

## The General Strike Fiasco. Its causes and effects.

The long anticipated month of May has come and nearly gone, and with it have evaporated both the fantastic hopes of the hot-heads of the Communist Party and the baseless fears of the nervous old women of both sexes who run the Primrose League and kindred organisations. Mr. A. J. Cook has repeatedly promised us "the end of capitalism" if the mineworkers attempted to force the miners' wages still further down; but in spite of the fact that the attempt is being made, with many prospects of success, the "revolution" obstinately refuses to materialise. In its place we have witnessed what looks suspiciously like the dying kick of Trades Unionism in its present form.

Four years ago (in our issue for April, 1922, to be precise) we definitely advocated combined action by the workers to resist the wholesale onslaught by the masters upon wages and working conditions. We did not promise a sweeping victory nor encouraged illusions regarding the ever-downward tendency of the standard of life of the workers under capitalism, but we did lay stress upon the necessity for making the best, instead of the worst, of a bad job, by means of an organised test of strength along class lines.

Experience had repeatedly shown that the old sectional mode of industrial warfare was obsolete; that, while the development of industry had united the masters into giant combinations, with interests ramifying in every direction, supported at every point by the forces of the State, representing the entire capitalist class, the division among the workers, according to their occupations, led automatically to their steady defeat in detail. The only hope, even for the limited purpose of restricting the *extent* of the defeat, lay, therefore, in class combination.

The *Socialist Standard* has only a small circulation, and our words passed unheeded by the mass of the workers, doped both by the organs of capital and the counsels of their own leaders. They were too absorbed in the petty details of their sectional struggles to perceive the general conditions governing those struggles. They could not see the wood for the trees; or they saw it only in the blurred form visible through the spectacles provided for them by the Labour Party. Those of their number who looked to "nationalisation", piecemeal or wholesale, to solve their problems and end the class conflict, considered themselves "advanced"; and their duly sceptical fellows were regarded as reactionary and hopeless. Thus, economic and political ignorance kept the workers divided and the defeats went on.

Yet even worms will turn, and rats forced into corners will fight; and it would, indeed, have been nothing less than supernatural if at length the steadily increasing pressure of their backs against the wall had not forced the hard truth into the workers enslaved minds. There is a limit even to the stupidity of sheep; and not all the smooth-tongued eloquence of their shepherds could prevent the flock from realising that they may as well hang together as hang separately.

The first official indication of this changing outlook occurred last July when the threat of a further attack upon the slave-rations of the miners led the TUC to intervene. The modesty of the workers' aspirations was proved by the ease with which their

representatives were satisfied. The granting of a subsidy to the mineowners (in order to gain time and enable the Government and the master class as a whole to prepare for the wider struggle) was hailed by the entire Labour Press as a "great victory". Subsequent events have shown the absurd hollowness of that claim.

When the miners were working through the winter increasing the stocks to enable their bosses to lock them out, their leaders wasted precious time and money in futile negotiations with those employers. While the Government proceeded coolly and leisurely with its scheme for maintaining essential services and breaking the resistance of the workers, the General Council of the TUC took no step to similarly organise the efforts of the working class. Practically every section of any size (miners, engineers, railwaymen, transport workers), all had grounds for demanding *increases* in wages; yet instead of co-ordinating these demands in a common plan and thus giving a solid basis for united action, sectional negotiations were proceeded with, in honour of that capitalist shibboleth, the "sanctity of contract". The enemy was allowed, not merely choice of ground and weapons, but the opportunity to get in the first blow.

Much ink has been spent on discussing the responsibility for the breakdown of negotiations, yet it was plain for months that war was inevitable. Mr Baldwin had made it plain that "all wages must come down", and that position, in practice, is still adhered to by the class which he represents. So far as the rank and file of trade unionists were concerned, the renewed attack on the miners was merely the commencement of a series of further attacks all round; and this fact, not some belated "sense of justice", explains their ready response to the signal for the general stoppage. Lacking any clear insight into their class position in society, however, they were guided by feeling rather than by reason, and blindly left the conduct of the struggle to the executives of the unions and the General Council.

