

and to subject the people by the same bloody methods which it used to gain power, and which it would no doubt use again to remain in power. Bloody force will also be the means to abolish it in the end. When our popular movement enters its own path, it must this time protect its rear and fight any remaining tendency of negligence or indifference towards armed right-wing violence. Weapons in the hands of nationalists and democrats in the armed forces are not enough; there is no substitute for the weapons in the hands of the revolutionary

masses as we learned from the experience of October and from July 19. . . .

We must act patiently, wisely and without haste. We shall advance step by step, in deep awareness of the need to safeguard our Party, and of our responsibility, inspired by the mass movement, by the courage of the martyrs of July 19, by the firmness of the prisoners and the detainees, by the hopes of our people and our working class—confident of victory and immune against the spirit of defeatism and submission. . . .

Labour History

The General Strike in Nottingham

Peter Wyncoll

1926 for the Nottingham Working Class was a grim year. The bottom had long ago dropped out of Lloyd George's "Land Fit For Heroes" and the town's mining community in particular was enduring terrible hardship. During April 1926 the town's unemployed figure stood at 6,143, whilst a further 1,447 were either on short time or stood off.¹ The figures for those in receipt of Poor Relief, are just as shocking. During April they numbered 13,335 whilst in May (the month of the General Strike) they shot up to 59,384 so that only the figures for London, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Wigan were higher.²

Conditions like this had been with the town since shortly after the First World War. One of the earliest recollections of Jack Charlesworth for many years the Secretary of Nottingham Trades Council, is of seeing a family being driven to the workhouse in the early years of the century:

"One of my earliest memories is of seeing a family being driven to the workhouse in a hansom cab . . . I remember all the neighbours turning out to see this wife and about four children being driven to the workhouse, they were waving and it was almost a ceremonial procession".³

A skilled hosiery worker, Jack remembers the years before 1926 as extremely lean ones, with short time

working being the rule. The Nottinghamshire coal-field too, was going through hard times, and in the period immediately prior to the General Strike, collier George Hamilton who worked at Bestwood pit remembers having to leave school because with nine in the family the money he could earn as an errand lad was vital to the family exchequer.⁴

Arthur Statham, a keen member of the town's ILP branch, who had spent the war years in Dartmoor as a conscientious objector, remembered a gradual feeling developing among the townspeople prior to the strike that "something should be done for the miners."⁵ Cyril Goddard, also an objector to the war, never actually attended school for more than a few days at a time because of the need to help support the family, and he remembers long spells of unemployment before the strike. Like Arthur Statham, Cyril remembers a strong feeling in the town that the miners were getting a "dirty deal"⁶ and a general atmosphere of gloom as the depression deepened.

As the economic climate cooled, conditions in all of Britain's industrial centres gradually worsened. In Nottingham and its surrounding area however, conditions were particularly bad because of the heavy dependence on the mining industry, and although tobacco and light engineering had taken their place alongside mining and hosiery as the

¹ Nottingham Evening Post, May 1, 1926.

² Labour Research Dept., July 1926, Vol. 15, No. 7.

³ Jack Charlesworth: Tape Recording, Jan. 12, 1969.

⁴ George Hamilton: Tape Recording, Jan. 9, 1969.

⁵ Arthur Statham: Tape Recording, Jan. 11, 1969.

⁶ Cyril Goddard: Tape Recording, Jan. 12, 1969.

area's main fields of employment, they had not been able to force the town's labour movement into any more obedient mould than had the mine owners, so that in 1926 there is ample evidence that the class forces of the area like those of the rest of the country were preparing for a major confrontation.

Preparing for the Battle

The months leading up to the General Strike followed a long period of sharpening class conflict. By the early months of 1926 every element within the British capitalist class was convinced of the need for a major showdown with organised labour, and they quickly began the task of creating the organisational weapons with which the battle would be fought. In late September 1925 the formation of a body called the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies was announced. Its leadership was packed with retired military gentlemen and its object was quite clearly to break a General Strike.

The Government itself took rapid steps to organise for a major confrontation. England and Wales were divided into divisions, each under a Civil Commissioner with a group of previously appointed civil servants to assist him. Each of the ten divisions had beneath it a network of local committees each with its own intricate organisation. The Divisional Officers were given full power under various Emergency Powers Acts, and they were empowered to requisition, and to fix prices. In December 1925, and January 1926 conferences were held between national and local officials; two more conferences were held in March, and all that was needed for this elaborate organisation to swing into operation was the receipt of a telegram containing the single word "Action".

