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

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

Thomas Scripps
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[Part One]
This is the second part of a three-part series.

The policy of the CPGB in its international context

Cant and Lee write that the CPGB's switch on May 13, 1926, from "More/All power to the general council!" to "Demand Emergency Conferences of Strike Committees and Councils of Action" encouraged "the rank and file to take control of the strike" and "was fundamentally correct—but came far too late. None of the CP's previous statements of trust in the General Strike [sic, General Council] and endorsements of its instructions had prepared supporters for this pivot."[1]

Again, this was not at all a simple question of timing. The authors' argument takes the tactic of the CPGB out of the context of the international perspective which produced it. Along the line of the Communist International under Stalin's influence, there could never have come a policy genuinely motivating a struggle of the working-class masses against the British Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy.

The May 13 statement, for example, was in large part an effort to put rhetorical distance between the CPGB and the disastrous consequences of the policy it had pursued for the entire preceding period. It was published in the manifesto "Stand with the Miners": an early iteration of a line which championed the continued strike of the miners' union—isolated and neutered by the General Council—while maintaining amicable relations with that same General Council through the Anglo-Russian Committee. In Trotsky's words:

> It was a great illusion to continue in the belief that an isolated economic strike of the miners would alone achieve what the General Strike did not achieve. That is precisely where the power of the General Council lay. It aimed with cold calculation at the defeat of the mineworkers…
>
> [M]ere financial support of the lingering and hopeless trade union strike… only meant grist to the mill of the General Council, which was biding calmly until the strike collapsed from starvation and thereby proved its own "correctness". Of course, the General Council could not easily bide its time for several months in the role of an open strike-breaker. It was precisely during this very critical period that the General Council required the Anglo-Russian Committee as its political screen from the masses.[2]

Both before and after the General Strike, the young CPGB was educated by the international movement under Stalin's growing influence in a spirit of tailing the opportunist misleaders of the working class. As Trotsky wrote in 1927, of the reasons for the CPGB's lack of "initiative and resolution", of "criticism and irreconcilability":

> Day in and day out the English Communist party was taught that the union with ["left" trade union leaders] Purcell and Hicks would aid the cause of the defense of the USSR… Everything was stood on its head. This could not pass without leaving its traces upon the consciousness of the British Communist party... The Right wing tendencies have become extremely strengthened among the leading circles of the British Communist party… All these symptoms indicate one and the same thing: for a young party, still lacking real Bolshevik tempering, the policies of the Anglo-Russian Committee inevitably implied the opportunistic dislocation of its entire line.[3]

The policy in Britain shaped by Stalin's international perspective of "socialism in one country" had undermined the most fundamental conclusion drawn by the Marxist movement from the Russian Revolution of 1917, consolidated by the revolutionary experiences of the years that followed and formalised in the resolutions and speeches of the Third International: the irreplaceable leading role of the revolutionary party.

Zinoviev himself had written the "Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution" presented and passed at the Second World Congress. They state, in words which ring as an indictment of his own policy just four years later (he would later recognise his errors and join Trotsky in the United Opposition against Stalin, for which he was murdered in the Great Terror):

> The Communist International rejects most decisively the view that the proletariat can carry out its revolution without having an independent political party. Every class struggle is a political struggle. The aim of this struggle, which inevitably turns into civil war, is the conquest of political power. Political power can only be seized, organized and led by a political party, and in no other

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way.[4]

These points were made specifically against the influence of syndicalism—which was especially strong at the time in France, Spain and the Netherlands—but obviously also with regard to Britain, considered the country of trade unionism *par excellence*. There were clear objective reasons for this syndicalist influence, which Zinoviev set out in his explanatory remarks to the Congress:

> If we wish to investigate the roots of this negation of the Party, they are as follows: Its deepest roots lie in the fact that on this question we are faced with the effects of bourgeois ideology, that we have been infected by the propaganda the bourgeoisie have been broadcasting for decades saying that the workers can be "non-party", that one does not need to have a political party and that the trades unions are sufficient…
>
> The second root lies in the fact that a whole series of old social democratic parties have turned in front of our eyes in the epoch of the imperialist war into parties that betray the cause of the working class. We say to our comrades from the ranks of the syndicalists… that the sign of the times does not consist in the fact that we should negate the Party. The sign of the epoch in which we live, in which the struggles will become ever harder, ever more obstinate, consists in the fact that we must say: "The old parties have been shipwrecked; down with them. Long live the new Communist Party that must be built under new conditions."[5]

The task posed was therefore an out-and-out struggle for political leadership of the working class: to break workers from the old social democratic parties, including the Labour Party and its pillars in the trade union bureaucracy in Britain. By retreating from this struggle—instead using the Anglo-Russian Committee not to expose but to boost the British trade union bureaucracy—the CPGB surrendered its revolutionary initiative.

