook and the others (conversations behind the scenes, correspondence, banquets, friendly back-slapping, gentle exhortations), they would gradually and imperceptibly draw the 'left' opposition ('the broad current') into the stream of the Communist International."[11]

In July 1926, long after these individuals had *betrayed* the British working class, Stalin was cheering the fact that "we have severed these vacillating reformist leaders… from the General Council and linked them with our trade unions". The "success of our policy", he said, had been indicated by the fact that Walter Citrine, the right-wing, anti-communist leader of the TUC, "now writes that the General Council and he are agreed to the Anglo-Russian Committee being convened".[12]

These "dear friends", as Trotsky cuttingly characterised them, were in fact making use of their association with the Anglo-Russian Committee as a shield against the workers for their treachery. Once they felt sufficiently clear of the crisis, they dispensed with the charade and broke relations. In Trotsky's words, "The British trades-unionists waited until their acute inner crisis was at an end, and then uncivilly kicked their generous but muddle-headed ally away."[13]

Marxism, internationalism and the science of perspective

Stalin's policy in Britain was inseparable from the broader disorientation and degeneration of the Communist International. Its roots, as Trotsky and his Left Opposition faction identified, were in the response of an increasingly bureaucratised and demoralised layer of the Russian Communist Party (the leading force within the Communist International) to the stalled progress of revolutionary developments after 1917—a pessimism in the international working class which crystalised into the concept of "socialism in one country".

The aborted German Revolution of 1923, for which the hesitancy of the Communist International under Zinoviev was substantially responsible, was a serious defeat for the world revolution, ushering in a period of relative retreat of working-class struggle. The leaders of the CI refused to acknowledge this or to seriously examine their role in the experience; instead, they insisted that the revolutionary wave continued unabated.

Defeats and disappointments suffered along this line, coupled with a belated recognition of a temporary "stabilisation" of world capitalism—and the necessary reintroduction of elements of the capitalist market in the Soviet Union after the destruction of the Civil War—encouraged a highly conservative shift to the right in the CI. Stalin declared in *Pravda* that capitalism had "extricated itself from the quagmire of the post-war crisis", with "favourable" winds "gaining the upper hand" and leading to "a sort of lull".[14]

Trotsky expertly drew out the relation between the CI's disorientation and its opportunism, describing how, initially, "In order to conceal the significance of the mistakes and defeats of 1923 from others as well as from oneself, the process of the swing to the Right that was taking place in the proletariat had to be denied and revolutionary processes within the other classes optimistically exaggerated."

This, Trotsky explained, saw the beginning of a shift in the class orientation of the CI, which later "was to liberate itself from its ultra-Left shell and reveal itself as a crude collaborationist line," including in Britain.[15] Moreover, it did so at precisely the point in Britain's history when a turn towards a revolutionary crisis and radicalisation was beginning. Trotsky wrote:

> Towards the middle of 1925, it finally became necessary to admit officially the existence of the stabilization (a year and a half after it visibly began); that was done at a time when profound fissures were already being produced in it (in England, in China)…
>
> The ultra-Leftism of 1924-1925, incapable of understanding the situation, was all the more brutally supplanted by a shift to the Right, which under the star of the theory of "not leaping over stages," brought the policy of adaptation to the colonial bourgeoisie, to the petty bourgeois democracy and the trade union bureaucracy…[16]

Trotsky explained how this shift was bound up with an abandonment of the perspective of world socialist revolution for that of "socialism in one country". It had always been understood by the leaders of the Russian Revolution, above all Vladimir Lenin and Trotsky, that the defence of the workers' state established in the Soviet Union demanded the *extension* of the world socialist revolution, of which it was the first outpost. The Communist International under Stalin reversed this perspective.

Rather than follow a policy of aiding the international working class in revolutionary struggles, which would inevitably mean a battle against the labour bureaucracy and other bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies, the Communist International increasingly subordinated workers to these forces. Discounting the revolutionary capacity of the working class, the CI advanced alliances like that struck with sections of the British trade union bureaucracy through the ARC as the necessary means of "neutralising" the world bourgeoisie and defending the Soviet Union against military attack. This theory sunk its roots in the material interests of a bureaucratic

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stratum in the Soviet Union: increasingly hostile to the working class at home, over whom it enjoyed a privileged position.

The counterrevolutionary logic and rank opportunism of "socialism in one country" was made clear in the case of Britain by Stalin's worry that the "demonstrative rupture" with the Anglo-Russian Committee called for by Trotsky and the Left Opposition would result "only" in "our own discomfiture". Stalin claimed:

> What they want is that our Soviet trade unions should either break with the Anglo-Russian Committee, or that they, acting from here, from Moscow, should overthrow the General Council. But that is stupid, comrades. To demand that we, acting from Moscow, and by-passing the British workers' trade unions, by-passing the British trade-union masses, by-passing the British trade-union officials, skipping over them, that we, acting from here, from Moscow, should overthrow the General Council—is not that stupid, comrades?[17]

Besides the bundling together of the "masses" and "trade-union officials", and the servile fear of "skipping over" those bureaucrats, what is striking is the pigheaded nationalism: "acting from here, from Moscow… acting from Moscow… acting from here, from Moscow". Hiding behind implicit allegations of Russian high-handedness was a policy of allowing the British nationalist policy of the "trade-union officials" to proceed unchallenged by a revolutionary internationalist perspective. There is more than an echo of this in Cant and Lee's criticism of Trotsky's too-heavy emphasis on "foreign policy".

