

## Background/1926 General Strike

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The 1926 General Strike in Great Britain lasted officially from midnight on 3 May until 12 May. Over the course of nine days, four million workers came out in sympathy with coal miners, who were protesting attempts by mine owners and managers to reduce wages and lengthen hours. A government subsidy had propped up the coal industry on and off since the end of the 1914-18 War; in the midst of an uncertain international economy, however, the Government claimed it could no longer afford to subsidize one industry at the expense of others. And mine owners were quite insistent that their profits not be reduced - hence the solution to cut miners' wages. Union representatives were understandably unwilling to accept these proposals, however, and in late April 1926, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the representative body of and for British labour unions, voted in favour of a 'co-ordinated action'.

Organized labour believed that a general stoppage would convince the public to put pressure on Parliament, whose members were involved in the debates and negotiations concerning the coal industry, to preserve the coal miners' then current wages and hours. The theory behind the notion of this broad-based action, first articulated in the 1830s (Benbow, 1832; Symons, 1957: 50-51; Morris, 1976; Jenkins, 1980; Wrigley, 1984a), held that even the dullest and most apolitical among the general public could not fail to notice the connection between labour and the maintenance of society if that labour were withdrawn all at once. Consequently, in early May of 1926, workers in over 200 unions put their livelihoods on the line for the sake of the coal miners. Yet, as with most strikes, the general public's hostility to being inconvenienced outweighed much of the sympathy they might have felt for the miners' plight. Most people tended to fear rather than applaud the sympathetic relationship among the labour unions, for a general strike (by the end of the stoppage, labour leaders were also using this term), carried to its logical extreme was and is a workers' revolution.<sup>i</sup>

As well, the working-class tactic of evoking such potent symbols of the left as the Peterloo massacre, the Chartist movement, and the Tolpuddle martyrs, served only to frighten the upper and middle classes into thinking that, regardless of protests to the contrary, the TUC did intend the General Strike as an attack on their rights and property.<sup>ii</sup> The arguments of both labour and intellectuals were based on a moral sense that those who had sacrificed for the good of the community (the entire British nation during the Great War) were by all logic also a part of that community. And the ‘innocent public’, which had benefited and continued to benefit from the products of manual labour, owed the workers, specifically the miners, some reciprocal responsibility. Yet while this argument made good rhetorical sense, it had little resonance for anyone besides the working classes and the intellectual left.

Much to the surprise of contemporaries at home and abroad, however, the strike was conducted with relatively little violence - especially as compared to other workers’ actions (cf. Perkins, 2006), and strikers did not engage in traditional protest to any great degree. In fact, TUC leaders specifically ordered their constituents to behave in an orderly fashion - not to indulge in older, more subversive and traditional methods of coercion. Unlike their eighteenth and nineteenth-century predecessors, strikers did not blacken their faces, parade about at night, demand money and free food from propertied people, or threaten to indulge in arson and riot if their demands weren’t met. In fact, with the exception of several mock funerals for blackleg miners (Leeson, 1973: 102-3, 109; Tucket, 1976; Gerard, 1976: 97, 221), Gerald Crompton’s note about a retired engine driver’s being treated to some rough musicking with tin cans and kettles by striking railway workers in Peterborough (Crompton, 1988: 134), and a few other charivari-like examples of in-group censure (Tucket, 1976; Bruley, 2004), there is surprising little evidence of this sort of behaviour. The TUC was intent on showing that organized labour

was a sophisticated and orderly force, neither a rioting mob nor a bunch of street hooligans (Laybourn, 1993; Laybourn, 1999).

At the same time, however, another group began to exhibit some very public displays of their own folk culture. All of a sudden, over half a million registered volunteers and countless others, most of whom the newspapers traditionally categorized as useless, disorderly, youthful, feminine, and, most importantly, non-workers, came out into the streets and parks of the nation, particularly in London and other major cities. Despite the fact that people from all walks of life served as volunteers,<sup>iii</sup> undergraduates and society women volunteers dominated the contemporary media and later the memoirs, diaries, and a continuous stream of novels, plays, and anniversary exhibits as well as the walls of the restaurant Strikes!. Upper and upper-middle-class university students, society women, titled people, and young businessmen drove trains and buses, ran canteens, printed and delivered emergency newspapers, worked in the docks, and had a great time 'carrying on'. A general spirit of renewal, fun, and license - the carnivalesque (Abrahams, 1987: 173-82; Falassi, 1987: 1-12) - came to characterize and frame much of the event - for contemporaries and in the collective memories of the event (Gerard, 1976: 95; Bruley, 2004: 237; Perkins, 2006).

It was the volunteers' traditional style of playing for laughs enabled them to transform a war into a game in which their rules prevailed - over the Government and over the strike. Yet because that joking/play frame has such enormous power 'to encompass contradictions, and, as Gary Alan Fine says, to mean both less and more than it says' (Smith, 2010), that framing device enabled and even obligated others to regard volunteer activities as play, and not as a protest against the disintegration of traditional social relationships (Turner, 1974).

The very condensation of the volunteers' role into an upper-class masculine image was

what has enabled it to be so easily invoked as a symbol of eccentric Britishness, of good humour in a crisis, of the gentleman amateur par excellence. That image represented the continuity of a nineteenth-century paradigm that categorized life as a sporting competition not to be taken too seriously and English lads of a certain class as the ones capable of winning it - and showing others how to play the game (Paxman, 1999; Ward, 2004). Thus, that image of the happy-go-lucky volunteers has persisted in British society, a humorous testament to England's ability to 'carry on'.

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<sup>i</sup> See W.H. Crook's *The General Strike: A Study of Labour's Tragic Weapon in Theory and Practice* (1931) for a discussion of the function and intent of various types of strikes. Also note that while the TUC and labour leaders avoided the use of the term "general strike" because of its political connotations at the beginning of the action, the term was in common parlance by the end, e.g. the NUR bulletin, entitled *General Strike News Bulletin*, various editorials in the *British Worker*, statements by the TUC General Council, and various writings by Aneurin Bevan, Arthur Pugh, and Walter Citrine (Farman, 1974: 280, 282, 291, 293, 296, 301, 334; Laybourn, 1999: 119).

<sup>ii</sup> Writer and playwright David Benedictus noted that 1926 'was a near as we've come to revolution' (Benedictus, 2009, Interview).

<sup>iii</sup> University men and Society women certainly dominated the popular image of the volunteers, but whether or not they actually constituted the majority is unknown. Certain statistical records, which classify those who served as special constables and in the civilian constabulary reserve in terms of residence, do indicate that the highest proportion did come from the wealthier urban areas and county seats than from other sites in Great Britain. (Wrigley, 1984a; PRO HO

45/12336/2130/1926/OMS/484910; PRO HO 45/13364/1923-29/SC/447130). And those who received official tokens of thanks of significant material worth, such as miniature sterling silver trays and sterling cigarette lighters, tended to be middle class and above. But there were also a great many who simply helped out without any institutional affiliation, just as one would join up in wartime or volunteer to give blood (Zeitlyn, Letter, 1985). Most commonly, however, such people consisted of middle-class women who offered rides to walkers and non-union working-class or lower middle-class and unemployed men who drove lorries, worked at the docks, or laboured at electric power stations; very few of *those* volunteers received any kind of formal acknowledgment for their services from official sources.