As the capitalist class generally began to take the offensive the Labour Movement's response was hesitant and timid. By and large the constant warnings of the Communist Party and other militants to prepare for a massive confrontation went unheeded. Indeed the class collaborationists within the Trade Union and Labour Movement mounted a vicious attack on these progressive elements, and at the Liverpool Conference of the Labour Party the right-wing pushed through a resolution expelling Communists from the Labour Party.

Against this background the crisis in the coal industry deepened. In an effort to take the heat out of the situation the Government had set up a Royal Commission and much was hoped of its report. The miners however expected little, and although the General Council of the TUC seemed to place a lot of confidence in it, the miner's leadership prepared for the worst. In March 1926 the Commission reported. Pared to the bone, it rejected the demand for nationalisation, and proposed an immediate reduction in wages. These two recommendations

were wrapped in a mass of woolly generalisations and vague conciliatory proposals so that the right-wing leaders of the TUC and the Labour Party were able to hail the report as a victory.

During April the positions of the two sides began to harden. The Miners Federation on April 9 rejected the essence of the Royal Commissions Report, and issued instructions to its District Federations that the working day must not be lengthened, the principle of the minimum wage must be adhered to and that no cut in wages must be accepted. There followed a complex series of meetings involving the Miners Federation, the Mine-owners, the General Council and the Government all predictably ended in deadlock.

On April 29 a special Conference of Trade Union Executives met to consider the position. In the face of the mineowners' refusal to agree a compromise solution, the conference was forced to draw up proposals for co-ordinated action. On May 1 the Cabinet put into action the Emergency Powers Act; troop movements followed, and a call for volunteers was issued by the OMS. In the days which remained before the deadline set by the Conference of Trade Union Executives ran out, the General Council of the TUC did everything in their power to achieve a compromise solution. All TUC approaches to the Government were rejected, and after the print workers at the *Daily Mail* had refused to print a vitriolic attack on the Trade Union Movement the Government broke off negotiations, and at midnight on May 3 the General Strike broke out.

The Capitalists Prepare

In Nottingham the Government's decision to set up strike-breaking machinery on a divisional basis had been quickly carried through. Captain H. Douglas King MP had been named as Commissioner for the North Midland district. His object was to maintain all essential services and on May 3 immediately prior to the strike he issued a statement that, "the public can be assured that all preliminary steps have been taken to ensure the maintenance of supplies of necessities."⁷ In fact a great deal of work had gone into setting up elaborate strike-breaking machinery. There were people in every district prepared to open offices and enlist volunteers as soon as they received the signal. The North Midlands was divided into eight districts each with a Chairman, Road, Coal, Postage, Haulage, Food, and Finance Officers and the class background of these gentlemen is made obvious by the fact that three more of Captain Douglas King's staff were recruited from the military, whilst the rest came from the business community.

The town's capitalists had also been busy setting

⁷ Nottingham Guardian, May 3, 1926.

up a local Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. On the eve of the strike a Volunteer Recruiting Office was opened, and advertisements calling for volunteers placed in the local press. According to one report there were about five thousand volunteers in Nottingham but this estimate is almost certainly inflated, since at a meeting of the Organisation on April 30 it was stated that in some parts of the County doors had been slammed in the faces of the Organisation's canvassers.⁸ In fact it was reported that the Organisation was established in 118 parishes out of the 260 in the Nottingham area. How strong these local groups were is uncertain. Captain H. C. Serbrooke DSO and Mr. H. D. Cherry-Downes both felt that many people had refused to sign on with the Organisation because they feared victimisation. However, Captain Turner reported that the Organisation's Headquarters was disgusted that so little had been done in Nottingham. He made the point that a poster campaign in West Bridgford had absolutely no effect, whilst Cherry-Downes advanced the view that the Unions had passed the word to have nothing to do with the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies.

The activities of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies were paralleled by the Volunteer Service Committee under the leadership of Major Stuart Hartshorn CBE. This Committee was active in recruiting Special Constables and during the strike over a thousand were sworn in. Amongst these worthies was Sir Ernest Jardine who personally marched 130 of his staff to the Guildhall where they were sworn in. Jardine's friend A. W. Kirkaldy, the President of the Chamber of Commerce, was appointed officer commanding one of the volunteer companies, and the Chamber's leading role in the strike-breaking forces is further emphasised by the appointment of its Secretary as one of the six Superintendents of the volunteer forces.

In fact, the organised blacklegging of the Chamber of Commerce was very highly developed. When the strike started it placed its transport unreservedly at the disposal of the Civil Commissioner. During the strike the transport department, the only one of its kind in the country, maintained a regular service to and from London. Its vehicles were in use carrying not only food, but lace, hosiery, tobacco, medical supplies, made-up goods, and other products of the Nottingham factories. The Chamber took over a warehouse in the Lace Market which it used as a clearing house whilst maintaining a daily service to London, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester.

