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

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

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[Part One] [Part Two]
This is the third and concluding part of a series.

Syndicalism and spontaneity: *What is to be done?*

Today, the authors write that they "have not found a united and experienced vanguard. We've found small sparks, sometimes coordinated, often flaring out in isolation."[1] What are the reasons for this situation and what must be done to change it? Readers will search in vain for an answer. Cant and Lee reply with loose gestures towards the future devoid of any political content.

They argue at one point: "if you keep going, the momentum swings. The mass of the class joins the vanguard and things start to move. You can never tell when that's going to happen: it's just a case of staying in the game and preparing for the next surge."[2] Similarly, in the concluding paragraphs, "The one absolute lesson we take from 1926 is that as this vanguard begins to recompose itself, it should be aware that nothing in history is inevitable, neither victory nor defeat… We all make the world every day."[3]

As always in politics, airy optimism about "the next surge" is cover for an anti-Marxist perspective, in this case syndicalism, foreclosing a principled and scientific answer to the strategic questions confronting the working class.

The Trotskyist movement represents nearly a century of struggle to answer those questions: to derive, defend and develop the ideas necessary to do precisely what Cant and Lee write must be done: "turn isolated workers into a united class force". Without assimilating that history, itself based on all the preceding conquests of the socialist movement, a conscious proletarian vanguard cannot take shape.

Putting these lessons into practice is the essential task of the revolutionary party. But Cant and Lee view these fundamental Marxist conceptions as elitist. They refer disparagingly in their book to ideas "dreamt up by intellectuals external to the working class and preached to the workers as a master plan" or to "a distant leadership… entrusted with directing affairs".[4] For them, what defines the vanguard "is the combination of organic leadership, workplace militancy, and articulation of the most advanced form of mass politics then available. They are the militant minority who turn single sparks into prairie fires. When the vanguard is advancing, even revolutionary parties have to run to keep up."[5]

These are not new arguments. Their defeat was essential in the building of the Bolshevik Party which carried out the Russian Revolution of 1917 under Lenin and Trotsky's leadership. Cant and Lee replicate almost word for word the arguments of the "Economists" and their defenders in Russia in the 1890s and early 1900s—a tendency Lenin labeled "tail-ism".

The Economists wrote: "Just as human beings will reproduce in the old-fashioned way despite all the discoveries of natural science, so the birth of a new social order will come about, in the future too, mainly as a result of elemental outbursts, despite all the discoveries of social science and the increase in the number of conscious fighters". They accused the group around Lenin of "having the incredible effrontery to impose upon the Party organisation solutions of tactical questions proposed by a group of emigrant writers more than fifteen years ago".

Lenin answered in *What is to be Done?*:

> Effrontery, indeed, and what an overestimation of the conscious element—first to resolve questions theoretically beforehand, and then to try to convince the organisation, the Party, and the masses of the correctness of this solution! How much better it would be to repeat the elements and, without "imposing" anything upon anybody, swing with every "turn"...
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> *Rabocheye Dyelo* [an Economist newspaper], however, not only follows this "tactics-as-process", but elevates it to a principle, so that it would be more correct to describe its tendency not as opportunism, but as tail-ism (from the word tail).[6]

In another passage which reads as direct riposte to Cant and Lee, Lenin turns a phrase from his opponents against them, writing that revolutionaries "must and will make it our business to engage in this kind of 'pushing on' a hundred times more forcibly than we have done hitherto." He adds that the "hideous phrase… cannot but rouse in the workers (at least in the workers who are as unenlightened as you yourselves) a sense of distrust towards all who bring them political knowledge and revolutionary experience from outside".[7]

Lenin was always among the first to recognise the initiative and innovations of the class, like the soviets in 1905. But he also understood that these depended in large measure on the prior work of organised Marxists, and that they were not sufficient to bring the class struggle to the point of the seizure of power and establishment of a workers' state. The Russian working class overthrew Tsarism in February 1917, but it took the Bolshevik Party, guided by Lenin's April Theses and Trotsky's

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Theory of Permanent Revolution, to defeat the capitalist state, and fascistic counterrevolution.

A Bolshevik-type party is needed, Lenin first explained in theory then proved in practice. Firstly, to resist and overcome the influence of bourgeois ideology, which finds organised expression in the trade union bureaucracy; Cant and Lee write that "the labour aristocracy is highly organised" but draw no conclusions about the necessity of the vanguard to therefore be *better* organised. Secondly, to give the working class an all-sided, farsighted appreciation of its social position and political tasks.

This was the basis of the revolutionary party advocated by the first four congresses of the Third International, defended by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and later the Fourth International. It was vindicated in the negative by the British General Strike.

