

THE GENERAL STRIKE, 1926

In January, 1961, the History Group of the Communist Party held a working conference in Leeds to gather and discuss materials about the workers' conduct of the General Strike in different parts of the country. Reports were given, sometimes by those who took part, of events in Manchester, St. Helen's, Sheffield, Leeds, Nottingham, Plymouth and other towns and it was clear that, with further work, considerably more information could be collected.

Of particular interest was a report given of the organisation set up in the north-east, considered in conjunction with a note sent in by R. Page Arnot who was there in May, 1926. This throws fresh light on a body which has been variously assessed in books on the General Strike. It has therefore been decided to publish the relevant documents, or summaries of them, prefaced by this note and with some concluding remarks by R. Page Arnot, written after reading the account through.

There are, of course, other eye-witnesses who could add to or modify this account. But a start must be made somewhere. This survey is offered as a preliminary one, in the hope that it will stimulate more recollections and a further search for documents and information about the period in this and other regions.

We have so far had little success in finding copies of strike bulletins though a few have been collected.* But enquiries in the right quarters may well discover more of these and ensure they are preserved. There are also minutes of local trades councils, where these were kept and have survived, reports of a kind in the local press (insofar as blackleg sheets appeared), later reports of police court cases and so on. We hope to publish further accounts of local events and organisation later and so would welcome any material, or any clue as to where it might be found.

HISTORY GROUP OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

There was a comprehensive collection at the Labour Research Department, together with answers to a questionnaire sent out to trades councils immediately after the strike, summarised in Emile Burns, The General Strike 1926: Trades Councils in Action (LRD, 1926). But we are informed that this was lost during the war and though there are faint hopes it may come to light they are fast fading.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NORTH-EAST ?

There has survived what has been described as a document of "unique interest" - An Account of the Proceedings of the Northumberland and Durham General Council Joint Strike Committee.(1) Drawn up immediately after the strike and presented to the council on May 20 it is in the form of a duplicated foolscap pamphlet reporting on the committee's work and in one place giving a detailed extract from the minutes of the meeting. (2)

This account opens with proposals for the setting up of a regional council to co-ordinate the conduct of the strike in the area, proposals advanced at an informal meeting held on the eve of the strike, Monday May 3. Present at this meeting were:

James White, area secretary, Transport & General Workers' Union

Ebby Edwards, financial secretary, Northumberland Miners' Association

Charles Flynn, northern divisional officer, National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers and

Ferguson Foster, organiser of N.U.D.A.W,

R. Page Arnot, director of the Labour Research Department.

But this was in fact the third local meeting which had taken place. The events which led up to it are described in the following note received from R. Page Arnot as a contribution to a discussion on local activities during the General Strike of 1926 (3).

An Episode in Durham

"On Saturday morning, May 1, 1926, the miners were locked out. That midday by a majority of over 3 1/2 millions to 49,911 the conference of Trade Union Executives in London voted the

- (1) J. Symons, The General Strike (Cresset Press, 1957) 125 - the latest book on the subject which however draws heavily on the authoritative account by an American investigator, W.H. Crook, The General Strike (O.U.P., 1931).
- (2) There are copies at the Labour Research Department, 78 Blackfriars Road, London. S.E.1. The document was printed in abbreviated form without schedules of members of committees in Labour Monthly Vol. 8, No. 6 (June 1926) 359-74.
- (3) Then thirty-five years old, Page Arnot was one of the twelve leading Communists put on trial in October 1925 as an essential prelude to the General Strike. Sentenced to six months he was released in April 1926.

resolution for the General Strike to begin on Monday midnight May 3/4. On the Saturday afternoon I was the speaker at a First of May demonstration at Chopwell, one of the numerous mining villages that made up the Urban District Council of Blaydon-on-Tyne. After the open air demonstration I jotted down headings for a plan of campaign in the Durham-Northumberland area where under the Emergency Powers Act Kingsley Wood had been made Commissioner assisted by a general and an admiral.

"That evening, before a gathering in the Miners' Club, Steve Lawther and three officials of Lodges in adjacent pits discussed and agreed on a plan of action. A further proposal was advanced that a meeting be called at twenty-four hours' notice for Sunday evening, May 2, of all trade union secretaries and chairman, all members of boards of the three or four local co-operative societies and all local Labour councillors of the county and urban district. This meeting took place with nearly fifty present, with checkweigher Will Lawther in the chair, and at it the plan of campaign was discussed and unanimously adopted. It included sending a call for Councils of Action to be set up all over that huge coalfield. Dozens of mining lads who never attended a lodge meeting and were therefore thought to be of little account turned up the next day ready to speed throughout the two counties on bicycles and motorbikes.

Meanwhile on Sunday a call had been drafted and that afternoon Will Lawther and I went over to Sunderland where the printer Thomas Summerbell agreed to do a rush job with a printed bulletin giving a call for General Strike and Councils of Action. His father had been one of the early Labour M.P.'s and he himself had met me some ten years earlier in the Wakefield House of Correction.

When we hastened to Newcastle where we found Ebby Edwards, financial secretary of the Northumberland Miners, in Burt Hall. We put before him the proposition of the Chopwell meeting that all leading officials of trade unions responsible in the Durham-Northumberland area should be called together to constitute a regional body. This meant in some cases district officials of such unions as N.U.D.A.W. and T. & G.W.U., but in the case of most unions such as the A.E.U. there was more than one district. J.E. Little, afterwards president of

the A.E.U., was official for one of these, Charles Flynn (a friend of Ellen Wilkinson) was the N.U.D.A.W. man, a live wire.; Ebby Edwards (himself a live wire quiet, shrewd and energetic) agreed to do what he could and suggested seeing Charles Flynn.