The business-dominated City Council too, was fully prepared to back strike-breaking activity to the hilt. Leading members like Alderman Sir Bernard Wright, and Alderman Albert Ball, were appointed

to take such steps as they considered necessary to deal with the strike situation. Perhaps remembering the manner in which the town's workers had fired the Castle in the Reform Bill riots of 1831, their first decision was to close the Castle to the public. Many of the town's Aldermen and Councillors were intimately connected with the town's industrial life, and it is not surprising that they regarded the strike as a fundamental threat to their class position. At every opportunity during its duration the Council came down firmly on the side of the State, and it is likely that they took Baldwin's pre-strike advice to "keep steady. Remember that peace on earth comes to men of goodwill"⁹ with a pinch of salt. It is probable too that the Bishop of Southwell's first sermon in the town in which he urged his listeners, "remain calm and hopeful" met with a mixed reception from those worthies of the town's establishment who for months had been preparing for a major showdown.

The Contrast

In contrast with the speed and relative efficiency with which the local representatives of capital made their preparations for the coming confrontation, the Nottingham Labour Movement's battle preparations were slow and hesitant. At the September 1925 meeting of the Trades Council it was reported that a local meeting of the industries concerned in the Quadruple Alliance had been held, at which it was resolved to form a local Council of Action. From this it would seem that Nottingham's organised workers had been influenced by the warnings of the Communists and were prepared to regard Red Friday as only the first round in a long struggle. Tragically however, the support given by the national leaders to the local Trades Councils was timid and ineffective. At the October 1925 meeting of the Nottingham Trades Council the Secretary reported that the activities of the local Council of Action were being held up because of his inability to obtain information from the national leaders. In December the situation was no better with the Secretary reporting that the Council of Action machinery had now seized up owing to the lack of guidance from the central bodies concerned, the whole question he said had now been referred to the General Council of the TUC.

The 1926 Trades Council elections produced a mixed leadership from craft and general unions. Of the collective leadership the miners provided only Tom Willoughby, although W. Askew of the Nottinghamshire Miners acted as one of the Trades Council's Labour Party delegates. Of the leadership in 1926 Billy Lees of the Distributive Workers was probably the most politically motivated and class

⁸ Nottingham Guardian, April 30, 1926.

⁹ Nottingham Journal, May 3, 1926.

conscious. He was an early supporter of the Communist Party and during the strike he was the only one of the local leadership to be arrested and imprisoned.

Politically the town's left wing in 1926 was many sided. The Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party, and the Communist Party all had active groups. Since the end of the war the town's Socialists had increased their numbers considerably. Many of these converts had come to the left through admiration of the new Russian State, and many more after bitter periods of unemployment in the period leading up to the strike. The Labour Party was of course the strongest of the left wing elements in the town, although the ILP claimed over 500 members. Many of the Labour Party's best activists had however left the party when the Communist Party was formed in 1920. To many on the left the Labour Party was already being seen as a reformist force. Jack Charlesworth for instance remembers its leadership as, "really reactionary".¹⁰ Cyril Goddard would agree with this view and he remembers most of the local Labour Party's leaders as being careerists of one sort or another. "The majority of the Labour Party boys were out for a career, if they hadn't been in the Labour Party they would have been in the Tory Party if it offered them a career."¹¹

The political work of the town's Socialists was based on the ILP's hall, and on rooms used by several groups in the William Morris Institute. These rooms were used by the Socialist Sunday School, Clarion Supporters, ILP and Communist Party supporters, as well as the Labour Party for a variety of social and educational activities which bore fruit in what Arthur Statham described as a "nightly hive of activity".¹² The town's famous Cosmopolitan Debating Society was at the height of its activity as a left wing forum, and the Labour Movement's press had never been so widely read and appreciated. The *Herald*, the *Clarion*, and *Reynolds News* were all popular. Jack Charlesworth remembers selling Labour papers in the Market Square and outside cinemas, whilst other veterans helped to build up sales by door to door sales.

The Strike Begins

Most of the political activists in the town were also active in the trade union movement, and these links were well demonstrated at the 1926 May Day demonstration. Taking place only a day before the strike broke out the demonstration was the biggest in the town for some years. Assembling on the Forest several thousand workers heard Alderman H. Bowles assure them that at midnight the local

labour movement would stand wholeheartedly with the miners. Arthur Hayday MP for West Nottingham declared that the trouble represented the breakdown of modern capitalism, whilst the President of the Trades Council told the crowd that unless the Government capitulated and saw that justice was done they would have the whole of the workers against them.

