

# **‘An excellent new history of the general strike’**

**The General Strike 1926**

**A New History**

**by David Brandon**

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*Reviewed by Harry Cooper*

David Brandon, a lecturer in history, particularly railway history, and a trade union activist, has written an excellent and comprehensive history of the 1926 General Strike. This book review coincides with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strike, one of the most significant events in the history of modern Britain and the class struggle.

One of the major strengths of the book, which should be read by all socialist activists and students of the class struggle in Britain, is its focus on the economic context, and particularly the decline of Britain’s industrial power and the crisis in the coal industry, leading to a decisive showdown between capital and labour.

In this context, Brandon carefully reviews the failure of the Trade Union leadership, their cowardly role, and their fear of a major social upheaval challenging the capitalist order, which led the TUC to sell out the general strike.

For these reasons the book provides valuable political lessons relevant to the situation of the working class and the crisis of British capitalism today. Brandon places the failure of the strike squarely on the shoulders of the Trade Union leadership, as a result of their links to the Labour Party, their generally conservative outlook, and their fear of the independent political movement of the working class toward a genuine socialist government with radical policies.

The same political and structural issues face the mass of the working class in Britain today - only at a higher level - given the complete collapse of Labour as a working class party, and the irretrievable stagnation of the British economy producing a decade and a half of austerity policies by successive capitalist governments.

## **The relative decline of the British economy up to 1914**

The distinctive feature of the British economy between 1880 and 1914 was the loss of its industrial competitiveness and superiority over Germany and the United States, in critical industries. In particular, the German economy in sectors such as coal, iron, steel and

manufacturing left Britain behind. This was, to a significant degree, the result of increasing research and development by German industry, leading to the expansion of production and higher productivity. In comparison, British industry became increasingly backward, less productive, and heavily reliant on intensifying the exploitation of labour to maintain profitability, rather than through the advance of industrial technique. This was especially the case in heavy industry. Instead of meeting the industrial challenge of her competitors Britain attempted to avoid them. Capital was instead directed toward finance, shipping, insurance and acting as an intermediary in the world trading system. Brandon summarises the relative decline in the following way;

*“Even more alarmingly, Britain increasingly began to experience import penetration from foreign manufactured goods, cheaper and often of higher quality than those made at home. British manufacturers were becoming complacent and inefficient. They seemed unwilling to take on the challenge of foreign competition. New machinery, new techniques, more productive use of resources were required but they involved time, energy and money and seemed unattractive while adequate profits could still be made from traditional methods in established markets. Little money was apparently directed into the modernisation of British industry compared with the massive quantities flowing out in terms of foreign investments.”*

The decline of British industry led to the increasing impoverishment of the working class. A large section of the working class lived below the poverty line. The stark reality of social conditions was revealed when large numbers of working class men were rejected as unfit for military service. British losses in the Boer war deepened the widespread sentiment that Britain was seriously stumbling. When Victoria died in 1901 says Brandon;

*“there was a widespread feeling that one era of British history was over and a new one was starting in which Britain might have to make difficult changes to adjust to new and demanding realities. Societies are disturbed and their members can be disaffected when the comforting continuities that have been taken for granted are threatened by great changes. The late Victorian, Edwardian and the inter-war years were characteristic of such times.”*

### **Increasing industrial unrest before the first World War**

The growing strength of the trade union movement was a matter which generated great fear on the part of British capital. The formation of the National Transport Workers Federation in 1910 was another sign of the strengthening of the collective power of labour. The trade union movement had been struck a major blow by the Taff Vale judgement in 1901, which had held that at common law unions could be liable for damages for strike

action. Under immense political pressure from the working class, and in particular as the result of the success of the Labour Representative Council (LRC) which became the parliamentary Labour Party, the Liberal government effectively repealed the judgement in the Trades Disputes Act of 1906. Under that same growing working class pressure, the Liberal government, which contained a number of leading industrialists, enacted a raft of labour reform measures, including the Workmens' Compensation Act and an eight hour day in the mining industry. As Brandon points out;

*"It is difficult not to think that these measures, which unquestionably benefited working people, were the result of the Liberals being scared that the Labour Party might replace them as the party of choice for the votes of working men."*

Another example of the increasing tension between capital and labour which Brandon reviews was the Osborne Judgement in the House of Lords in 1909. Walter Osborne had started his career as an official of the General Railway Workers Union, and a supporter of the left wing Social Democratic Federation, but was shifting rapidly to the right. He changed his union affiliation to the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants but became explosively hostile when the Society decided that every member should pay a levy to finance parliamentary candidates who were supported by the LRC.