While the others were engaged elsewhere I went (as far as my recollection goes) to fix up activities with Alec Geddes, then a Communist Party organiser attached to this district, and four years previously Communist candidate at Greenock where he had a vote of over 8,000. Then we hied back to the already mentioned meeting on the Sunday night of representatives of the whole movement in Blaydon-on-Tyne.

On the Monday, while Ebby Edwards was with some difficulty getting members of the projected regional committee, the Lawthers and I went over to Sunderland in the later afternoon to collect the printed bulletin, only to be informed that while it had been printed off it had not yet been guillotined or folded and that they had received the General Strike call from the Typographical Association which meant that they would have to stop work at once at the end of the shift. Eventually, however, after much arguing that it would be ridiculous to refuse to complete work on the strike bulletin on the ground that the strike had already begun we got our four-page paper and the despatch riders got busy.

In the North-east area there was no difficulty about gathering pickets. On Tuesday, May 4, Will Lawther and I got in touch with the local organiser of the National Union of Seamen, James Rogers, who had agreed to join in - though the union under the domination of Havelock Wilson had voted against the strike. (1) In the evening Rogers drove us up in his car towards the village of Chopwell. We decided to go in 'by the back road' to make sure that that also was properly picketed. At a narrow part of the moorland road we came up with the picket; the numbers were, we ascertained, about 125, mainly young miners. Most of them were carrying pick hafts. This considerably reassured us that there need be no trouble about picketing. Very soon there was no traffic on the Great North Road

- (1) James Rogers eventually figures on the regional strike committee as representing the Seamen's Union "unofficially". He was afterwards dismissed by Havelock Wilson.

except by permission of the Strike Committees, (1) Those in that area, local grocers or others, who relied on the official O.M.S., were disappointed and after a short time came to ask for Strike Committee permits instead".

Chopwell and District Plan of Campaign

To return to the evening of Sunday, May 2, the plan of action discussed and adopted by the second meeting in Chopwell, at which some fifty representatives of trade unions, co-operative societies, miners' lodges, and Labour councillors were present, was a businesslike one. (2) It first laid down, in a brief preamble, that no time be spent on discussion of the purpose of the strike, its national or international implications, but that attention be concentrated on the immediate objective. This was to defeat the civil commissioner appointed for the region by the government and "armed with the Emergency Powers Act in order to break the strike". The apparatus of the regional commission was outlined. It comprised the various arrangements and the organisation built up during the past nine months by the Ministry of Health, the Home Office, the War Office, Admiralty and Air Force, and other agencies. In short, there would be "concentrated against the strikers ... the whole of the civil and military institutions that are under central control; and also the civil institutions usually classed as Local Government". So far as the latter were concerned it remained to be seen whether the civil commissioner "would be able to make the full use of them that he would wish". The bodies of men at his disposal were the various government officials, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (3), other strike breaking bodies "composed mainly of middle class persons", the Fascists one of whose organisations had an arrangements with O.M.S., the special constabulary,

- (1) "Traffic circulation on the great north-south arteries running through Durham and Northumberland was completely stopped by the implacable tourniquet of the miners' mass picketing"; A. Hutt, Post-War History of the British Working Class (Gollancz, 1937) 150-1.
- (2) It was printed in Labour Monthly (June, 1926) without mention of the place concerned; it appears also in R. Page Arnot, The Miners: Years of Struggle (Allen & Unwin, 1953) 436-9.
- (3) Set up in September 1925 ostensibly as a voluntary and non-governmental agency but handed over to the government from the outset of the strike.

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regular police forces and armed forces equipped with various weapons.

"To meet all this we must improvise", the document continues. "The improvised machinery must be simple, easy to throw up, all inclusive. All activities in each locality should be centralised in a single body to be called Council of Action, Strike Committee, Trades Council or what you will: all such bodies should be linked up and centralised in the county capital town under a body responsible for the whole region"..

The first task was to set up a district Council of Action "and plan out all the machinery and all the tasks for the locality". Then replicas of this would be needed throughout the two counties "so as to make a network of Councils of Action linked up with a central directing body whose authority and scope on our side would exactly answer to the Civil Commissioner". Finally district officers of trade unions must be assembled to form the core of a regional authority to undertake the central direction. These last two tasks could be undertaken "mainly by the printing and scattering broadcast of a special strike newspaper". (That to be next described, in fact issued on May 4).

The tasks of councils of action were then outlined, tasks which would call for the constitution of various sub-committees concerned with communications; food and transport, picketing, publicity and so on. There follows an important paragraph on food and transport.

"The T.U.C. instructions for the general strike, if and when it should come off, include the provision of Food, Transport and Health Services. Whatever the intention of the General Council in laying down this instructions, it is clear that on this point depends the success of the general strike. Whoever handles and transports food, that same person controls food: whoever controls food will find the 'neutral' part of the population rallying to their side. Who feeds the people wins the strike! The problem of the general strike can be focused down to one thing - the struggle for food control".

Just how accurate this forecast proved will appear in the report of the regional strike committee. In the event the government refused the T.U.C. General Council's offer to administer essential services and there necessarily developed a form of dual control with the government attempting to gain mastery through O.M.S., the police and other agencies, while the strikers picketed and bent all efforts to keeping off the roads any transport which did not carry a permit from a strike committee or union. (1)

Meanwhile the Chopwell document ends with a section on morale. While all the machinery proposed is to defeat any attempt to break the strike, it is noted, such activities have also another object "that is the building up of our own morale both locally and nationally, and the breaking down of the enemy's morale both locally and nationally. Every officer who reports that picketing has stopped his transport, every military officer who reports that he cannot trust his men to act against the strikers because of effective fraternisation, is a means by which, when the report has filtered through to Whitehall, the morale of the Chief Civil Commissioner, and thence of the Cabinet, is impaired and weakened".