This meeting took place in the afternoon of May 2; the morning had seen a procession which eclipsed all previous records for size and display. The parade took nearly half-an-hour to pass any given point, and as a spectacle and pageant it "drew applause even from those who had little sympathy with the ideals of those taking part." The local paper records several interesting costume groups including one arranged by the Sherwood Ward Labour Party in which Friar Tuck led a pony on which rode Maid Marian, accompanied by Robin Hood and his Merry Men. A touch of humour was supplied by a humble pram labelled, "The Workers Daimler" and a derelict motor car dragged by two cart horses in which sat a miner carrying a placard declaring "both broke". A group of ILP paper sellers dressed in French Revolution costume also took part, and the procession was led by bands playing the *Red Flag*. Perhaps the most popular tableau was one which featured a satire in which a hearse carrying the "Death of Capitalism" was followed by a vehicle on which the "Birth of Socialism" was illustrated.

In the evening several more meetings were held. At the ILP rally the group's chairman warned, "the war in which we are about to engage might not bring bayonet and shell but it will bring sorrow and danger".¹³ On the same evening at another demonstration Mr. J. H. Hayes MP told his audience, "do not play the enemy's game, don't allow yourself to come into conflict with the OMS or the Fascisti, treat them with contempt."¹⁴ The Communist Party's pre-strike meeting was held on the same evening and Cyril Goddard remembers it well; "the Party was fully alive to the fact that the Government was organising and the TUC was doing nothing . . . at our meeting I remember the speaker Harry Webb, the 'Mighty Atom'* we called him, making the point-watch your leaders . . . and by God they took some watching."¹⁵

The workers of Nottingham then, spent the day before the strike began demonstrating their solidarity with the miners and the International Labour

¹³ Nottingham Journal, May 3, 1926.

¹⁴ Nottingham Journal, May 3, 1926.

* Harry Webb was rather small but had a voice of immense power.

¹⁵ Cyril Goddard: Tape Recording Jan. 12, 1969.

¹⁰ Jack Charlesworth: Tape Recording Jan. 12, 1969.

¹¹ Cyril Goddard: Tape Recording, Jan. 12, 1969.

¹² Arthur Statham: Tape Recording, Jan. 11, 1969.

Movement. Their mood was optimistic, Jack Charlesworth remembers that when many of the pubs closed at 10 p.m. the *Red Flag* was the last song sung. Unfortunately as the strike progressed, the optimism of the Nottingham workers would change into one of depression as the betrayal of the national leadership became more and more obvious. Meanwhile the day before the strike commenced it was a buoyant and optimistic Labour Movement which looked forward to the coming struggle.

Despite the confusion of the pre-strike period, the Trades Council acted quickly on May 3. A Nottingham and District Joint Advisory Dispute Committee was quickly formed at a meeting convened by telegram. It was resolved at this meeting that the Strike Committee should be composed of two representatives of each of the unions involved in the dispute together with the whole of the Trades Council Executive, and delegates from Long Eaton and Netherfield. Whilst the strike was on the Committee sat every day, as did the sub-committees which it appointed to deal with the questions of permits, publicity, meetings, and outside pickets.

The First Days

As far as the rank and file were concerned their response to the strike was magnificent. The TUC's official report on the strike records the fact, that Nottingham was amongst the towns where the response was "unexpectedly and amazingly fine".¹⁶

The strike call was answered first by transport workers and those employed in heavy industry leading the walk out. On this first day of the strike the local evening paper managed to produce an edition which carried a story detailing "great activity" outside the offices of the T&GWU and the NUGMW where workers not yet called out were anxiously inquiring if they could cease work. Huge meetings of transport workers and railwaymen were held in various parts of the town, and the mood was summed up at a joint meeting of the three rail unions where Mr. W. Halls, the NUR District Organiser, after appealing for order and discipline went on: "we knew this day was bound to come sooner or later and we ought to be glad. It is a day we have hoped for and prayed for and looked forward to . . . we ought to be delighted."¹⁷

Meanwhile the sub-committees of the Strike Committee had swung into action. Of these the most important was the group of men responsible for considering and endorsing permits for the removal of foodstuffs. It was through this Committee's work that the power and authority of the workers was most dramatically demonstrated, and the workers

Strike Bulletin of May 6 was able to report, "Mr. Harding the area food controller, has undertaken to move no food except by permission of the Strike Committee. He does not recognise the OMS."¹⁸