Osborne sued the union challenging the legality of the compulsory political levy. He lost at first instance but the Court of Appeal reversed the decision, which was confirmed by the House of Lords. As Brandon points out, the Osborne judgement was a huge blow to the union movement and the growing Labour Party. It was not until 1913 that a rattled Liberal government struggling for its survival passed legislation granting unions the right to provide funding for the Labour Party. Expressing the outlook of the ruling class Osborne fulminated in the pages of the Daily Express against the march of socialism; *'honest trade unionists should stand up to the fraud of socialism ..... Socialism is diametrically opposed to trade unionism. The latter exists for trade purposes; the former would abolish trade. That Trade Unions would regulate wages, while Socialism would abolish wages.'* He declared that his purpose was to *'defeat the advancing Socialist army'* by depriving it of its 'war chest'.

Regrettably, the views of Osborne regarding Trade Unions and Socialism being antithetical remain, more or less consciously, the outlook of many union bureaucrats in Britain to this day.

In the book Brandon provides a comprehensive picture of the increasing industrial unrest and class conflict in Britain in the decade before World War One. In particular the years

1910 to 1914 were marked by an unprecedented scale of industrial conflict involving millions of workers across major industries.

In 1911 strikes broke out involving railway workers, seamen, dockers and carters. An acrimonious strike took place in the South Wales coalfields which spread to the Taff Vale Railway at Tonypany. A nationwide strike of railway workers was narrowly averted by Lloyd George - who recognised the immense danger to Britain's economic stability involved - although his creation of "Conciliation Boards" to sidestep the conflict, as Brandon notes, never genuinely addressed workers grievances, did not involve union representation as such, and were widely mocked by workers as "Confiscation Boards".

The 1911 railway strike was nevertheless a portent of things to come. An estimated 200,000 railway workers struck for better pay and union recognition for collective bargaining purposes. The government deployed 58,000 troops to the main sites of strike activity. Brandon points to the significant fact that *"on 19 August 1911, for the first time in history union leaders sat down at the negotiating table with representatives of the railway companies."*

In 1912 there was a national stoppage in the mining industry for a minimum wage with 80 percent of members of the Miners Federation of Great Britain in favour of strike action. Although railway workers, critical to the transport of coal, did not come out in sympathy, it was becoming increasingly clear to many workers, particularly in railway, transport and mining, that combined union action was the key to success. The 1912 miners strike which only lasted several days and was successful in securing a minimum wage for miners throughout Britain, but not the end of the despised district agreements, shook the ruling class. Brandon quotes the statement of one senior politician at the time,

*"This coal strike is the beginning of a revolution. Power... is passing from the House of Commons to the trade unions... The unions may of course like blind Samson with his arms round the pillars, pull down the house on themselves and everyone else, if they push things too far; or if the owners are unyielding there will be civil war... There are unpleasant years before us."*

The formation of the 'Triple Alliance' in 1914 which brought together the unions of miners, railway and transport workers provided a lever of enormous power to labour, and that is how it was viewed by the ruling class and grassroots union activists. It was a major development in the class struggle. Many workers saw the alliance as a means to a substantial improvement in their wages and conditions - and many also saw it as a powerful tool in the fight for a socialist society. On the whole however the view of the

union leaders was that the Alliance was mainly defensive. Nevertheless its power was deployed to block industrial conscription in 1916 in trades in which the Alliance provided support, and in 1919 in opposition to British government intervention against the new Bolshevik government in Russia.

However, as Brandon describes it; *“the contrast between the visionary ideals of the rank and file activists and the much more limited view that the leaders held was to be put to the test in the troubled years after the Great War”*.

By 1914 British capitalist society was extremely unstable and approaching breaking point. Basic industry was characterised by its technical lack of development and lagging productivity. More and more capital was being directed to financial services, intermediary functions like insurance and broking, rentier operations and the exploitation of the cheap labour of the colonial dominions. Between 1875 and 1914 Britain’s share of global manufacturing fell from 32% to 15%, dropping to third place behind the United States and Germany.