- (1) Councils of action which issued permits for transport were clearly "organisations of the working class facing the existing State machinery It was clear that the issuing of these documents rested on the assumption that the unions and/or Councils of Action had powers to do, or to allow to be done, certain public things that would ordinarily be regarded as exclusively within the province of the constituted authorities, national and local". In the great majority of cases the powers tacitly assumed were effective powers insofar as mass picketing prevented other forms of transport. Hutt, 149.

North-East Strike Bulletin May 4, 1926 Price One Penny
No. 1.

There is a single copy of the four-page bulletin brought to birth on the eve of the strike in the library of the Communist Party. Printed by Thomas Summerbell, published by the Spen and District Trades and Labour Council, and distributed throughout the area on the first days of the stoppage, it announced in heavy black letter on the front page - General Strike Below came sub-headings.

GENERAL STRIKE

ALL Railwaymen to cease work TO-NIGHT

Transport Workers, Printers and
Metal Workers to Follow

General Council's Arrangements
for General Stoppage

The front page gives news of readiness for action in the area, of local councils of notion going ahead, and of union executive committees following the lead of the General Council. On the first inside page the General Council's instructions for the strike are printed in full under the headings:

EXTREMELY IMPORTANT Read This! Official T.U.C. Programme

The remaining column describes the formation of the council of action in the Blaydon urban district under the heading:

Chopwell and District Council of Action's Fine Lead

It is understood, this item concludes, that arrangements are being made for similar councils in each locality, drawing in all sections of the labour movement and an appeal is added for workers to take the initiative where necessary: in any locality where a council of action has not been formed they should take immediate steps to have the necessary meetings held and committees appointed.

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The facing inside page carries for the most part speeches of the miners' leaders - of Herbert Smith, president of the M.F.G.B., Arthur Cook, its secretary, who had spoken to the theme "the whole movement is behind us", and Bob Smillie saying "No Surrender". There is half a column on international support for the miners and another with the latest instructions regarding the conduct of the strike, which includes a reminder that "under the Trades Disputes Act of 1906 peaceful picketing is completely legal".

On the back page, spaced out in heavy black letter, is the call.

WORKERS OF DURHAM AND NORTHUMBERLAND

The General Strike is ALREADY A SUCCESS.

Don't believe the lies put out by the Capitalist press.

The newspapers are trying to dope and deceive you into the belief that the General Strike will fail, and that the Government forces are bound to get the better of the workers. Nothing could be further from the truth.

From centre after centre of industry comes the news of the magnificent response to the call sent out by the General Council of the Trades Union Congress.

On Saturday a million miners were wantonly locked out, and the Government - which is supposed to represent the whole of the nation - put all its forces at the service of a small minority of profiteers and exploiters.

The organised trade unionists of Great Britain cannot suffer the miners to be beaten and starved into submission.

What happens to the miners will happen to you next.

Your own wages, your livelihood, the welfare of your wife and children, are at stake.

That is why there is a General Strike. That is why you are called out.

That is why, fighting in such a cause, you are bound to win.

The strike-breaking organisations of Sir Kingsley Wood have proved feeble weapons against the united will and determination of hundreds of thousands of the working-class.

Be of good courage, and victory is ours.



Northumberland and Durham General Council and Joint Strike Committee

The finishing touches were being put to this publication late on Monday afternoon, May 3, and this brings us back to the original starting point - the small informal meeting held in the offices of N.U.D.A.W, in Newcastle on that same evening, a few hours before the strike was due to begin. The five men there assembled representing the miners, transport workers,

distributive workers and including also Page Arnot, agreed to summon a meeting of representatives of other unions for the next day. Attempts had already been made to get more to this meeting, but nearly all trade union officials approached were completely occupied with other meetings, so now arrangements were made to see or telephone to as many as possible.

Page Arnot was deputed to call on James Robson, secretary of the Durham County Mining Federation Board, which he accordingly did on Tuesday morning, only to find Robson presiding at a council meeting. This particular story may as well be followed up here. Another call on Wednesday morning, to ask for representation from the Durham miners as soon as possible, brought the reply from Robson that he would bring the matter before his colleagues but it would require a board meeting to make the necessary appointment. (1) In fact the Durham miners' organisation only succeeded in forming a strike committee two hours before the strike was over. (2) Meanwhile Will Lawther, member of the executive committee of the Labour Party and also of the county federation's board, acted unofficially as the latter's representative on the regional strike committee.

The regional organisation was in fact formed at the meeting called on Tuesday, May 4, which took place at 2.30 p.m. again at the offices of the N.U.D.A.W., 47 Leazes Terrace, Newcastle. This time there was a wide representation of unions: Northumberland Miners' Association (Ebbv Edwards); N.U.D.A.W. (Charles Flynn and Ferguson Foster); T. & G.W.U. (James White, area secretary); Durham Miners' Association (Will Lawther - unofficially); and representatives of the Shop Assistants Union, Northumberland Colliery Mechanics Association, N.U.G.M.W., Boilermakers' Union, Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades, Railway Clerks Association, National Union of Railwaymen, Builder's Federation; National Union of Sailors & Firemen (James Rogers - unofficially).

(1) This is recorded in An Account of the Proceedings pp 1, 5. All later quotations are from this document.

(2) R. Postgate, Ellen Wilkinson, J.F. Horrabin, A Workers' History of the Great Strike (Plebs League, 1927) 66.

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Also present were representatives of the Gateshead Labour Party and Trades Council, Newcastle Trades Council and Labour Research Department.