The weakness of the leaders in the face of the common foe, their abject "begging and pleading for peace" (in the words of J. H. Thomas), merely expressed the disorganised condition of the movement as a whole. No such weakness characterised either the Government or the mineowners.

The lock-out notices were posted at the time appointed and the terms for their withdrawal were laid down. Having allowed themselves to be bluffed and held off by months of diplomatic confab, the General Council were forced, relentlessly, to act or abdicate. Yet to the last their irresolution was apparent.

Mr A. Pugh in a statement to give "the *real* truth" in the *British Worker* of May 11<sup>th</sup>, said:

"From the moment the mineowners issued lock-out notices to their workpeople, the question at issue, so far as the General Council was concerned, was the withdrawal of those notices as a condition preliminary to the conduct of negotiations. From that we have never receded."

Yet according to the same statement, they continued negotiations right up to the evening of Sunday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, two days after the lock-out notices were actually operating! They waited for the Government to give them the final ignominious kick,

and this was duly administered on the pretext that the printers of the *Daily Mail* had more determination than their "leaders".

Once the stoppage commenced, however, these same leaders assumed all the airs of omniscient military generals. Pompous exhortations to the rank and file to "hold fast" and "remain calm and dignified" were issued in their official Strike Bulletin what time they were already succumbing to the siren-like blandishments of that "friend" of the workers, Sir Herbert Samuel.

Not once had the leaders any cause to complain of lack of support. On all hands they admitted that the workers were solid behind them. In the issue already quoted they announced,

"The number of strikers has not diminished, it is increasing. There are more workers out to-day than there have been at any moment since the strike began."

Further,

"the engineering shops and shipyards are to stop tonight . . . The men have awaited the instructions impatiently, and all over the country they received their marching orders with enthusiasm and a sense of relief."

As an expression of working-class solidarity the response of the rank and file was unquestionably unprecedented; but the long months, nay, years of delay found effect in the official confusion between "essential" and non-essential occupations, the handling of goods by some unions which were banned by others and the issuing of permits one day which had to be withdrawn the next. Just prior to the strike the railwaymen were working overtime providing the companies with the coal to run their blackleg trains. Afterwards they refused to handle any traffic at all while the transport workers tried to pick and choose. The lack of practical unity with which to give expression to the sentiment and secure the end in view justifies, up to the hilt, our long-standing criticism of Trade Unions upon their present base.

The confusion on the industrial field was reflected in the political sphere. In spite of the obvious fact that they were involved in a *class* struggle and that the machinery of government was being brought to bear at every point, the Council fatuously endeavoured to represent the issue as purely industrial. They endeavoured to confine the efforts of a class to the point at stake in one industry. They thus denied the very basis of their own existence, i. e., class interests; but if they were blind to the logic of the conflict, the Government were not. They brazenly declared the whole affair to be an attack upon the Constitution and Parliamentary methods. In order to obscure the class character of their own acts, they invoked the mildewed pillars of the "nation". According to their spokesmen, the Council with whom they had been negotiating had suddenly become "an alternative government". With unerring judgement they saw in the manifestation of working-class solidarity the latent possibility of revolution.

The only objective of a social revolution, however, is Socialism. The very facts, that the Government were in power, that millions of workers had supported them less than two years ago at the polls and that those who did not were, in the main, far from

understanding Socialism, rendered any *immediate* question of revolution ridiculous. It was the *ultimate* outcome of the ceaseless struggle to which their apprehensions gave expression.