The ruling class was chomping at the bit to attack the unions and destroy their collective power. The competition of cheap foreign goods and the impact of rising prices made many capitalists feel that a confrontation with labour had to be brought on sooner rather than later, on this Lloyd George and Winston Churchill were certainly in agreement. Brandon provides a dramatic picture of the situation in Britain on the eve of the war;

*“Britain, in 1914, could with some justification be described as a society in a state approaching revolution. Unprecedented industrial unrest, women’s struggles for political and social emancipation, the ‘Irish Question’ and the Conservative and Unionist’s contempt for the rule of law in encouraging mutiny in the armed forces over the issue of Home Rule, the intransigence of the House of Lords in seeking to block progressive legislation; these were among issues tearing society apart. Then came the declaration of hostilities and, overnight, these took second place to the war effort but the tensions of which they were symptoms were not extirpated because of a short-lived sense of national unity brought about by war. The war only exacerbated the old tensions and created new ones which led, at least between 1918 and 1920, to a situation which, if anything, was even more volatile than that experienced in the immediate run-up to the war..... This fifty-year process of uncomfortable change provides a background and a context which is essential to any understanding of why the General Strike occurred in 1926.”*

### **Rising class militancy after the war**

It was clear to millions of workers in Britain, including huge numbers who had served in the war, that the country would not become a “land fit for heroes” after the war as the leaders of Britain had promised. On the other side the ruling class felt increasingly fearful of the concentration of power represented by the emergence of national trade unions in key industries. Most of the union leadership had declared their support for the war and could be relied upon to suppress unrest and ensure that the working class backed the war effort. Under the Munitions of War Act of 1915 compulsory arbitration was enforced and strikes in industries considered crucial to the war effort were deemed illegal. Under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) political opposition to the war was outlawed. The war also had the effect of bringing sections of the Union bureaucracy closer to the government, and this made many Union officials feel that they had a standing and respectability in the ‘system’ which gave them a feeling of great satisfaction.

Leading representatives from Labour were brought into government where they sat with reactionaries outwardly hostile to organised labour. One significant development in the Union movement, foreshadowing conflicts in the future, was the development of the shop stewards movement. As Brandon explains;

*“At grassroots level, union activists, especially those on the left, were concerned about their officials ‘cosying-up’ to the government and the employers. Relations between workplace activists and full-time officials had often been problematical. Now the perception was that the latter were even more removed from involvement with workplace issues. It is not surprising that a grassroots alternative leadership emerged as shop-stewards’ movements developed in critical industries across the country. Although there had been shop stewards in certain industries before the war, in the tensions of the immediate pre-war years and of the war itself these unpaid elected union officials assumed considerable importance in key industries. This rise of the shop stewards was evidence of the developing schism between the national leadership of the labour and trade union movement and the activists at local level, something that was very evident during the General Strike.”*

The Russian revolutions of 1917 came like an earthquake to the ruling classes of the major powers and not least in Great Britain. Since the French revolution of 1789 the British ruling classes were fearful of the potential of the masses to overthrow their rule. The overthrow of King George’s cousin, with whom he even shared a striking resemblance, the Tsar Nicholas II, awakened the British ruling elites to their worst nightmares. Historical documents establish that Britain did not seek to intervene in events in Russia at the time out of fear that it could provoke a workers’ revolution in Britain. The Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 which abolished private property and was largely the result of the refusal of Kerensky’s bourgeois regime to end the imperialist war, struck terror into the hearts of

the British elite. Churchill became the chief political spokesman against the Bolsheviks in Russia, and also a leading strategist against organised labour at home.

One important consequence of the revolution for the union movement Brandon refers to was that it increased tension between the union leadership and the rank and file. A resolution was passed to establish workers and soldiers soviets as had developed in revolutionary Russia. The statement was unofficial and not put into effect, however, thousands of ordinary working people cheered the Russian revolution and the aspirations of the Bolsheviks and the Russian workers and peasants to create an alternative economic and political system. These developments says Brandon;

*“provided further evidence of the growing schism between the left wing of the movement and the official leadership who had made abundantly clear their opposition to soviets. The very idea of such bodies conflicted totally with the drive of the official union leadership to gain respectability and an accepted role in the state apparatus of capitalist Britain.”*