May 4 saw the first real excitement of the strike. Both the bus and tram services were idle, and the few private buses which ventured into the town were attacked and overturned. During one demonstration the private car belonging to a local bus proprietor was turned over. This proprietor made a determined effort to run his bus fleet with non-union labour, but after a great deal of trouble with pickets who in some cases removed the carburetors of his buses, he discontinued the effort about noon. Later on May 4, some two thousand strikers toured the Queens Drive area and demanded that work should stop at a number of local factories. After they had rushed the Nottingham Brewery Company, the police were called and scuffles and fights broke out. Later they visited the Midland Timber Company, and the works of Messrs Jardine, but since they were accompanied by a strong force of police they were unsuccessful in their attempt to call out the workers of these firms. Despite these disappointments however, the strikers were able to halt a motor lorry owned by Skinner and Rook, and were successful in removing its load of beer and groceries before the police arrived.

Predictably the class forces opposed to the workers didn't take kindly to this kind of activity. The local evening paper ran an editorial on May 4 which spelt out the attitude of the establishment:

"We now wish to record our protest against the use of the General Strike as a weapon with which to settle a sectional dispute . . . we imagine there is very little enthusiasm for a General Strike amongst the vast majority of workers. . . ."¹⁹

The writer of this editorial soon found out how wrong was his assumption that there was little enthusiasm for the strike when on the morning of May 5, his own printers walked off the job. Nottingham's other newspaper was also hit by the strike. During the strike it managed to produce a duplicated sheet containing national news items, a summary of parliamentary debates, and the cricket scores. The owners of the local press were predictably outraged at the interference with their ability to make profits, and on resuming publication published the usual hypocritical editorials calling for, "the unqualified support of every man and woman who values the English birthright of personal liberty and freedom of the press."²⁰

¹⁶ TUC General Council: The Mining Crisis and the National Strike 1927.

¹⁷ Nottingham Guardian May 4, 1926.

¹⁸ Nottingham Strike Bulletin No. 1., May 1926.

¹⁹ Nottingham Guardian May 4, 1926.

²⁰ Evening Post, May 10, 1926.

The Strike Bulletin

The strikers answer to the lack of news, and blackleg news sheets was to produce their own official *Strike Bulletin*. First produced on May 6 the *Bulletin* was issued twice daily during the dispute, and issue number one warned workers to ignore "any Government or anti-strike propaganda publications, obviously inspired to mislead the public and to attempt to break the General Strike."²¹ The ILP Labour Hall was quickly turned into the strikers' main communication centre, and it, together with the People's Hall, soon became the Strike Committee Headquarters, from which issued the instructions which over the nine days of the strike challenged again and again the assumptions of generations of the town's ruling group.

As the strike developed every facet of life in the town became affected. The most exciting incidents were mostly concerned with the various attempts to re-open some kind of transport service. Earnest supporters of the Establishment did their best to organise a private transport system by using volunteers owning private cars. Miss Kentish Wright was able to boast that she had saved hundreds of women and girls long walks to work by the private service which she organised morning and evening from Basford, Bulwell, Daybrook, Sherwood, Netherfield, and Bridgford, into the centre of the city. Meanwhile the strike among railwaymen continued almost 100 per cent solid. On May 10 the LMS claimed it was running 32 trains, and the LNER 31. The official strike bulletin however claimed that "the much vaunted service is being maintained by the same engine, train, driver, and guard, who work about 16 hours each day."²²

It was because of blacklegging attempts of one sort or another that the various disturbances which broke out from time to time during the strike were provoked. Early in the strike a crowd of about 500 went to Player's tobacco factory to encourage the workers to join the strike, and when they were met by a force of police with drawn batons a serious fight broke out. Several of the strikers were felled to the ground, stones were thrown, and one man who rushed out from the crowd was arrested. Later a running fight developed in the town's main streets before the police finally managed to disperse the crowds.

The Arrests

As a result of these incidents a man was charged with committing an act likely to cause disaffection, and with assaulting a policeman by kicking him on the leg, and tearing his trousers. Found guilty this 22 year old miner was sentenced to six months.

Later in the week four others were charged with committing an act likely to impede or restrict transport. All four were employed at a brewery and on May 8 they were outside their depot. There was a bus outside and the four men went over to the driver and conductor and used threats of violence against the blacklegs, telling them that if they went on with the bus they would wait for them with a Mills bomb on the return journey. At this point the men were taken into custody and they were subsequently fined two pounds each.