The role played by the Labour Party corresponded with that of the General Council. While disclaiming any desire to see the Government defeated by the strikers, they nevertheless proclaimed from their platforms that the Government were responsible for the "trouble". "Had the Labour Party been in office", men were told, "such a situation could not have arisen." They relied upon the short memories of their followers who omitted to remind them of the loco' and transport strikes during "Labour's" term of office, and the application of the Emergency Powers Act by these false "friends". In their eyes the Government's chief crime lay not in its support of the mineowners, but in its breaking off of negotiations with the General Council. The lock-out and the strike were secondary matters compared with their being shut out from the counsels of their beloved friends, the bosses.

True to their sham romantic outlook, the Communists covered themselves with "glory" by circulating wild rumours as to disaffection among the troops. They performed the worst possible service to the workers by trying to persuade them that the soldiery would not fire if called upon. Fortunately few people took them seriously, and in the main, the only sufferers from their advice were themselves. The importance of possessing political power was brought well to the front in repression of anything in the nature of incitement, and the bulk of the workers showed their keen appreciation of the fact in their orderly behaviour.

A sinister secrecy surrounds the capitulation of the General Council on May 12<sup>th</sup>. At the time of writing they have yet to give an account of their action to their constituents, the TUC. Their cool contempt for the intelligence of their followers easily gauged by the correspondence between themselves and Sir H. Samuel, which they had the audacity to publish in the *British Worker* of the 13<sup>th</sup>.

The emissary of "peace" frankly stated that he "acted entirely on his own initiative, had received no authority from the Government and could give no assurances on their behalf". Yet on the strength of this diplomat's unofficial memorandum (rejected on the 12<sup>th</sup> by the miners' officials) the General Council "terminated the strike assuming that the subsidy would be renewed and the lock-out notices would be immediately withdrawn."

We are not prepared to state in what exact proportion the ingredients of treachery and cowardice were mingled in the composition of the General Council. Suffice it that the miners remain locked-out and that, thanks to the capitalist terms of peace, even the rank and file are not deceived as to what actually happened. Union after union has signed a treaty of surrender which leaves the workers worse off than ever. In addition to this the unemployed army on the Exchange books has swollen to the tune of half-a-million, thus giving the employers an unparalleled opportunity for further inroads upon wages and working conditions. The height of enthusiasm reached by the workers during the strike is now matched by the depth of demoralisation of the leaders everywhere apparent.

The outlook before the workers is black, indeed, but not hopeless, if they will but learn the lessons of this greatest of all disasters. "Trust your leaders!" we were adjured in the Press and from the platforms of the Labour Party, and the folly of such sheep-like trust is now glaring. The workers must learn to trust only in themselves. They must themselves realise their position and decide the line of action to be taken. They must elect their officials to *take* orders, not to *give* them!

Most important of all, however, they must change the object of their organisation. Even in the now unlikely event of the miners gaining the day over the wages question, how much will the necessary sacrifice avail them? The reorganisation of the industry, to which they have agreed, will, on the admissions of its promoters, spell more unemployment among the miners! Are they prepared in face of recent experience to trust any capitalist promise such as is contained in the suggestions of the Samuel memorandum? At the very best they will but be marking time.

On every hand it is evident that the downward pressure upon the slave-class will continue until they unite to end their slave-status. The sentiment of solidarity must be embodied in practical organisation based, not upon the mere transient necessity for wage adjustments, but upon the permanent need of the workers for the abolition of the wages system.

That can be secured only through the establishment of socialism by the conversion of the means of living into the common property of the whole people.

To that end the workers must organise as a class, not merely industrially, for the capture of supreme power as represented by the political machine. For this purpose neither the Labour Party nor the Communist Party is of any value. The former is hopelessly compromised with the ruling class, while the latter ignores the basis of political power. It is useless for the workers either to "trust" leaders or to "change" them. The entire institution of leadership must be swept by the board.

The one thing necessary is a full recognition by the workers themselves of the hostility of interests between themselves and their masters. Organised on that basis, refusing to be tricked and bluffed by promises or stampeded into violence by threats, they will emerge victorious from the age-long struggle. Win Political Power! That is the first step.

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