### **January 1919 Clyde Workers Committee calls General Strike**

The post-war conservatism of the Trade Union leadership was responded to with the growing militancy of the rank and file workers. In January 1919 the Clyde Workers Committee, part of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers called a general strike. The Clyde was a major shipbuilding centre with a history of militancy, including during the war. The action at Clyde was led by militant left wing shop stewards. The Liberal-Conservative coalition government was frightened by the events at Clyde and King George V believed revolution was imminent. The King's concerns were no doubt reinforced by the hoisting of red flags on municipal buildings in Glasgow and violent battles between workers and police in St George's Square. The government brought in tanks and machine guns. Fearing unrest on London's transport system, the government decided to create the Industrial Unrest Committee (IUC). It was clear the State was moving towards a major confrontation with organised labour. Brandon describes the increasing dilemma which the government was confronting regarding the unions in the following way;

*“A formidable strike-breaking machine was being created which reflected the government's preoccupation with the possibility of serious labour trouble. While the government may have believed that it could largely control the official leaders of the labour movement there was uncertainty that it could do the same to grassroots leaders such as shop stewards and other lay officials. Many were militant socialists who usually understood the issues of immediate concern to those they represented. They were close to their members because they did the same jobs and, unlike the full-time officers, they were elected by them. Their members could deselect them if they did not fight their corner successfully. They*

*constituted a possible alternative trade union leadership the prospect of which the government found threatening. This was because such a leadership might not play the game within the rules that the government considered acceptable.”*

Brandon explains in some detail how through the 1920s increasing class militancy was met with deepening preparations by the government for a major conflict with organised labour.

In September 1919 railway workers struck over proposed wage cuts threatened by the railway companies. The companies tried to divide the railwaymen by meeting the demands of the footplate workers (footplate workers were those in the locomotive’s cab) and set up a “Strike Committee” to replace the governments Industrial Unrest Committee. Lloyd George referred to the railway strike as an “anarchist conspiracy”, and a “wanton attempt to hold up the community”. Brandon goes into some detail reviewing the history of the strike, the machinations of the government including the deployment of 23,000 troops, and the cowardly and unprincipled role played by Jimmy Thomas, Labour MP for Derby and a senior figure in the National Union of Railwaymen. Thomas’ role was in many ways a foretaste for the role he played in betraying the General Strike in 1926. The companies and the government finally agreed to maintain existing wage levels for a year for an immediate resumption of work. Brandon expresses his view as to the reason for the success of the railway workers;

*“Firstly, there was the superb level of solidarity in the ranks of the railway workers. The footplatemen of ASLEF spurned the bribe the government offered and came out with the other grades. There were very few blacklegs so scarcely any passenger trains moved and goods and mineral traffic ground to a halt.”*

And further he says;

*“There was much support from trade unionists in other industries and, notably, the print workers in London’s newspaper industry made it clear that they would not produce newspapers unless the railway workers’ case was given a fair hearing. A novel feature of the strike was the collaboration of the NUR and the Labour Research Department in putting their case in the newspapers, backed by well-researched financial data. This robust but level-headed approach won much middle-class sympathy and contrasted sharply with the cringing apologetics of Jimmy Thomas.”*

The government’s use of “volunteers” and “special constables” as well as the army was an indication of the resolve on the part of the capitalist State to deal ruthlessly with the

workers if necessary. The contrast with Thomas' compromising attitude could not have been sharper, and an ominous sign for the future.

In October 1920 the Emergency Powers Act became law - supported in the House of Commons by both Ramsay MacDonald and Clement Attlee from the Labour front bench. The Act permitted the government to declare a "state of emergency" to last for a month and to implement "all regulations necessary" if there was considered to be a threat to the nation's "essentials of life".

It was already clear to more astute elements of the bourgeoisie and its political leaders by 1919 that more valuable than any legislation or other powers it might utilise against the workers in a major clash, its most valuable asset was the indecisive and conciliatory character of the trade union leaderships. Brandon recounts a remarkable incident highlighting this class reality which occurred in 1919 when Lloyd George had a meeting with the leaders of the Triple Alliance, comprising the Mining Transport and Railway unions. Lloyd George told the meeting:

*"You have fashioned, in the Triple Alliance... a most powerful instrument. I feel bound to tell you that in our opinion we are at your mercy. The army is disaffected and cannot be relied upon... We have emerged from a great war and the people are eager for the reward of their sacrifices, and we are in no position to satisfy them. In these circumstances, if you carry out your threat and strike, then you will defeat us. But if you do, have you weighed the consequences? The strike will be in defiance of the government of this country and by its very success will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. For if a force arises which is stronger than the State itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the State, or withdraw and accept the authority of the State. Gentlemen, have you considered, and if you have, are you ready?"*