Two days later a motor bus driver was arrested for trying to stop another transport department worker reporting for work. At 7.15 a.m. the striking worker spotted the blackleg cycling to work, tried to push him from his bicycle, whilst at the same time shouting, "where are you going? Be a man you dirty dog."²³ Fined two pounds for this dastardly crime this worker was only one of the thousands of Nottingham workers who regarded blacklegs as the lowest form of life. Certainly this view would have been shared by the striker sentenced to three months for inciting a crowd in Long Row and the centre of the town.

Over the period of the strike something like a dozen arrests were made, some of course much more serious than others. George Hamilton for instance remembers the following incident involving miners scavenging for coal on the pit tips:

"Best laugh I ever had. They were on Cinderhill pit bank, they'd got roughly eight bags of coal, each bag would weigh roughly 100cwt. and a half, and of course the police pounced on them. The lads had got a nice donkey and cart, and when the police arrived they said 'come on load these bags', the lads said 'not bloody likely, you want them on, you put them on yourself', and it was worth the fine to see the police struggling to put them on. Well the donkey belonged to a rag and bone man and it would only move for either him or a boy who worked with it, but he'd seen the police coming and made his escape. Anyway they got the bags on and it was 'Gee up Neddy', but it wouldn't have it, so anyway it finished up with one policeman at its head and three shoving, and they had to shove him right to Bulwell. When they got to Burr Street where the rag and bone man lived, the police knocked at his door, course he was in bed, so he put his head out of the window and said, 'go on lock him up same as the rest' but as soon as the donkey heard his master shouting he sat down and started braying. By this time there was a big crowd, four hundred people, laughing at the police and enjoying themselves, anyway they had to shove the donkey into the police yard and next day they fined them 2/6d a piece".²⁴

²¹ Nottingham Strike Bulletin No. 1, 1926.

²² Nottingham Strike Bulletin.

²³ Nottingham Journal, May 13, 1926.

²⁴ George Hamilton: Tape Recording, Jan. 9, 1969.

A Clash

George Hamilton was no lover of the police; he described the local Inspector thus, "he was a pig . . . we called him Vesta Tilly because he was so smart."²⁵ At one point during the miners' strike George was picketing one of the local pits when a typical clash between police and strikers took place, "there was four of us . . . we hadn't been there many minutes before down came a police van with about six police in it. They got out and told us the old tale, they were working class people and all the rest of it. So when they started hustling and bustling, my mate who was only 5ft. 6ins. said, 'now mate if you feel like that, come to the kick hole top in the field and me and my mate will take the best two of you'."²⁶

Arthur Statham too had personal memories of the police and arrests which they made. Arthur's cousin Herbert Saunders who was employed at a brewery as a carter is remembered by Arthur as bursting into the office in which Arthur was working in a very agitated state. "He burst in shouting, 'Arthur they are trying to take out beer, I'm going to see about this' and off he went you see, anyway when he got there he was arrested and he went to Lincoln like Billy Lees for three months." Arthur was able to remember the arrest of Lees since the two men were working together when Inspector Castle made the arrest. "Billy was a very lively character and he said to Castle in a joking way, 'I've been expecting you' . . . I've never forgotten that."²⁷

The arrest of Lees, together with that of Thomas Kilworth were probably the most significant of the strike period. Both these men were political animals. Lees was a communist and a member of the Trades Council Executive, and Kilworth was a defeated candidate in the Municipal Elections. Kilworth was a labourer and he was sent to prison in the aftermath of the strike for a speech in the Market Place in which he was alleged to have said:

"I would say to the miners stick out, fight for your rights, and I hope that when the National Strike comes in about two years we shall have the good old red flag flying over Buckingham Palace. And when we have got our new town hall we shall have it flying over there with Councillor Billy Green as mayor . . . next Sunday I am taking a crowd outside the prison to sing the *Red Flag*".²⁸

Instead of being outside the prison however, Kilworth found himself inside, and so did Lees after a speech, notes of which were taken by Inspector Castle. Castle alleged that Lees said:

"I am a member of the local strike committee. One of our Trade Union leaders, there is no need to mention his name, says the Chief Constable wants law and order. Well, during the last two or three days he has shown how he wants law and order. He will have amongst you two or three plain clothes men and if there are groups of people some of whom are expressing their views, one or two are pointed out. Down comes the van full of coppers, you are struck with a lump of wood, thrown into the van and away to the police station. But you wait until our comrades have to take a more active part in holding up transport. It will give the Chief Constable the chance to come amongst you and show how pretty he is."

After remarks about the British Gazette and the bad position in London he is alleged to have continued, "there is a person named ***** who comes as a delegate to the Trades Council. Well he is on duty in the signal box at present; so there you are. Wait till he comes again I'll do my best to out him, I'll play ****".²⁹ Despite the fact that Lees had three witnesses willing to speak for him, he was convicted and sent down for three months.