The *Workers' Weekly* of June 5, 1925, for example, 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. It recognized that capitalism had stabilized itself temporarily."[6]

In April 1926, the front page of the paper declared: "Our party does not hold the leading positions in the Trade Unions. It is not conducting the negotiations with the employers and the government. It can only advise and place its forces at the service of the workers—led by others... To entertain any exaggerated views as to the revolutionary possibilities of this crisis and visions of new leadership 'arising spontaneously in the struggle' is fantastic".[7]

Trotsky fights for a Marxist line in the British General Strike

Trotsky fought to defend and renew the political heritage of the Bolshevik Party and the early years of the Third International in his seminal work, *The Lessons of October*, published in 1924. He concluded in that work, after a careful review of the experience of the Russian Revolution:

> There has been some talk lately in our press to the effect that we are not, mind you, in a position to tell through what channels the proletarian revolution will come in England. Will it come through the channel of the Communist Party or through the trade unions? Such a formulation of the question makes a show of a fictitiously broad historical outlook; it is radically false and dangerous because it obliterates the chief lesson of the last few years…
>
> 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… We have paid far too dearly for this conclusion—with regard to the role and importance of a party in a proletarian revolution—to renounce it so lightly or even to minimize its significance.[8]

Trotsky applied this conclusion in his writings on Britain, most significantly *Where is Britain Going?*—originally published in 1925, but not in the UK until February 1926, thanks to Stalin's influence. By no means "skipping over" the trade unions, as his opponents claimed, Trotsky fought to place work within the trade unions in the context of the struggle for political leadership and power. The Communist Party would "be able to take the lead of the working class only insofar as it enters into an implacable conflict with the conservative bureaucracy in the trade unions and the Labour Party."[9]

This argument was based on Trotsky's rejection of the Stalinist perspective of capitalist "stabilisation" in 1925-6. Trotsky identified the powerful international forces acting on Britain, producing an "increasingly constricted, economically dependent, but ultimately untenable position; which also provides the conditions for revolutionary social upheavals."[10] He concluded his work:

> The concrete course of the struggle, its duration and its outcome will depend wholly upon the domestic and especially the international conditions of the moment in which it develops… The whole world situation and the role of the British proletariat in production and in society will guarantee its victory—on condition there is a correct and resolute revolutionary leadership. The Communist Party must develop and come to power as the party of proletarian dictatorship. There are no ways round this. Whoever believes there are and propounds them can only deceive British workers.[11]

Trotsky wrote to concretise this argument into a revolutionary perspective for British workers. He warned that "the principal efforts" of the Labour and trade union leaders would be "directed not towards paralysing the bourgeois state by means of the strike but towards paralysing the General Strike by means of the bourgeois state."[12] Against their and the CPGB's downplaying of the question of power, he explained, "A general strike is the sharpest form of class struggle. It is only one step from the general strike to armed insurrection."[13]

After the TUC's betrayal of the strike and the maintenance of the Anglo-Russian Committee despite this, the Left Opposition had, as Trotsky explained:

> opposed an overestimation of the economic elements of the capitalist stabilization and the underestimation of its political elements… Purcellism is the pseudonym of the present "stabilization" in England. We are therefore of the opinion that it is fundamentally wrong, in consideration of the working masses

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> who carried out the general strike, to combine either directly or indirectly with Purcell. This is the reason why we have demanded the dissolution of the Anglo-Russian Committee.[14]

These writings leave nothing standing of *The Future in Our Past*'s suggestion that Trotsky neglected the specifics of the British situation by placing "too much emphasis on the Anglo-Russian Freedom [sic] Committee and Soviet foreign policy." They make clear that these issues were indissolubly linked with questions of international perspective and the insistence on the political independence of the revolutionary party, against its smothering by the unprincipled relations of the Anglo-Russian Committee.

It is an evasion of these issues to simply advocate, as Cant and Lee do, the "development of rank-and-file structures" as a new leadership. The decisive questions were: upon what political perspective would such a leadership have to have been built, and how would it have distinguished itself from and combatted the existing leadership of the working class and other non-communist tendencies within it?