Brandon's assessment of this meeting and the response of the union leaders is very illuminating and worth quoting in full;

*"Robert Smillie, one of the miners' leaders, who attended the meeting, went on record as saying: 'From that moment on we were beaten and we knew we were.' It is extraordinary that a group of seasoned and presumably intelligent trade union leaders had to be told what the full implications of a general strike were. Lloyd George was, of course, right. It suggests that he knew more about the men that he was dealing with than they knew about themselves. We can only speculate on just how important Lloyd George's seemingly casual comment was for the future course of events. Smillie's statement strongly suggests that the union leadership in the years up to 1926 found itself being swept along towards an*

*inevitable debacle they feared and dreaded. They were not revolutionaries. Their vision was limited to one of manoeuvring within the existing economic and social structure to obtain better wages and working conditions for their members. To what extent was the outcome of the General Strike decided in this meeting in 1919?"*

The answer to that question was a resounding "completely", as subsequent events, and particularly the role of the trade union tops clearly proved.

### **The problems of the coal industry and the development of the General Strike**

Brandon discusses in some detail the critical problems in the British coal industry which rendered virtually inevitable a major conflict between the coal owners and the miners. These factors are well worth studying because they highlight the objective character of the relationship between the insurmountable structural problems of industry organised on a profit basis and therefore the inescapable conflict between labour and capital more generally, and the role of the State in that conflict. At the heart of the problem lies increasing competition in a capitalist world economy.

The quick end of the post war up-turn and the recovery of the French and German coal industry forced down coal prices and rapidly made the British industry loss-making by the early 1920s. As soon as the mines, which had been placed under government control during the war, were handed back to the owners, they demanded substantial wage cuts. There were a number of commissions set up by the government to enquire into the coal industry prior to the General Strike in 1926 (The Sankey Commission in 1919 and the Samuel Commission in March 1926) but the fundamental structural problems of the industry made a solution - short of nationalisation - impossible.

Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders of the Russian revolution, had addressed the problems of the British coal industry and the role of the union bureaucracy in his writings in March 1926. He wrote *"the necessity of a technical and economic reconstruction of the coal industry represents a profoundly revolutionary problem and requires a political "reconstruction" of the working class. The destruction of the conservatism of the British coal industry, this foundation of British capitalism, can only be through the destruction of the conservative organisations, traditions and customs of the British labour movement ."*

Summing up the general political and economic situation regarding the coal industry just two months before the strike, Trotsky wrote;

*"the general situation can be characterised in this way; the economic blind alley of the country which is most sharply expressed in the coal industry thrusts the working class on the path of seeking a solution, that is on the path of an even sharper struggle. Its' very first*

*stage will as a result reveal the inadequacy of the 'usual' methods of struggle. The whole of the present-day "superstructure" of the British working class - in all of its shades and groupings without exception - represents a braking mechanism on the revolution."*

In October 1924 the Labour government lost the election bringing its very short hold on office to an end. The Conservatives gained a majority of over 200 seats. Labour's fall from office was largely attributable to a red scare promoted by the Conservatives and the capitalist press. The well-known tale of the forged Zinoviev letter, says Brandon, *"undoubtedly had its desired effect of persuading the more gullible sections of the electorate that a Bolshevik revolution was on the way if a labour government was re-elected."* The new government saw itself as staunch defenders of capital. Baldwin and Churchill looked forward to a major confrontation and got on with making preparations.

An increase in the supply of coal from American and Polish-Silesian mines and reopened German pits in the Ruhr region, put huge pressure on the British coal industry. The return of Britain to the gold standard in April 1925 led to a revalued Sterling which drove British coal prices higher in export markets. The response of the coal owners is succinctly summarised by Brandon;

*"The mine owners protested, pleading poverty. They owned an industry which was outdated, inefficient and desperately needing modernisation and reorganisation. Many owners were men of considerable wealth and influence who saw no reason why they should be subjected to reorganisation or other compulsory government intervention. They argued that since they were not getting the prices they wanted for their coal, there was no alternative but for the miners to work longer hours and take a pay cut."*

The miners were ready to fight. Many workers' wages were just above subsistence levels, and also felt they should be paid wages which reflected the critical role they played in the British economy. The miners looked for support from the rest of the union movement if they could not reach an agreement with the coal proprietors regarding wages, working hours and the modernisation of the industry.