James White of the T. & G.W.U. was elected to the chair and Charles Flynn of N.U.D.A.W. secretary, After the chairman had outlined the purpose of the meeting, and a statement had been given of the position of each union in relation to the general strike, it was moved by Flynn, seconded by Ebby Edwards, to form a general council to cover the Northumberland and Durham Area with two representatives from each union. It was agreed in addition to appoint a strike committee composed of one representative from each union, or group of unions, on strike or locked out. Proposals for sub-committees, on the lines originally suggested at Chopwell, were approved and Page Arnot was co-opted on to both the General Council and the Joint Strike Committee. It was settled that the former meet daily at 3 p.m. at Burt Hall, Northumberland Road, Newcastle - offices of the Northumberland miners. The Strike Committee's first meeting was fixed for 7 p.m. that same evening. "The meeting terminated with the first hint of the difficulties of a general strike in the shape of a complaint that the Miners' Clubs faced with a drink shortage were sending in motors for beer whilst Transport Workers were out on strike".

As finally constituted the General Council included, besides the bodies already listed, representatives of the A.S.L.E.F. the E.T.U., the A.E.U., the Typographical Association (all directly involved and represented also on the strike committee) and the Plumbers' Union, the National Union of Clerks, the Lithographic Printers, the National Union of Printing, Bookbinding etc. Workers, the Newcastle Borough Labour Party, the I.L.P., the Tyne Watermen's Association and the Gateshead Strike Committee.

First Meeting of the Joint Strike Committee, May 4 at 7 p.m.

The T.U.C. General Council's instructions were "that the actual palling out of workers should be left to the Unions, and instructions should only be issued by the accredited representatives of the Unions participating in the dispute". It recommended that there should be no interference with health and food services "and that the Trade Unions concerned should do everything in their power to organise the distribution of milk and food to the whole of the population". And it defined the responsibili+v

of the trades councils, in conjunction with local officers of unions, as "organising the Trade Unionists in dispute in the most effective manner for the preservation of peace and order". (1)

Accordingly, when members of the joint strike committee assembled again the same evening, nearly all had a set of telegraphic instructions from their own union head office. All these had to be co-ordinated. "So far was it from being a question of putting previously prepared plans into action", says the report, "that the committee were forced to spend the evening in problems of simple co-ordination" and the organisations envisaged could not be brought into being. For instance, no sub-committees were formed on the lines approved since it was not known whether the various unions might have "conflicting regulations or policies". So the strike committee decided to handle all questions which "meant of course an enormous accumulation of work. It meant that within a few days the committee began to sit in the morning and to continue from morning to afternoon, evening and midnight". On the other hand, this concentration of activity (e.g. all permits were granted only by the committee) meant that it rapidly became, a working body, all members came to know each other well, and "to get the measure of what was important and what was relatively unimportant".

An example is given of the need to co-ordinate instructions. One transport union had called out all men concerned with transport of food but given permits for transport of building materials; another had stopped all the latter but was giving some permits for transport of food. Some problems "necessarily took a good deal of time to clear away". (2) The committee

(1) R. Page Arnot, The General Strike 1926 (L.R.D., 1926)
Detailed instructions were equally vague; e.g. all building workers were called out except those "employed definitely on housing and hospital work.

(2) Similar problems arose everywhere. In Nottingham, according to a note received from D. Mahoney who represented the railwaymen on the central strike committee, two days' were taken up with a dispute between the T. & G.W.U. and the N.U.G.M.W. because the former had called out its brewery men, the latter not; so the discussion turned on the question - "is beer food?" Despite all efforts both local and national no settlement had been reached by the end of the strike.

listed a number of points relating to food permits to be raised with the General Council and requested that the acting secretary (Walter Citrine) be asked to remain in direct touch with the strike committee as well as with union headquarters. At this meeting the committee also considered the Strike Bulletin issued that same morning and considered that it "was very effectively printed and its tone was very calm and moderate". Since many blackleg sheets were appearing the committee decided to take over this bulletin and issue its own publication as soon as a permit could be obtained from the Typographical Association, (1)

Labour Withdrawals and Permits. Wednesday, May 5

On the second day of the strike the question of permits for food and transport came to the fore, as also the fact, foreseen from the outset; that it was on this question that the success of the strike turned. Not only was there confusion as between the instructions of different unions, but also applications for permits were flowing in to each separate union district office, to local transport sub-committees co-ordinating the transport unions, to trades councils, as well as to the strike committee itself. More serious, "the abuse of permits ... was beginning to reach gigantic proportions in the course of Wednesday afternoon". Anything and everything was being transported under the pretence of "food only" or "housing materials only". The committee therefore decided, after receiving reports from the transport unions, to withdraw all permits for transporting building materials and to issue no new ones - it had already taken over the powers of the local transport committee which was itself incorporated in the strike committee. It was also agreed to represent to the General Council that any exception in favour of housing now be withdrawn. This initiative was confirmed by a wire from Ernest Bevin urging the closest supervision over the issue of permits

(1) No permit was, in fact, obtained. The TUC was opposed to local publications and endeavoured (ineffectively) to get its own paper, the British Worker published at certain regional centres, including Newcastle. The strike committee recognised as its greatest weakness the lack of a publication to counteract the misrepresentations of the B.B.C., the government organ and such local sheets as appeared in attenuated form. This and other matters figure in later sections of the report but in the present account attention is concentrated on food and transport.

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in view of abuses, (1)

Sir Kingsley Wood and the Strike Committee, May 5 and May 6

Over and above this a major development was reported. Members of O.M.S, had been brought on to the quayside at Newcastle to discharge foodships and two destroyers and a submarine had been moored alongside one foodship in the river. This was reported to the committee by James Tarbit, organiser of the N.U.G.M.W. together with the information that trade unionists employed at the docks under permit to unload food had forthwith ceased work. Later in the evening a message came through from the civil commissioner that he wished to see Tarbit and members of the strike committee, and shortly Sir Kingsley Wood appeared in person at Burt Hall where the committee was in session. There he had a long interview with three members of the committee - Tarbit, the chairman and the secretary - which was in the end adjourned until 12.30 the following day in order to allow the commissioner to consult his colleagues.

