General Strike Of 1926 Essay, Research Paper

The General Strike of 1926

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Why did the General Strike of 1926 fail and what were the effects the strike

had upon industrial relations in Britain?

The General Strike of 1926 lasted only nine days and directly involved around

1.8 million workers. It was the short but ultimate outbreak of a much longer

conflict in the mining industry, which lasted from the privatisation of the

mines after the First World War until their renewed nationalisation after the

Second. The roots of the General Strike in Britain, unlike in France or other

continental countries, did not lie in ideological conceptions such as

syndicalism but in the slowly changing character of trade union organisation and

tactics. On the one hand, unskilled and other unapprenticed workers had been

organised into national unions since the 1880s to combat sectionalism and to

strengthen their bargaining power and the effectiveness of the strike weapon. On

the other hand, at the same time and for the same reason trade unions had

developed the tactic of industry-wide and ’sympathetic’ strikes. Later during

the pre-war labour unrest these two forms of strike action, ‘national’ and

’sympathetic’, were more often used together which in an extreme case could have

meant a general strike. The symbol of this new strategy was the triple alliance,

formed in 1914, which was a loose, informal agreement between railwaymen,

transport workers and miners to support each other in case of industrial

disputes and strikes. As G.A. Phillips summarised:

The General Strike was in origin, therefore, the tactical product of a

pattern of in-dustrial conflict and union organisation which had developed over

the past twenty-five years or so in industries where unionism had been

introduced only with difficulty, among rapidly expanding labour forces

traditionally resistant to organisation, or against strong opposition from

employers.

Therefore, a large majority of the British Labour movement saw a general

strike along the traditional ‘labourist’ view, which emphasised the separation

of the political and the industrial sphere, as a purely industrial act. This

notion was supported the developments in the 1920s when the depression and the

employers offensive weakened the militant and revolutionary forces , whereas the

success of the Labour Party and the reorganisation of the TUC General Council

further strengthened these ‘labourist’ forces.

The government’s and the employer’s view, of course, was a different one.

Since the French syndicalists in 1906 had drawn up the Charter of Amiens,

reaffirming their belief in direct political action and the general strike as a

means of overthrowing the Parliamentary system, governments and industrialists

all over Europe saw a general strike as a revolutionary challenge for the

constitution and the economic system. Although the British Labour movement had

never been really committed to this idea, during the post-war boom when it was

on the offensive, there were two examples of semi-syndicalist conceptions

concerning the use of industrial action against the war and British intervention

against the Soviet Republic. Government and employers were warned and did not

hesitate to condemn every notion of nation wide industrial action as

unconstitutional and revolutionary.

The mining dispute which caused the General Strike emerged after the First

World War when the triple alliance broke and the miners were left to fight alone

against the government’s plans to privatise the mines. As a result the mines

suddenly returned to their private owners and the miners faced demands for very

substantial wage cuts of up to 50 per cent . The dispute escalated because the

crisis was seen by all the key players -the government, the em-ployers and the

Trade Union Council (TUC)- as an example for future industrial relations in

Britain. The trade un-ion movement saw its opportunity to challenge the notion

that wage reduction could solve Britain’s economic diffi-culties and decided

therefore that a future united action in support of the miners would take the

form of a general strike. But as Margaret Morris emphasised. "It was the

absence of any possibility of finding an agreed solution to the difficulties in

the mining industry which made a confrontation on the lines of the General

Strike almost inevita-ble, not any generalised will to class conflict".

The Conservative government, however, saw its role as a neutral, standing

between the contending parties and rep-resenting the British people as a whole.

Its industrial policy included the application of the principle of

co-partnership in industry, in the hope that workers and management would begin

to see their interest as identical, a policy which was ultimately challenged by

a general strike. The Government was completely aware that a trade union victory

would have important political implications such as government intervention in

the coal industry as well as encouraging further industrial action of a similar

dimension. Moreover, in 1926 the government was very well prepared for a major

industrial dispute, whereas unemployment and uncertain economically

circumstances forced the trade union movement in the defensive.

Due to this, the scene was set for a nation-wide strike in May 1926, which

was condemned to fail from the outset. After five years of struggle the miners

could not accept any wage cuts while the mine owners did not see any

possi-bility of running the mines profitable without any. Furthermore, the

owners’ case was supported by the government, which did not want to interfere in

industrial relations. Moreover, becouse the government saw the strike as a

revo-lutionary challenge to the constitution and the economic system it demanded

unconditional surrender from the be-ginning. But in fact, as Magaret Morris

emphasised, the General Strike was neither a revolutionary act nor an industrial

dispute. "Only if the Government had intervened by additional subsidies or

by coercing the coal owners could the difficulties of the coal industry have

been solved in some other way than at the expense of the miners. The General

Strike, therefore was a political strike and needed to be pursued as such if it

was to make any progress" . Therefore the General Council of the TUC, which

always emphasised the industrial character of the dispute, by the very nature of

the General Strike was not fighting the owners but the government, which was

forced into taking part in negotiations and put this pressure on the owners. As

the government refused to intervene and the TUC could not openly challenge the

government there was no chance for a successful end and the TUC had to call off

the strike.