The Future in Our Past, on the other hand, ties itself up in knots trying to reconcile its perspective with the experience of 1926. Cant and Lee note that, in the lead up to the General Strike, "Rather than providing independent leadership to the rest of the class, the vanguard watched and waited."[8] As we have already seen, they point to the Communist Party as the force which could and should have rectified this situation. But their criticism that the CP "assumed councils of action would emerge as new centres of leadership" could just as well be turned back on the authors, who suggest no other course of action.[9]

J.T. Murphy and Stalinism

Where this approach to politics ends up is made clear a few pages later, when readers are told of the Communist Party's actions that "The most exasperating part of this failure is that it was foreseen in advance."[10] They are then directed not to Trotsky, to whose analysis Cant and Lee are indebted for much that is correct in their book, but to J.T. Murphy—one of the CPGB's leaders arrested in 1925 for seditious libel and incitement to mutiny.

The Future in Our Past cites Murphy's 1922 comment on "Black Friday", when the leaders of transport and rail unions broke their Triple Alliance with the miners by refusing to strike in solidarity:

> We warned the masses to "Watch their Leaders." We fostered the idea that the Triple Alliance would fail. But when it did fail the revolutionary movement was almost as demoralised as the union movement in general. We had not, to any great extent, considered or advised the masses what they could do in such an eventuality. Yet everything cried out for the preparation of a new centre of leadership in the organisations involved, to which the masses could gravitate as the leaders mined towards failure.[11]

Murphy in 1922 is selected over Trotsky in 1925, 1926, 1927 (and so on…) because he suits Cant and Lee's political agenda: a leading member of the British Shop Stewards Movement, and later of the Red International of Labor Unions and the National Minority Movement, he serves as their model "organic" leader of the British vanguard. But an even halfway serious look at Murphy's political biography demonstrates that militancy guarantees nothing, and "organic leadership" is a euphemism for leadership under the influence of the prevailing political pressures on the working class—in Murphy's case, Stalinism.

A member of the CPGB until his resignation in 1932, he was described by Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon as "a wheel-horse of Stalin, not only in the British Party, but in the Comintern as well, and won many decorations for his part in the war against 'Trotskyism', loyally following the increasingly directly counterrevolutionary line of the Stalinist bureaucracy."[12] He later supported the Hitler-Stalin pact and then spent part of the Second World War producing a friendly biography of the butcher of the October Revolution.

Murphy wrote the introduction to the 1925 book *The Errors of Trotskyism*, circulated in Britain to secure the allegiance of the CPGB to the Stalinist line. He concludes his miserable piece with the claim that: "The class political line of Comrade Trotsky, if applied by our Party as the leader of the proletariat of Britain, would mean and could mean nothing else but… the creation of dangerous illusions about their own strength amongst the proletariat."[13] In this way, he played a critical role in destroying the revolutionary prospects in Britain. Whatever conclusions he drew from Black Friday were discarded.

The lesson here, contra Cant and Lee, is that we are not simply free to "make the world every day". Questions of political orientation are objectively posed before the working class by the development of world capitalism and the class struggle. To name just a few of the most important today: the response to fascism, to imperialism, globalisation, the trade union bureaucracy, the national question and national separatism, and, still, to Stalinism. Failure to take a correct stand on these decisive world issues leads to catastrophe.

Revolutionary perspectives and organisation today

Only through the activity of a world revolutionary party can the working class find a correct orientation. This is especially the case in today's highly complex globalised world, in the aftermath of the enormous and poorly understood struggles of the 21st century.

A socialist internationalist party must unify a working class numbering in the billions, carrying out every conceivable form of labour under virtually all conceivable conditions. It must win them to a programme of struggle against war; climate catastrophe; global unemployment, poverty and homelessness—and the profit and nation state system of capitalism which underlies them all. To do so it must overcome the influence of reformist and pseudo-socialist tendencies and the trade union bureaucracies in the working class, in large part by clarifying the historical experiences of the 20th and first quarter of the 21st centuries.

Cant and Lee write of the contemporary GMB and Community unions who "refused to ballot their members for strike action" over the closure of Tata Steel plants in the UK, "preferring to trust in negotiations," and of Unite which "retracted its strike notice under pressure from the company". At a demonstration in town, "none of the participants… seemed really to believe they could force the hand of giant multinational Tata Steel by marching past the shopping centre." They write of the GMB's "sweetheart scab partnership agreements with Deliveroo and Uber".[14]

But *The Future in Our Past* provides no answers to the questions posed by these experiences: how to wage a struggle against transnational corporations, or in conditions of highly precarious employment, and, in all circumstances, against the anti-working-class apparatus in the trade unions. Even these challenges cannot be answered at the shallow level they are raised by Cant and Lee, let alone the decisive questions of war, recession, fascism and climate catastrophe that urgently confront the working class—which do not enter into their book.