The Betrayal

Of the local strike leadership, Lees stands out as being the only one who really understood the full potential of the situation, whilst at the same time grasping fully the many dangers inherent in it. In the end of course, local militants like Lees were betrayed by the class collaborationists who were taking the decisions at national level.

Behind the scenes the National leadership had been wavering from the very beginning, and on May 12 representatives of the General Council of the TUC went to Downing Street to tell the Prime Minister that they had decided to call the strike off. At 1 p.m. the news was broadcast by the BBC and as the day wore on, newspapers came out with enormous banner headlines. "GREAT STRIKE TERMINATED", "STRIKE OVER", "NO MORE VOLUNTEERS WANTED". Amongst the ruling class congratulations seemed to be the order of the day and as the striking workers struggled to comprehend the extent of the betrayal, members of the Establishment rushed to pat each other on the back.

In Nottingham the news was met with stunned dismay from the strikers. The local paper was able to resume printing with an editorial which went right to the heart of the recent events. "Unless a General Strike has a revolutionary aim it is bound to be futile." As the truth of this statement was being realised by the strikers, the different elements in the town's ruling group hurried to congratulate each other. The local press congratulated the Government on standing firm, and Sir Charles Starmer the

²⁵ George Hamilton: Tape Recording, Jan. 9, 1926.

²⁶ George Hamilton: Tape Recording, Jan. 9, 1926.

²⁷ Arthur Statham: Tape Recording, Jan. 11, 1969.

²⁸ Nottingham Guardian, May 18, 1926.

²⁹ Evening Post, May 12, 1926.

managing director of the *Journal* received a letter of thanks for his efforts during the strike from Asquith of the Westminster Press. The proprietor-editor of a blackleg news-sheet also received letters of appreciation from Sir John Turney and the Chamber of Commerce, and the Lord Mayor's appeal for thanksgiving contributions to the local police fund was soon answered with £500 from Boots, £250 from Shipstone's Brewery, and £105 from Raleigh.

Meanwhile the strikers remained shocked. Of the actual capitulation Jack Charlesworth remembers, "I heard it on the radio, it was a most pitiful story . . . where they went with their caps and took their cloth caps off, and this of course is how the commentator at the time reported it, they really apologised and wanted to get the country back on its feet . . . it was a shocking statement."³⁰ Cyril Goddard remembers utter "dismay and disbelief"³¹ and George Hamilton has memories of, "real gloom cast over everything after the nine days."³²

Victimisation

The town's capitalists were quick to push home their class advantage. In West Bridgford this meant that more than 50 per cent of the transport department workers employed by the council had their jobs filled by blackleg labour. Four members of the United Builders who had struck work at the Raleigh Cycle Company were not re-employed despite letters to Sir Harold Bowden from the Trades Council. Seventeen of the motormen employed by Shipstones Brewery were not allowed back. Only 80 per cent of the workers at Cammel Laird were re-engaged, and the City Transport Department attempted to get returning workers to sign a document promising that they would "not at any time withdraw service except after seven days written notice to the manager."³³ Notices posted by Blackburn and Sons, Stevens and Williamson, and the Standard Company stated that shortage of work would mean staff "alterations", and notices issued by Erricsons stated that it would not be possible to restart all its workers at once.

Despite Baldwin's plea to let bygones be bygones a great deal of bitterness remained. At Bulwell shortly after the return to work a group of miners pulled up a convoy of coal carts, removed the pins holding the tail boards and pitched the coal into the road. At Bulwell a great deal of real distress remained. George Hamilton remembers:

"We used the Baptist Chapel as a feeding centre . . . when we couldn't get any more foodstuffs we told

the kiddies and their mothers to go to the school and demand school meals . . . the Education Committee sent a man to my house to warn me. He asked me what my authority was, and I told him starving kiddies".³⁴

Enraged by treatment of this sort, Thomas Kilworth speaking in the Market Square about the imprisonment of Billy Lees said:

"Whatever Lees said, he has not said half as much as Sir Albert Ball and his clique of forty thieves . . . next we will have not a General Strike, but a National Strike and then we will show the boss class what we will do . . . if there are any police here taking notes let me say this to you . . . don't be bribed by your capitalist bosses who are out to smash the Trade Unions".³⁵

Sending him down for one month the magistrate claimed that he had been guilty of a gross breach of freedom of speech.