However the owners would not retreat in their demands for wage cuts. The TUC promised to support the miners and the railway, transport and seamen's unions declared a ban on coal movements from midnight on 31 July 1925. The situation had all the makings of a general strike. The government suddenly backed down and promised a subsidy to the coal industry until 1 May 1926 in order to avoid a damaging confrontation. The victory was cheered by the miners and working class more broadly but given the deep structural problems of the coal industry could only be a temporary victory. Lloyd George criticised

the government for being “afraid of cold steel” and Churchill was reported as saying “we decided to postpone the crisis in the hope of averting it or, if not averting it, of coping effectively with it when the time comes.”

Brandon describes in some detail the 9 months leading up to the general strike including the failure of the Samuel Commission to advance proposals to resolve the problems of the industry satisfactory to both sides. The Commission acknowledged the need for the reorganisation of the industry, recommended no longer working hours but a cut in wages, but not to the extent demanded by the employers. The Miners’ Federation restated its opposition to wage cuts, their slogan was “Not a penny off the pay, not a second on the day”. The TUC was fearful of calling a general strike, and other union leaders were afraid of the strike being unsuccessful. For that reason, as Brandon emphasises, they never wanted a general strike. The hesitation of the union leadership was not mirrored however by the coal owners. On 30 April the owners terminated the existing agreement with the MFGB and demanded big wage cuts. Brandon describes the pathetic and grovelling conduct of Jimmy Thomas and the TUC in the face of the inevitable confrontation;

*“The woebegone and panic-stricken TUC General Council repeatedly appealed to the Prime Minister to help them find a way, almost any way, to avoid the abyss opening in front of them. Their naivety was astonishing given that Baldwin by reason of his upbringing and his inclinations would inevitably side with capital in any major confrontation with labour even if his natural preference would always have been to come to an accommodation acceptable to all parties. Jimmy Thomas plumbed new depths of obsequiousness when he described what happened at a meeting on 30 April with Baldwin and members of the government. He said:*

*... I suppose my usual critics will say that Thomas was almost grovelling, and it is true. In all my long experience... I have never begged and pleaded like I begged and pleaded all day today, and I pleaded not alone because I believed in my bones that my duty to the country involved it.*

*No wonder Baldwin and the government knew that they had little to fear from such men as Thomas.”*

On 1 May 1926 the general secretaries of the affiliated unions handed their powers to the General Council for the duration of the strike which was to commence on 3 May. The overwhelming vote in support was 3,653,529 votes to 49,911. The workers were to be called out by their respective unions as opposed to the TUC. Instructions were issued to

the Trades Councils who were to be responsible for the efforts of the affiliated unions at the local level.

The General Strike lasted from one minute to midnight on 3 May 1926 until twenty past midnight on 12 May. Brandon in the chapter titled "Days of Strike" provides a very detailed and riveting account of the workers struggle which formed the strike. He describes the determination, solidarity and discipline of the rank and file workers in the battle with the coal magnates. There was a very high response to the call to strike and the determination to fight to a victory by the mass of striking workers did not waver. Brandon contrasts the determination of the workers to the conciliatory and muddled Union leadership. At one point he writes;

*"The strike showed that any proper railway service, let alone normal economic activity, was unsustainable without the everyday contribution of working people. It was their labour that underpinned modern society. This gave the organised working class enormous potential collective bargaining power, but they were lions led by donkeys. Full-time trade union officials were generally appointed, not elected, usually paid more than the workers they represented and had 'escaped' the drudgery that was the working life of so many of their members. They tended to see themselves climbing the greasy pole of upward social mobility. In doing so, they often lost sight of, or even sympathy for, the needs of their members. Such men were unhappy finding themselves 'leading' industrial action, let alone the ultimate unthinkable situation, a general strike."*

What hope was there, asks Brandon, that the miners were going to get a fair deal when the mass of sympathy strikers had leaders of this sort? Jimmy Thomas continued attempts to settle the strike without a mandate from the ranks of the union membership. For its part the government, this time thoroughly prepared, made a show of enormous power and determination. Naval personnel were deployed extensively in power stations. Armoured cars and army lorries supported by military guards carried essential supplies around the country. Troops were not directed against picket lines but had a heavy presence in cities like Birmingham, Cardiff and East London, which were aimed at intimidating the working class. Thousands of "volunteers" however were deployed as strike breakers throughout the country, many drawn from reactionary layers of the middle classes.