A reader has no inkling from *The Future in Our Past*, for example, that events in Britain in 1926 were part of a chain of political disasters authored by the increasingly Stalinised international communist movement—such as the bloody defeat of the Chinese revolution in 1927 and culminating in the coming to power of Hitler in 1933—which left the

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working class chained to a bourgeoisie sliding rapidly to catastrophe. The tendency to war between British and US imperialism foreseen by Trotsky in *Where is Britain Going?* ultimately took shape in the Allied-Axis conflict of the Second World War just 13 years later—thanks above all to the rise of German fascism enabled by the Stalinists.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the contemporary Trotskyist movement, has now analysed the early stages of the development of a *third* world war, bound up with a sharp turn to dictatorial, far-right forms of rule. This is driven by deep economic and social contradictions and taking the form of war to remake the world as if the Russian Revolution and the subsequent wave of anti-imperialist struggles it unleashed had never taken place. At the Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US) this August, Chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* David North explained:

> If the war is, in its essence, the continuation of the century-long struggle of imperialism against the socialist revolution, then the fight against the war is, and can only be, the resumption of that revolution. It cannot take the form of the defense of any national state, nor of the restoration of a "rules-based order" that was itself an instrument of the counterrevolutionary project, nor of the pressure politics of the pseudo-left. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working class internationally on a program of socialist revolution.[15]

From this analysis, North and the ICFI draw the strategic conclusion that rank-and-file committees must be built not in the abstract, syndicalist way advocated by Cant and Lee but according to a definite political programme: as "organs through which workers formulate their demands, coordinate their actions across workplaces, industries and national borders, and break through the isolation imposed upon every struggle by the official apparatus". They must be "organizing centers of an anti-bureaucratic insurgency" and "anticipatory forms of genuine workers' democracy and workers' power".[16]

The growth of working-class struggles provides the essential basis for this programme of action. But, as North explained: "The radicalization of the working class, proceeding on every continent, poses the question of leadership; and the question of leadership is resolved in only one way—through the construction of the revolutionary party within the struggles of the working class itself."[17]

We say bluntly, as Leon Trotsky did of Britain in 1926, that in the struggles of the working class today "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."[18] That is because the lessons of the General Strike and other similarly decisive strategic experiences of the 20th century have been largely quarantined from the working class by Stalinism, social democracy, Pabloism and the petty-bourgeois politics of the pseudo-left.

The Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, was founded to resolve this crisis of working-class leadership. Helping a new generation of revolutionary leaders to draw the necessary conclusions from the 1926 British General Strike is vital to this work.

Concluded.

Callum Cant and Matthew Lee, *The Future in our Past: The General Strike, 1926/2026* (Verso, 2026), Kindle edition, 127.

Ibid., 81.

Ibid., 129.

Ibid., 5.

Ibid., 9.

Vladimir Lenin, "What is to be done?", *Selected Works: Volume 5* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm].

Ibid. [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iv.htm].

Cant and Lee, *Future*, 24.

Ibid., 123.

Ibid., 124.

Cited in Cant and Lee, *Future*, 124.

James P. Cannon, "The Case of J. T. Murphy", *The Militant 5*, no. 23 (1932), 4 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1932/jun/murphy.htm].

J. T. Murphy, "Introduction", *The Errors of Trotskyism* (CPGB, 1925) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/murphy-jt/1925/05/errors.htm].

Cant and Lee, *Future*, 79.

David North, "An assessment of the decade of socialist revolution and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party", World Socialist Web Site (2026) [accessible: https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2026/08/12/rumn-a12.html].

Ibid.

Ibid.

Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume* 2 (New Park, 1974), 144 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch12.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, 127.

[2] Ibid., 81.

[3] Ibid., 129.

[4] Ibid., 5.

[5] Ibid., 9.

[6] Vladimir Lenin, "What is to be done?", *Selected Works: Volume 5* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm].

[7] Ibid. [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iv.htm].

[8] Cant and Lee, *Future*, 24.

[9] Ibid., 123.

[10] Ibid., 124.

[11] Cited in Cant and Lee, *Future*, 124.

[12] James P. Cannon, "The Case of J. T. Murphy", *The Militant 5*, no. 23 (1932), 4 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1932/jun/murphy.htm].

[13] J. T. Murphy, "Introduction", *The Errors of Trotskyism* (CPGB, 1925) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/murphy-jt/1925/05/errors.htm].

[14] Cant and Lee, *Future*, 79.

[15] David North, "An assessment of the decade of socialist revolution and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party", World Socialist Web Site (2026) [accessible: https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2026/08/12/rumn-a12.html].

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Writings on Britain: Volume* 2 (New Park, 1974), 144 [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch12.htm].

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