To this second meeting the civil commissioner came accompanied by General Sir Kerr Montgomery, head of O.M.S. for the region, and Mr. Moon, official food controller. The minutes of both discussions have been reprinted in full. (2) Briefly they indicate the civil commissioner making concessions to negotiate a return of trade unionists to unload food at the docks, under permit and so under Strike Committee control, while refusing to withdraw O.M.S. men altogether; in effect a form of dual control was proposed with the latter working under official direction and not interfering in any jobs for which the normal labour was authorised by the strike committee. Flynn agreed to report this proposal fairly to his committee but added that "he would not be able personally

(1) "From reports received food permits are being abused instruct Local Transport Committee to exercise close supervision and not issue permits for outside their own district and act in full agreement with the three Railwaymen's Unions" signed "Bevin". Dated May 5, 1926. Bevin was secretary of the T.U.C. General Council's "Strike Organisation Committee", a body of six which conducted the central direction of the strike.

(2) Arnot, The Miners, 440-2.

to recommend the form of dual control proposed", a view with which the strike committee wholly concurred. (1) The committee further agreed to recommend to the General Council that they be empowered "to withdraw all permits for transport of food and everything else for which permits have been issued", and decided "that we now use the discretionary powers vested in us by the T.U.C and withdraw all permits today". This decision was endorsed the following day. (2)

In their report, which was of course drawn up after the strike had ended, the committee comment on this decision, pointing out that it was forced upon them by the local situation and reinforced by telegrams from headquarters. "It was a momentous decision in that it immediately raised a number of other problems, but no other policy was possible in view of the abuse of permits that had taken place. Had there been previously carefully worked out plans on the Trade Union side as there had been on the employers and governmental side, it would have been possible to start the general strike on Friday with a complete and immediate withdrawal of labour and therefore to issue permits under a system of strict controls". This had not been the position and by their decision of Thursday "the Strike Committee gained for the first time the complete control over transport which was vital to the success of any centralised conduct of a general strike". Their decision was loyally accepted and operated, with miners aiding transport workers in peaceful picketing. These facts lie behind the assertion, when matters were discussed on Friday evening with Sir Charles Trevelyn, M.P. for Central Newcastle who came as emissary from the T.U.C., that there had been "complete mastery of the difficulties" hitherto experienced and that "the situation as a whole was now well in hand".

- (1) "Having heard this report and recognising that our men cannot, and will not work in conjunction with O.M.S. we instruct that a, reply be sent to the gentlemen named, that we cannot agree to our men working under any form of dual control".
- (2) "We agree your action cancellation of permits endorsed. Signed ... National Transport Committee".
Dated May 7, 1926.

Negotiations with the Co-operative Movement. Friday May 7 -
Tuesday, May 11

It was the very success of the policy adopted that brought new problems. In particular the staffs of retail co-operative societies ceased work to a man and this meant that private traders in a position to convey essential foods had a handle on the co-operative movement. This was most notably the case in Gateshead and Newcastle where picketing was the least effective. Accordingly on Friday the strike committee released bread and milk through the Newcastle Co-operative Society over the weekend, giving permits to 15 bread vans and "a larger proportionate number of milk carriers" for two days only. A similar arrangement was made at Gateshead.

On Saturday evening the whole question was discussed at great length. There was no food shortage in the outlying villages but the very effectiveness of the picketing might arouse some alarmist fears which would be "only less serious than an actual food shortage". The obvious course, it is noted, would have been to provision the strikers through the co-operative movement from the very outset of the strike. But such a policy could not be adopted because there had been no arrangements between the T.U.C. and the co-operative movement, indeed no understanding insofar as the directors of the C.W.S. had before the strike issued a statement refusing credits. So there had been hand to mouth arrangements weaving a way through the various instructions coming to district offices from union head offices and the General Council. Then with the abuse of permits and the entry of O.M.S. at the docks had come cancellation of all facilities with the approval of headquarters. Now the committee had to contend with T.U.C. instructions on the one hand and local feeling on the other and between the two "to find a correct line of policy, and that line once found, to pursue it steadily but carefully". (1)

- (1) The committee had become aware of local feeling at a conference held on the Saturday morning attended by 167 delegates representing 28 councils of action, 52 strike committees, 4 Labour Parties and 3 Trades Councils in the region. Here the main discussion centred on the embargo and its effect on the co-ops. There was no excitement nor alarmist feeling but rather a quiet determination to go on with the strike coupled with recognition that this was the most pressing problem on the agenda.

The decision eventually adopted was to send out telegrams releasing all food supplies in the possession of the retail co-ops, and on Sunday milk supplies were similarly released after discussion with the bodies concerned. But by now the C.W.S. directors were also demanding a lifting of the embargo as it affected them. Though the strike committee sympathised with the difficulties, and expressed readiness to seek a partial solution, it was clear that "any general yielding on the question of removing the embargo on food supplies was at the moment completely out of the question". Then came a blow in the form of instructions from the National Transport Committee to the effect that all transport men should be out with the exception of those delivering bread and milk for Co-operative Societies to their members (1) - instruction* which effectively removed the discretionary powers formerly held by the joint strike committee and left it no room for negotiation.

When, therefore, the C.W.S. directors (Northern Board) met the strike committee in Burt Hall again on Tuesday, May 11, the secretary had to make clear to them that the committee "was impotent to afford them any further relief or to take any further steps towards the progressive realisation of that strategy which alone could guarantee nothing (anything) more than a favourable draw for the strikers".