As things began to return to normal, people began to take stock. In purely material terms the NUR and ASLEF had paid out over £10,000 in strike pay to their members in the district. The miners' financial plight remained perilous. On May 19 it was reported that funds stood at only £4,000 with 23,000 eligible for strike pay, and the bank had had to be approached to advance £11,000 in return for the deeds of the union's property. The minutes of the NUDAW local branch report the imposition of a levy of 1¼ per cent of the wages of members in work to assist the distressed, whilst members of the United Operative Plumbers levied themselves 10/- a week.

In the weeks after the strike, the Trades Council continued to try to help the victimised. The signing of the new tramway agreement meant that many lost their record of service, or were dropped into a lower grade. The LNER suggested they would need less staff and those who worked during the strike would be given preference. Many of the miners too were victimised. Cyril Goddard remembers;

"Any amount didn't get their jobs back . . . I remember an old miner who told me that after the strike the owner said to them, 'yes you've been on strike for so many months now I'm going to make you eat grass', and did make them eat bloody grass as well".³⁶

George Hamilton remembers six or seven committee men from Bullwell pit being sacked after the strike and he himself was sacked in 1929, "they'd had

³⁰ Jack Charlesworth: Tape Recording, Jan. 12, 1969.

³¹ Cyril Goddard: Tape Recording, Jan. 12, 1969.

³² George Hamilton: Tape Recording, Jan. 9, 1969.

³³ Nottingham Journal: May 14, 1926.

³⁴ George Hamilton: Tape Recording, Jan. 9, 1969.

³⁵ Nottingham Journal, May 13, 1926.

³⁶ Cyril Goddard: Tape Recording, Jan. 12, 1969.

their eyes on me for years. I could have told you the names of those who would go.”³⁷

Shortly after the strike had ended, the Trades Council decided to open a general organising campaign in a joint effort with the Labour Party. It was decided that this campaign would have as its objectives, to increase the membership of trade unions to 100 per cent, to protest against the Government’s action in increasing working hours, and decreasing wages, and to urge the workers to organise politically as well as industrially. In the event this campaign seems to have been successful, and in November the Trades Council reported splendid victories for the Labour Party in the Municipal Elections. Labour had gained victories in five new seats in the town, and successfully retained three more. Bulwell too moved from Liberal to Labour after the strike, and had not the Liberal and Conservative organisations made common cause there is little doubt that Labour would have made more gains in the town.

Prior to the Labour Party’s electoral victory the town’s ruling group had allowed itself to relax into a welter of self-congratulation. After the strike the Chief Constable speaking to the town’s Rotary Club thanked members for their help during what he described as a “very trying time”. There was still a certain amount of trouble he explained but this was caused by a few misguided people. The trouble he claimed, was mainly the work of irresponsible youths and men coming from the “hooligan class”.

³⁷ George Hamilton: Tape Recording, Jan. 9, 1969.

This view of the strike, and the people who took part in it, was probably shared by most of the town’s industrialists and Establishment figures. That it amounts to a gross slander on the finest elements in the town’s labour movement and to the thousands of ordinary workers who had taken part in the greatest social upheaval in the town since the days of the Chartists never seems to have occurred to either the Chief Constable or his friends in the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club.

Looked at with hindsight, it is possible to see the General Strike in Nottingham as being in the very best of the town’s working class traditions. Tragically the strike was a defeat for the workers of the town. The miners managed to stop out for some months, but in the end even they were forced to take Spencer’s advice and go back on the best available terms. Let down by the national leadership the town’s workers had no alternative but to return to work with the rest of the country. Jack Charlesworth sums up the whole experience well; “the workers were ready, there is no doubt that with proper leadership we would have gone over the top, the spirit was magnificent, magnificent.”³⁸ Certainly the eagerness and enthusiasm with which the workers answered the call were in the same tradition with which the great struggles of the nineteenth century had been fought, and those who took part in the strike can take their place alongside those who in earlier times had won for the town the title of the “banner town of progress.”

³⁸ Jack Charlesworth: Tape Recording, Jan. 12, 1969.

Louis Althusser: Philosophy and Leninism

Grahame Lock

A large part of the debate in the philosophy section of last year’s Communist University of London centred around the work of the French Communist philosopher Louis Althusser. *Marxism Today* has subsequently published a two-part article by John Lewis on the same subject in its January and February issues of this year. The theoretical debate which started in France some years ago had entered the British Party. Our comrades, like the British people as a whole, are sometimes a little wary of foreign imports. But if

styles differ from one land to another, the principles of Marxism remain the guiding force of the Communist movement the world over, and in our day, as half a century ago, we have much to learn from our comrades abroad.

For those who missed the Lewis article, a very brief outline of the context. Louis Althusser is a philosophy teacher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the University of Paris. He is a member of the French Communist Party, which he joined in 1948. His best known published works are *For*