However, despite the heroic efforts of rank and file workers, half way through the strike on day five it was already clear that the government had the upper hand and the TUC wanted to raise the white flag. Baldwin announced on the BBC that he was someone the people

could trust and that he wanted peace. Brandon makes no mistake about the wily tactics of prime minister Baldwin;

*“He portrayed himself as an honest broker merely wanting to bring the government, the employers and the unions together around the negotiating table and to do so because he had the national interest at heart. He was absolutely determined that the challenge to the rule of capital posed by the General Strike would be decisively defeated.*

*Baldwin might have liked to pose as the man of reason but on the BBC he also announced the formation of a new ‘Civil Constabulary Reserve’ which was to be composed entirely of ex-soldiers. They would form an auxiliary constabulary and be equipped with steel helmets and truncheons. There was anger across the labour movement when it was revealed that they would be full-time and be remunerated considerably better than the highest-paid miners. He made this announcement on the same day that he told the nation that he was ‘a man of peace’.*”

In contrast, says Brandon, the union leadership displayed nothing but supine cowardice;

*“The TUC, despite a high degree of continued determination at local level across much of the country, had lost whatever little stomach it ever had for the fight, reiterating constantly but rather pathetically that it was not threatening the constitution or attacking the community. The height of its aspirations now seemed to be making a settlement as quickly as possible. While the miners would have to accept wage reductions, it might be possible to negotiate a further temporary subsidy for the industry. The TUC’s Negotiating Committee may have believed that this was a viable way forward but, if so, the members were deluding themselves. The government wanted nothing more or less than an unconditional end to the strike.”*

Late on day six of the strike the General Council told the miners’ executive that the miners had to take wage cuts and longer hours if there was going to be a settlement. The TUC was desperate to call off the strike but the miners’ leaders were determined that there would be no wage cuts. The TUC leadership became hostile to the miners’ leaders, with Arthur Pugh of the TUC telling the miners’ leaders that they were living in a “fools’ paradise”. Thomas continued to vent his deep aversion to the strike, claiming without evidence, that large scale violence would take place between the strikers and the police if there was no quick settlement of the dispute.

As Brandon observes; *“The government however now had little doubt that events were running in its favour. The strike had become a battle of wills between the government and the unions. Under the pressure of events the TUC’s will broke first.”*

One of the most disgraceful actions of the TUC during the strike was its refusal to accept £200,000 in funds which had been sent by trade unionists in the Soviet Union in aid of the striking workers, and sent the money back! They refused on the basis that they would be depicted as pro-soviet and part of a revolutionary plot! Few acts could have more decisively revealed the completely reactionary character of the union leaders.

### **Capitulation by the TUC**

On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the strike the TUC made further attempts to force the miners leaders to accept the Memorandum of Settlement which provided for wage reductions and longer hours, but failed. At around noon representatives of the General Council attended 10 Downing Street to meet the Prime Minister as had been previously arranged. Totally humiliated, they were told that they were only permitted to enter if they provided assurances that the General Strike had been called off. Brandon paints a graphic picture of the TUC’s abject surrender on that day;

*“More humiliation followed as Arthur Pugh for the TUC preceded his statement that the strike was ending forthwith with pious hopes that a satisfactory settlement for all could be reached. This was followed by Ernest Bevin, a man who liked to be regarded as the sort who called a spade a spade, cringingly stating that he hoped the TUC’s action in ending the strike would be seen as one of strength not weakness. It was nothing of the sort. It was unconditional surrender. The miners were on their own. Almost beyond belief, the evening edition of the British Worker, in announcing the end of the strike, told its readers that the miners would now get fair treatment. For its part, the MFGB quickly disassociated itself from the TUC’s decision to call off the strike. The lockout of the miners continued.*

*On the government side there was no delusion about the nature of what had happened. Even Lord Birkenhead, one of the most hawkish of the inner circle, said he ‘felt something akin to compassion for the TUC leaders as they trooped dejectedly out of the Cabinet room.’”*

When the truth of what had occurred became known the reaction was one of “incredulity, despair and anger”. The sell-out came as a stunning blow to millions of workers. That they had initially been lied to, and told that the miners’ dispute would be satisfactorily resolved came as a stinging betrayal. Meanwhile the yellow press described the TUC capitulation as the “Surrender of the Revolutionaries”!