Cant and Lee champion the National Minority Movement, founded in 1924 by the CPGB, as one of the "rank-and-file groups" around which the "vanguard layer" of the working class was gathered. Like the Anglo-Russian Committee, the NMM was a potentially powerful mechanism for its stated purpose of "convert[ing] the revolutionary minority in each industry into a revolutionary majority". It came to represent roughly a million workers on the eve of the General Strike.

But under the false perspective of the Stalinists the NMM became a mechanism for *hindering* the revolutionary development of the working class. Trotsky addressed this question when reviewing the experience of the General Strike five years later, in the article, "The Mistakes of Rightist Elements of the Communist League on the Trade Union Question".

The correct policy of the CPGB towards the NMM, advocated by the Left Opposition, had been the "complete independence of the British Communist Party". It was only "under the influence of the independent slogans of the party and of its open criticism that the Minority Movement could take form, appreciate its tasks more precisely, change its leaders, fortify itself in the trade unions while consolidating the position of Communism."

Instead, under Stalin's direction, "maintain[ing] the bloc with the strikebreakers of the General Council" meant "the British Communist Party had to be deprived of all independence. This was obtained by the actual dissolution of the party into the so-called Minority Movement". That movement, Trotsky continued:

> bore the germs of destruction within itself. The masses knew as the leaders of the movement only [British trade unionists] Purcell, Hicks, and Cook, whom, moreover, Moscow vouched for. These "left" friends, in the first serious test shamefully betrayed the proletariat. The revolutionary workers were thrown into confusion, sank into apathy, and naturally extended their disappointment to the CP 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.[15]

By dismissing these decisive political issues fought out between the Marxist internationalists led by Trotsky and the bureaucratic nationalists led by Stalin, Cant and Lee make it impossible to understand the course of events in Britain. How was it that, for example, when ideas were raised in a March 1926 conference of the NMM to set up factory committees and defence organisations, "precious little happened to turn these ideas into reality"?[16]

The authors lead their readers to lament but not to understand why, in the "battle for leadership of the working class between a labour aristocracy in its most bureaucratic form and a vanguard welded together through years of struggle… the labour aristocracy won."[17]

To be continued.

Callum Cant and Matthew Lee, *The Future in our Past: The General Strike, 1926/2026* (Verso, 2026), Kindle edition, 125.

Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (Pathfinder, 2015), 154 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti06.htm#p2-08].

Leon Trotsky, "What we gave and what we got", *Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume 2* (New Park, 1974), 239 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1927/09/arc.htm].

Grigory Zinoviev, "After break. Third Session.", *Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International* [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch03a.htm]

Grigory Zinoviev, "Second Session", *Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International* [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch02.htm].

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Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October* (Bookmarks, 1987), 72 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch8.htm].

Leon Trotsky, "Where is Britain Going?", *Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume 2* (New Park, 1974), 119 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/wibg/ch08.htm].

Ibid., 4 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/intro02.htm].

Ibid., 123 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/wibg/ch08.htm].

Ibid., 145 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch12.htm].

Ibid., 144 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch12.htm].

Leon Trotsky, "An Answer to the Stalinist Critics" [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1926/11/answer.htm].

Trotsky, *Volume* 2, 253 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/unions/6-mistakes.htm].

Cant and Lee, *Future*, 24.

Ibid., 126.

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[1] Callum Cant and Matthew Lee, *The Future in our Past: The General Strike, 1926/2026* (Verso, 2026), Kindle edition, 125.

[2] Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (Pathfinder, 2015), 154 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/ti06.htm#p2-08].

[3] Leon Trotsky, "What we gave and what we got", *Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume 2* (New Park, 1974), 239 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1927/09/arc.htm].

[4] Grigory Zinoviev, "After break. Third Session.", *Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International* [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch03a.htm]

[5] Grigory Zinoviev, "Second Session", *Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International* [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch02.htm].

[6] Cited in Joseph Redman, "The Early Years of the CPGB", *Labour*

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[8] Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October* (Bookmarks, 1987), 72 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch8.htm].
[9] Leon Trotsky, "Where is Britain Going?", *Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume 2* (New Park, 1974), 119 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/wibg/ch08.htm].
[10] Ibid., 4 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/intro02.htm].
[11] Ibid., 123 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/wibg/ch08.htm].
[12] Ibid., 145 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch12.htm].
[13] Ibid., 144 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch12.htm].
[14] Leon Trotsky, "An Answer to the Stalinist Critics" [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1926/11/answer.htm].
[15] Trotsky, *Volume* 2, 253 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/unions/6-mistakes.htm].
[16] Cant and Lee, *Future*, 24.
[17] Ibid., 126.

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