A general confusion on the side of the trade unions and a principal lack of

communication between the different parties surrounded the circumstances of this

surrender. Sir Herbert Samuel lead the final negotiations based on his

memorandum, but he did not have any authority from the government. The

Negotiating Committee of the TUC was well aware of this fact but nonetheless it

expected Samuel to provide an accurate reflection of what the gov-ernment was

prepared to do. However, the trade union side thought that the strike was in

decline and was losing more and more of its faith in its success, and therefore

accepted the Samuel Memorandum without the miners ac-cepting, which, of course,

would have been crucial for the signing of a final agreement. Therefore neither

the government nor the miners, and of course, neither the employers were

involved in the negotiations which the Nego-tiating Committee thought to have

turned in its favour. Only after they had called off the General Strike did they

realised that they had nothing in their hands.

While the miners were left to fight alone until their humiliating defeat in

November 1926, the other workers re-turned to work where they faced their

strengthened employers. In some trades, such as railways and printing, work-ers

suffered widespread victimisation . The real extent of victimisation, however,

is very difficult to estimate be-cause besides the dismissal of militants and

the replacement of workers by volunteers, there was also an increase in

redundancy due to the reduced circumstances of many trades. Nevertheless most

employers tried to reinstate their men under new conditions which meant new

bargaining arrangements and some times substantial wage cuts. In the long term,

however, employers did not exploit their victory and showed an increasingly

moderate behaviour and the willingness to collaborate. The symbol of this new

climate became the Mond-Turner talks where the General Council together with

prominent industrials discussed the future of industrial relations. This

development was not only the result of the General Strike but, as Phillips

emphasised, also due to the "sectional conflicts which took place in the

early 1920s, which had been in many cases more costly to the firms involved, and

which certainly seemed a likelier mode of resistance to further attack on wages

now".

After the end of the strike the Conservative government emphasised its

industrial neutrality again and continued to refuse any responsibility for

managing the economy. Nevertheless, after the General Strike it responded with a

new Trade Dispute Act which made general strikes illegal, tried to severe the

financial link between trade unions and the Labour Party and made picketing much

more difficult. The government’s intentions was to drive the trade unions back

into their ‘labourist’ line, but because the trade unions lost the General

Strike, among other reasons, exactly because they were too much committed to

this ‘labourist’ line, this policy was highly superfluous and in fact the new

legislation had virtually no effect. The government, therefore, was never able

to capitalise on its victory, but as the history of the strike showed that was

never its intention.

Among historians the most controversial issue concerning the General Strike

is its impact on the development of the Labour movement. For Marxist historians,

such as Martin Jacques and Keith Burgess, the General Strike marked a central

watershed in this development. They emphasised a shift to the right of the whole

Labour movement and a further strengthening of traditional ‘labourist’ forces ,

whereas the left and especially the Communist Party was isolated and lost its

influence. Jacques described this new direction as a general rejection of

militancy and the use of industrial action for political ends, the strict

separation of the political and the industrial spheres, the notion of solving

Labours’ problems within the capitalist system and finally the acceptance of the

common interest between wage-labour and employers. For Burgess, the idea of

class collaboration which was symbolised in the Mond-Turner talks especially

marked a sharp watershed. "The extent to which the TUC as a whole was won

over to these ideas marked the final stage in the containment of the challenge

of labour to the existing social order". Besides the impact of the General

Strike both historians also emphasised other factors for this shift, such as the

changing eco-nomic environment , but as Jacques suggested:

"Mass unemployment, structural chance and the rise in real wages do not

them-selves explain the politics and ideology of working-class movement during

the inter-war period. Nevertheless, they provide an essential explanation. For

they help to reveal what might be de-scribed as the objective basis of the shift

to the right on trade union movement".

Although mass unemployment influenced the Labour movement from the beginning

by forcing the workers on the defensive, undermining multi-sectional

consciousness and weakening sectional solidarity, it was not until the Gen-eral

Strike that it played a crucial role in determining the politics and ideology of

the trade union movement.

This notion of a watershed has been challenged by several other historians,

above all by G.A.Phillips. He suggested that the General Strike had "a

significant short-term effect upon union strength -measured primarily in terms

of membership and its distribution- but almost no lasting consequences. On

industrial tactics, and especially the use of the strike weapon, their impact

was rather to provide a further restraining influence where inhibiting factors

were already in evidence, than to initiate any change of conduct".

Furthermore he emphasised this the reinforced trend towards industrial peace was

happening anyway, as well as the long-established faith in a regulated system of

vol-untary collective bargaining. Thus he described the shift to the right of

the whole Labour movement and the isola-tion of the Marxist left more as a

further strengthening of already familiar principles than as a significant

watershed. Moreover, the strike itself and especially its failure was the result

of the structural development of the trade union movement along these familiar

principles -especially the ‘labourist’ one- over two generations. Altogether,

from this point of view it seems that the pattern of trade union activity and

industrial relations was not altered by the General Strike. The only thing that

really changed was the Labour movement’s rhetoric style and as Laybourn

Emphasised, the isolation of the rank and file activists from the trade union

officials and therefore the final decline of the shop stewards’ movement.

However, there is little doubt that the 1920s saw a transition of the whole

Labour movement towards the separation of the political and the industrial

spheres, collaboration and moderation. At the end of the 1920s the Labour Party

was much stronger and even the trade unions, despite their defeat in the General

Strike and their reduction in both finances and members, were now much more

effective. The General Strike, of course, played an important role in this

transition, but more for its final consolidation than as a crucial watershed.

Moreover, its origin and its failure seem today like a paradigm of this

transition. Nevertheless, in the long term the General Strike left some marks

upon the Labour movement, which determined its future fate. Most importantly,

after defeat the miners lost their crucial position within the Labour movement

and great bitterness and frustration emerged among the miners in particular, but

also within the Labour movement as a whole.

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