The Government Takes the Offensive

Meanwhile it had become clear that, when the strike committee refused co-operation and withdrew all permits, the civil commissioner would be faced with an acute situation. The O.M.S. organisation in the area, and other official bodies, had proved incapable of maintaining supplies. Sir Kingsley Wood's approach to the strike committee had become common property, having been mentioned in the House of Commons on May 6 by a labour member with the implication that the civil commissioner had been forced to approach the local strike committee for assistance in maintaining supplies. This was altogether too near

(1) "National Transport Committee now instruct that all men engaged in Transport should now be on strike excepting men employed by Co-operative Societies solely for delivering Bread and Milk to their members. Our Union members must act accordingly other Unions are instructed likewise. Local Transport Committees have been informed of this instruction . Signed Bevin". Dated May 10,1926.

the bone and a government spokesman flatly denied that any discussions had taken place; a denial repeated more explicitly on May 10.(1) It was therefore clear that there would be no more negotiations from the commissioner's side. Since it was also obvious that there would be no outright capitulation to the strike committee which was pursuing the aim of bringing all transport of supplies under its sole control, there remained only one course open. In fact the strike committee informed the intelligence department of the T.U.C, by telephone on Friday night, May 7, that it was believed there had been a central governmental decision to break down picketing by force, or to institute provocation on a scale which would, in the long run, provide an excuse for calling in military forces. (2)

There was not long to wait for confirmation of this view. Already on Saturday night the police conducted baton charges in various localities? where there had not previously been any friction. In Newcastle, where there were such charges on both Saturday and Sunday evenings, eye witnesses reported that there was no apparent reason: "inoffensive citizens peacefully passing through the main thoroughfare of the town were severely clubbed and mauled by the police", In a despatch to the General Council on Monday, May 10, the strike committee reported that it was sending a deputation to meet the chief constable because "we must not have our people ridden down"; and pointing out that its own efforts to avoid provocation and maintain order had to be pursued without any sanctions "against disorder and overt violence on the part of the legally constituted authorities".

- (1) The Miners, 440n. It was these official falsehoods which prompted publication of the strike committee's detailed minutes of the discussion.,
- (2) Two days later the T.U.C. General Council itself received information that the cabinet had decided (a) to arrest all the members of the council, (b) to call up the Army Reserve, (c) to rush through a bill repealing the Trades Disputes Act, thus making union funds liable to seizure; this if the strike was not settled within two days. So it was reported in "The Secret History of the General Strike" published in Lansbury's Labour Weekly, Volume II, No. 63, Saturday, May 22, p. 5.

On Monday reports of arrests and police intimidation were coming in from all parts of the region. "The most sensational arrest was that of Will Lawther and Harry Bolton, chairman of the Blaydon U.D.C who were charged under Regulation 21 of the E.P.A.J", a regulation also used for "laying by the police more than 200 miners in Durham and Northumberland", (1) This same day the committee reorganised its work to the extent of setting up a Transport Office and a centralised system of despatch riders, to be used in part to distribute the British Worker, the official T.U.C, paper whose Newcastle edition was finally issued for the first time on May 11, the day before the strike was called off.

The report records that the strike committee put its resources behind this initiative, but in fact "a stage had now been reached when the committee could no longer hope for the effectiveness of its own strike policy. The ground which might have been covered in the seven days from the commencement of the strike was by this time irretrievably lost". But there was no cessation of activity and, though it was rumoured that police action was bringing defections, in fact all that happened was that some brewers' draymen returned to work on Tuesday. Then on Wednesday the second line of defence was called and the engineers came out on strike - at the most important single centre on the Tyne, Elswick, every man responded. This was a great success of strength and "the situation on Wednesday, May 12, 1926, was one which showed an advantage as compared with the previous three days of the week". With this sentence the report of the strike committee ends, with much left unsaid,

An Assessment

A reference to this report in the latest book on the General Strike remarks that there is apparent in it "the kind of unjustified optimism that is a vital element in militant movements, and yet is also a dangerous and heady

- (1) So the Strike Committee's report records. "The circumstances of this arrest certainly bear the marks of deliberate planning, On Sunday the police, who were accompanying a food lorry, saw Lawther and Bolton outside a pub, and asked them to help in food distribution. Lawther, by the police story, asked if they had a permit from the Chopwell, Blaydon and Ryton Council of Action, and suggested that the food should be handed over to him for distribution. After some further argument;, both men were arrested. When the case was heard Lawther and Bolton were accused of establishing a 'reign of terror' in the district". Symons, 131.

tonic". (1) It is hard indeed to find evidence supporting this judgment in the report just summarised. It is true that it states at one point: "On Friday (May 7) the success of the general strike appeared completely assured. It was clear to everyone that the O.M.S. organisation was unable to cope with the task imposed upon it. The attitude of the population was favourable to the strikers and unfavourable to the government. There were no disturbances the Trade Unionists maintained an almost perfect discipline". But this is a sober assessment of the response to the strike call, and of all-important public reactions, made moreover just after the negotiations of the committee with Sir Kingsley Wood and its firm steps to gain control of food distribution.