Trotsky recognised Stalin's perspective for the mortal threat to the international socialist movement it was. He wrote in *The Third International after Lenin* that with the theory of "socialism in one country" the "backbone of internationalism has been broken." The "very heart of revolutionary internationalism" was the "invincible conviction that the fundamental class aim, even more so than the partial objectives, cannot be realized by national means or within national boundaries".[18]

Contrary to Cant and Lee's suggestion that international developments are external to questions of revolutionary strategy within a given country, Trotsky defended the Marxist conception that "The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch."[19]

The most essential characteristic of that epoch, as Trotsky later summarised it in his book *The Permanent Revolution*, was that the process of world socialist revolution begun with October 1917 "begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena."[20] Therefore, "The fate of the Soviet republic cannot be separated from that of the world revolution… The construction of socialism is a contest between the Soviet state and not only the internal bourgeoisie, but also the world bourgeoisie, a contest waged on the basis of world-wide class struggle."[21]

This was an essential, historic corrective. Trotsky's revolutionary perspective foreclosed any subordination of working-class struggle anywhere in the world to tactical alliances convenient to the Soviet bureaucracy, or to the fantasy of diplomatically securing a Soviet state in which to build socialism. Against the "obstinacy evinced" in Stalin's policy of "retaining the bloc with the General Council… explained away by the ever recurring reference to the very same 'stabilisation'", Trotsky declared:

> The whole so-called stabilization of British capitalism is maintained only upon the conservative forces of the old labour organizations with all their currents and shadings in the face of the weakness arid irresoluteness of the British Communist Party. From this we see what depths of theoretical absurdity and blind opportunism are expressed in the reference to the existence of "stabilization" in order to justify the political bloc with Purcell. Yet, precisely in order to shatter the "stabilization", Purcellism had first to be destroyed.

It was at the level of global perspectives that strategic questions in Britain, and every other country, were ultimately decided; from which flowed the decisions to wage or not wage struggles for political clarification and leadership, against tendencies reflecting the pressure of hostile class forces; and from which flowed the tactical initiatives taken or not taken.

To be continued

Callum Cant and Matthew Lee, *The Future in our Past: The General Strike, 1926/2026* (Verso, 2026), Kindle edition, 119, Footnote 21.

Ibid., 119.

Ibid, 118.

Ibid., 120.

Ibid., 123.

Ibid., 124.

Cited in Joseph Redman, "British Communist History", *Labour Review* 2, no.4 (1957), 107 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/lr/vol02/v02n04-jul-aug-1957-lr.pdf].

Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (Pathfinder, 2015), 147 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti05.htm].

Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume 2* (New Park, 1974), 242 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/v2/ch02g.htm].

Joseph Stalin, "Speech Delivered at a Plenum of the Central Committee of the R.C.P.(B.)", *Works: Volume 7* (Moscow, 1954) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/01/19.htm]

Leon Trotsky, *Volume 2*, 252 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/unions/6-mistakes.htm].

Joseph Stalin, "The Anglo-Russian Unity Committee", *Works; Volume 8* (Moscow, 1954) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1926/anglo-russian-unity.htm].

Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (Dover, 2007), 528 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/mylife/ch42.htm].

Joseph Stalin, "The International Situation and the Tasks of the Communist Parties", *Works: Volume 7* (Moscow, 1954) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/03/22.htm].

Leon Trotsky, *Third International*, 149 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti05.htm].

Ibid., 280 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti12.htm].

Joseph Stalin, "Anglo-Russian Committee" [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1926/anglo-russian-unity.htm].

Leon Trotsky, *Third International*, 97 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti03.htm].

Ibid, 26.

Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (New Park, 1982),155 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr10.htm].

Leon Trotsky, *Third International*, 283 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti12.htm].

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[1] Callum Cant and Matthew Lee, *The Future in our Past: The General Strike, 1926/2026* (Verso, 2026), Kindle edition, 119, Footnote 21.

[2] Ibid., 119.

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[3] Ibid, 118.
[4] Ibid., 120.
[5] Ibid., 123.
[6] Ibid., 124.
[7] Cited in Joseph Redman, “British Communist History”, *Labour Review* 2, no.4 (1957), 107 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/lr/vol02/v02n04-jul-aug-1957-lr.pdf].
[8] Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (Pathfinder, 2015), 147 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti05.htm].
[9] Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky’s Writings on Britain: Volume 2* (New Park, 1974), 242 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/v2/ch02g.htm].
[10] Joseph Stalin, “Speech Delivered at a Plenum of the Central Committee of the R.C.P.(B.)”, *Works: Volume 7* (Moscow, 1954) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/01/19.htm]
[11] Leon Trotsky, *Volume 2*, 252 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/unions/6-mistakes.htm].
[12] Joseph Stalin, “The Anglo-Russian Unity Committee”, *Works; Volume 8* (Moscow, 1954) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1926/anglo-russian-unity.htm].
[13] Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (Dover, 2007), 528 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/mylife/ch42.htm].
[14] Joseph Stalin, “The International Situation and the Tasks of the Communist Parties”, *Works: Volume 7* (Moscow, 1954) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/03/22.htm].
[15] Leon Trotsky, *Third International*, 149 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti05.htm].
[16] Ibid., 280 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti12.htm].
[17] Joseph Stalin, “Anglo-Russian Committee” [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1926/anglo-russian-unity.htm].
[18] Leon Trotsky, *Third International*, 97 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti03.htm].
[19] Ibid, 26.
[20] Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (New Park, 1982),155 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr10.htm].
[21] Leon Trotsky, *Third International*, 283 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti12.htm].

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