The battle in the coal fields continued until November 1926 with neither side prepared to give ground. However the hardships of the miners and their families took a massive toll and eventually reached agonising levels. The coal owners were wealthy men and could continue to maintain their position indefinitely. With winter coming the morale of the miners was blunted and there was a slow return to work. The miners were essentially starved back to the pits. Most mines were operating by the end of November and miners were forced to take wage reductions, work longer hours and subjected to diminished employment security.

Thousands of miners were left in long term unemployment and thousands experienced deep poverty. It was a terrible defeat despite the extraordinary courage and resolution shown by the whole working class. Determined to drive home its advantage on behalf of capital the government in 1927 enacted the Trades Disputes and Trade Union Act making sympathetic strikes and mass picketing illegal. Union membership plummeted in the years following the defeat of the General Strike and the trade union movement did not recover for many years says Brandon, who lays the blame for the defeat squarely at the feet of the TUC. In his assessment the TUC had failed to make preparations for a looming crisis pointing to a general strike.

Brandon writes; *“It failed to support the strike with any real vigour, giving the impression that it did not want a strike in the first place but also never believed that it could be won. It betrayed the miners by unconditionally calling off the strike. This was the end of what was probably the most bitter dispute in British industrial relations. The MFGB was effectively destroyed as a fighting force for about a decade.”*

### **Conclusions and important lessons**

Drawing some theoretical conclusions regarding the failure of the strike and the role of trade unionism Brandon makes the following observations, which provide a valuable insight for those fighting for genuine socialism today;

*“Leaving the personalities of the individuals who composed the TUC leadership aside, the explanation of their behaviour lies with the nature of trade unionism itself. It is defensive in nature. It seeks an accommodation with capitalism rather than a challenge to its hegemony. Capitalist societies are extremely hierarchical. A tiny percentage of the population possesses a disproportionately large percentage of the wealth and power. Despite pious statements in trade union constitutions about their aim being to obtain for the workers the full reward for their labours, their efforts are restricted to bargaining for a*

*bigger share for workers within the existing system rather than seeking to replace it with a different system that might bring about greater equality of wealth and opportunity.*

Brandon provides another important insight into the experience of the British working class in the aftermath of the strike. Following the strike, unions lost large numbers of members and when the great depression struck working people looked to the parliamentary Labour party and the election of a Labour government in 1929 to help with their pressing problems including low pay and mass unemployment. Again they were betrayed when, in 1931, faced with the gravest economic crisis in British history, Ramsay MacDonald, head of the Labour Party, and short-lived first Labour Prime Minister in 1924, agreed to lead a Coalition government dominated by the Conservatives, in the “National Interest”. Capital, for the last 100 years has been secure in the knowledge that the Labour Party and the Trade Union leadership are trusted guardians of its interests. “Democracy”, as we know it, always puts the employers first.

Writing contemporaneously, Trotsky saw the same fundamental political-class dynamics at work in the General Strike and its defeat. Writing on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the General Strike he made the following analysis;

*“A general strike is the sharpest form of class struggle. It is only one step from the general strike to armed insurrection. This is precisely why the general strike, more than any other form of class struggle, requires clear distinct resolute, and therefore revolutionary leadership. In the current strike of the British proletariat there is not a ghost of such leadership, and it is not to be expected that it can be conjured up out of the ground. The General Council of the Trades Union Congress set out with the ridiculous statement that the present General Strike did not represent a political struggle and did not in any event constitute an assault upon the state power of the bankers, industrialists and landowners, or upon the sanctity of British parliamentarism.”*

As the strike showed all too clearly, unlike the leaders of the unions, the representatives of British capital showed no hesitation in deploying all the political weapons which were available to them to crush the strike, including the State’s “bodies of armed men”, the Legislature, the Press and the Lords.

David Brandon’s history of the 1926 General Strike is an excellent, detailed and well argued account of the events. Great emphasis is appropriately laid on the structural problems of the British economy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century which was the root source of the conflict, and in particular, the contradictions of the capitalist profit system as expressed in the coal industry, which were insoluble.

Importantly, Brandon shows how the TUC leadership's class-conciliatory approach to the conflict doomed the General Strike to failure, leading to great misery and impoverishment of thousands of workers. Brandon's book, alongside Trotsky's contemporaneous writings on Britain in 1925-1926 provide invaluable lessons as, one hundred years later, the deep and intractable problems of British and world capitalism once again are leading to a stormy period of social upheaval and class conflict in which the question - capitalism or socialism - is once again inexorably posed.