The later sections of the report, however, indicate that the committee, though acutely aware from the outset that the ultimate success of the strike turned on control of food supplies, were unable to pursue the tactics which could have brought success in a trial of strength. They were unable to do this firstly, as they point out, because of the total lack of preparation for the strike on the part of the General Council, in particular the absence of any kind of agreement or arrangements with the co-operative societies. Secondly, because, having taken resolute action in response to Sir Kingsley Wood's attempt to gain a degree of control in the docks and to abuse of permits, and created the possibility of building up effective strike committee control over food supplies, they were hampered by directions from headquarters which eliminated freedom of manoeuvre on this absolutely key front. Thereafter if the committee abided by the T.U.C.'s whole approach to the strike situation - and it was their watchword that, where they had no discretionary power they must "carry out the Trade Union Congress decisions to the letter no matter how many misgivings they might have" - there was no course but to enjoin passive defence against a calculated use of provocation and force on the part of the government.

It would be nearer the mark to suggest that, because of the very scope of the regional general council - which was planned from the start as a direct response to the government's regional commission from the workers' side - there was a high degree of awareness of the real nature and course of the struggle and so, too, of the total inadequacy of the General Council's conduct of it. Such a recognition necessarily precluded easy

(1) Symons, 132.

optimism and the matter of the joint strike committee's report, far from bearing witness to lightheadedness, provides evidence of thoughtful and serious attempts to introduce measures relevant to the concrete situation within the limits imposed,

If anything, there is an overtone of pessimism at time. But it must be recalled that this report emphasised weaknesses and drew the lessons after the strike had been called off by the T.U.C. General Council in face of the government threats of repressive legislation and reprisals. In fact the official resort to direct action can itself be interpreted as an admission of defeat, or at the very least of acute anxiety as to the outcome of the struggle. Naturally, it was not a question of waiting until supplies actually broke down. (1) The point was what was likely to happen to the balance of power during a second week of the strike, with the workers' organisations just getting into their stride all over the country and fresh forces coming into action. These were clearly not to be easily broken - the strike was solid. Nor indeed were they ever broken. The government's salvation was that its threats broke the backbone of the T.U.C. leadership in Eccleston Square, which, caught between this fire and fear of the organised mass movement, succumbed to terms of peace without honour or safeguards.

The Aftermath

It has been recorded that when the T.U.C.'s retreat became known in the north-east on May 12 and 13 it was received "with incredulity which changed to fury. The Northern Light said: "There is only one explanation for this treachery - our leaders do not believe in Socialism"; the Newcastle Workers' Chronicle wrote: "Never in the history of workers' struggle - with one exception of the treachery of our leaders in 1914 - has there been such a calculated betrayal of working class interests"; the Council itself said: "To hell with the

- (1) Symons' argument that the Strike Committee overestimated its achievements rests almost solely on quotations from the blackleg press indicating that Newcastle presented an almost normal appearance - except for total absence of transport - and that there was no appreciable shortage of foodstuffs, "There does not seem to be any evidence ..that the Government.. organisation broke down in any serious sense", p. 132.

Constitution ... next time we must not be unprepared". (1)

Meanwhile the struggle had not ended. On Thursday, May 13, Will Lawther and Harry Bolton (a J.P. as well as chairman of Blaydon U.D.C, were tried at Gateshead County Police Court and fined £50 for imposing a reign of terror in the district, with the alternative of two months' imprisonment; they chose the latter. There was a demonstration in support of the accused of several thousands who sang the Red Flag outside the police court. Among these was a contingent from the neighbourhood of Chopwell, Blaydon, Ryton and Spen - so that the story ends as it began with Chopwell and district. On Saturday, May 15, the Northern Light, a bulletin published by the local council of action, reported on the demonstrations of Thursday and their sequel:

"A band of 300 to 500 men and women (and not 90 or 100 as stated by the lying capitalist press) marched to Gateshead from Spen and Highfield behind the Victoria Garesfield Miners' Lodge banner. They marched orderly into the town and settled themselves round about the police court to patiently await the result of the trial. This quiet gathering did not suit the police and one officer in particular did his best to cause trouble".

the account continues:

"Seeing what was brewing, and actually hearing some policemen say they wished to be given orders to charge the crowd, some of us did our best to keep order and succeeded after the decision of the Court had been given in persuading the demonstrators to leave for home. They had proceeded some distance along Askew Road, on their way home, when a body of policemen, led by a well-known inspector and sergeant at their head, bearing the outward resemblance of gentlemen, went behind the peaceable and innocent procession with their brutally trained and uniformed bullies and belaboured unarmed people unmercifully".

- (1) Postgate, Wilkinson and Horrabin, 68-9. The last two were in the north-east just after the strike ended, where they attended 11 "huge mass meetings" and met strike committees. E.Wilkinson "Ten Days that Shook the Cabinet", Lansbury's Labour Weekly, Volume II, No. 63, p. 9.

Blackleg newsheets printed the lie: "that the demonstrators had attacked the police, but the hollowness of this frail excuse is exposed by the fact that not one policeman was injured, but a dozen or so of our men with wounds bore testimony to the brutality of the police. The powers that be are mistaken if they think tactics of this kind will crush our movement. We must get on with the fight and make our organisation better for the next time".

There are also specific charges of violence by the police after arrests and again it is affirmed that such brutality only helps "to strengthen our determination to carry the workers' cause to victory". An interview with those imprisoned after sentence is described: "The message was, 'Go on with the fight, let not the prisons daunt you'. That is their spirit. Let it be yours".

Victimisation through the Law Courts

On Thursday, May 20, Edward Wilson, aged 40, a miner, appeared at Gateshead police court accused of contravening Regulation 21 of the Emergency Regulations by doing a certain act likely to cause dissatisfaction among the civil population by distributing a document known as the Northern Light - in fact the number in which the extracts above occur, (1) Counsel for the prosecution, Mr. Frank J. Lambert, quoting these extracts, rested his case on the argument that the crowd at the trial of Lawther and Bolton was so hostile that: "the police had to send fop reinforcements and to form their men up for a baton charge. There was this baton charge and it was a serious baton charge. Men were knocked out and so forth and others were locked up. These men used serious threats to the police, while his (Mr. Lambert's) position, because he happened to be prosecuting in the case, was such that he had to close his office - which was a cow hardly thing to force anyone to do - because he was simply carrying out his duties as a lawyer".

(1) These extracts are given in a very full report of Wilson's trial which appeared in the Blaydon Courier of Saturday, May 22, 1926, and was reprinted in Labour Monthly (June, 1926) Subsequent quotations come from this newspaper report of the trial.

Quoting further extracts, including expressions of determination not to be intimidated, counsel for the prosecution stated that these men must understand "that no one would be allowed to over-ride the laws of this land; and if these men insisted in this course of action, so would the authorities persist in their course of action, and they intended to meet force with force". It was clear the men were still determined "to show that the Council of Action was the ruling authority of Chopwell", There was only one true statement in the paper - that every edition was eagerly awaited by the police. He would quote what the paper thought about the police force: "The lowest aim in life is to be a policeman. When a policeman dies he goes so low he has to climb up a ladder to get into hell, and even then he is not a welcome guest".

Edward Wilson had been found carrying copies of the Northern Light on the evening of Saturday, May 15, which he said he was selling for a penny. This might not be violence but clearly the council of action was "resorting to this method of creating dissatisfaction amongst the civil population", (1) Cast your minds back to the strike, counsel for the prosecution exhorted, "the Council of Action was still carrying on in their terrifying way" and the police could not find where the paper was printed so that they could "raid the place and blot it out altogether in the same way as they hoped to be able to blot out this so-called Council of Action". He appealed to the Court for the safety of the people in the neighbourhood of Chopwell, Blaydon, Ryton and Spen, "as there was no doubt about it that they

- (1) For the text of Regulation 21 of the Emergency Powers Act, Arnot. The General Strike, 157. It was only necessary for the authorities to claim that an action or publication was likely "to cause dissatisfaction" to get a conviction. "The superintendent of the local police assures us", recounted Special Strike Bulletin No. 6 of the Sheffield District Committee of the Communist Party (May 11) "that any statement published, whether it be a statement of fact or otherwise if in their opinion it gives cause for dissatisfaction amongst the civil population then the E.P.A. gives them the power to suppress such publication". The same line of approach was adopted towards sellers of papers, particularly those which escaped suppression (as did the Northern Light amongst many others) by changing the place of production each night.

were terrified to death" by members of this Council of Action. He asked the Court "now that they had got them in their hands to "stamp them out . They were making the lives of people in the district "a perfect hell on earth".

At the outset counsel for the prosecution had stated that the defendant was a member of the "Communist League" and now a police sergeant was called to make the same point, which counsel for the defence promptly refuted. The presiding magistrate inquired whether he was "a Liberal, like myself?" His client was a member of the Labour Party, answered counsel, and thought he was acting in a lawful way; he had never been in a police court before and bore an unblemished character. The Bench then retired and returned to record a unanimous verdict of guilty and a sentence of three months with hard labour - a sentence appreciably harsher than that meted out the previous week - the chairman adding that if he had had his own way there would have been an additional fine of

Postscript by R. Page Arnot

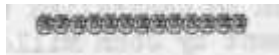
"These summaries, with ample quotation, from the scarce documents that are now available, cannot, of their nature, give all the background or the accompanying incidents of that first fortnight of May 26 on Tyneside. Nevertheless they seem to me to conjure up a vivid picture of the General Strike in an area where trade unions though long established had earlier been regarded as clinging to Liberal traditions. Nor had its towns ever been a stronghold of any of the socialist societies, such as the I.L.P. or the B.S.P. The Communist Party was very weak in numbers and had few members outside Newcastle City. But in parts of the coalfields north and south of the Tyne there had ben strong radical sentiments and one or two left-wing groups in sundry villages. Of these Chopwell, where Karl Marx was being studied in educational circles, was outstanding. But the only Communist there on May 1, 1926, was a young lad who had joined the Communist Party in his teens. (1)

- (1) Three months later, in August 1926, I addressed the Chopwell Communists on a hillside as no hall would hold the 200 members present.

"The huge Lawther family and their checkweighmen friends from neighbouring pits exercised the main influence. Chopwell, part of Blaydon-on-Tyne, became the focus from which it was hoped to stimulate other villages, especially if the regional plan did not succeed. That it did succeed was due largely to Ebby Edwards and to Charles Flynn (in whose office each day there gathered the special staff of volunteers - including the mountaineer-post Michael Roberts). Of course none of the detailed plans for sub-committees suggested on Tuesday, May 4 worked out exactly, and that was where the volunteers came in handy.

"But Blaydon-on-Tyne as far as Durham County was concerned remained the storm centre throughout. There, the outstanding figure was Harry Bolton, J.P. This veteran miner went back from the meeting on Sunday night, May 2, to Blaydon, where early next morning as Chairman of the U.D.C. he assumed complete authority. He went to the U.D.C. offices, went round the numerous staff (including architects, medical officials, etc.), instructed those whom he did not fully trust to take their holidays that first fortnight of May - immediately - and turned the remaining staff, offices and machinery (including the duplicator) into an organ of the General Strike, (1) They did it with a will. And when things got too hot, the duplicator was transferred under cover of night in a maternity van to the first of the various hide-outs for the continued production of the Northern Light. Responsible for its contents was Steve Lawther, with a clear militant outlook and at that time a constant supporter and seller of Labour Monthly.

"The whole episode showed the immense resources latent within the working class, given a clear line: and the fact that everything had to be improvised demonstrated this all the more".



(1) These facts came out in the local press at the time and were referred to at the trial of Edward Wilson - it was known, said counsel for the prosecution, as "The Blaydon Scandal".

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