

it. The decision on the freedom to move supplies, for example, was not made on the basis of how far it helped the capitalist state but whether it contributed to the unity and cohesion of the working class in struggle. Employers would beg permission to move their goods on the grounds that it 'would not hurt the strike'. Once even tacit recognition was given to

such assumptions, the whole structure of ruling class control could come quickly tumbling down.

To this extent, the General strike does mark a historic turning-point in the practical unmasking of state power in Britain. However, what still remains to be done—50 years later—is to take these lessons back into the Labour Movement as a whole.

The Councils of Action as a Form of Struggle

“Britain, Home of the General Strike”¹

Mick Jenkins

(The author joined the Young Communist League in 1923 and the Communist Party in 1925. He acted as a courier during the General Strike and took part in the great cotton struggles of 1929-32. He was a full-time worker for the YCL and then for the CP and for many years Secretary of the East Midlands District of the CP. He was also for many years a delegate to the Manchester Trades Council and a shop steward.)

In January 1832 there was published a pamphlet entitled *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* by William Benbow,² later a Chartist and member of the General Council of the National Charter Association. The pamphlet goes into detail as to the aims and objects of the “National Holiday,” (also called the “Sacred Month”), and how the “Holiday” was to be organised—by stopping work. “When the people fight their own battle—when they have a proper opinion of themselves: that is when they are convinced of their own power and worth, they will then enjoy the advantages a people ought to enjoy . . . they will no longer be robbed of the fruits of their toil: no longer oppressed.” (p. 5) “Can anything be more humane than the main object of our glorious holiday, namely, to obtain for all at the least expense to all, the largest sum of happiness for all.” (p. 13). “Committees of management of the working classes must be forthwith formed in every city, town, village and parish throughout the United Kingdom” (p. 10). Details of the plan of action are given. The term “General Strike” took a few years more to come into use, whilst “Councils of Action” had to wait some 90 years before it was used.

Ten years after the publication of Benbow’s pamphlet, the first General Strike in the world took

place. Centred on Manchester and the S.E. Lancashire area, the strike affected large parts of the country. Bourgeois historians have dubbed this strike the “Plug Plot Riots”, and are fairly unanimous that it was a spontaneous outburst against wage reductions and the harsh conditions of the Industrial Revolution, and as it arose without any blasts of trumpets, so it died down without any after effects. And yet there is much evidence that between January 1832 and July/August 1842, a general strike was a major topic of discussion in the trade union and Chartist movements. In July 1839 the Chartist National Convention passed a resolution to organise a General Strike commencing on August 12, 1839. There is no doubt that these years of discussion acted as a preparation for the General Strike that took place in August 1842.

Precursors of the Councils of Action

The ten years of discussion and practical experience in strikes and the building of trade unions, also helped to bring into existence the first embryonic “Councils of Action” the world had yet seen. Like the General Strike at that time they had another name for them—“Trades Conferences”, reflecting the as yet early stage of trade union organisation and struggle. Emile Burns in *The General Strike: May 1926: Trades Councils in Action*, summarising the reports of 140 local Councils of Action said: “. . . the Council of Action really united the whole of the organised Labour movement in the area . . .” (p. 14). That is exactly what the Trades Conferences aimed

¹ Heading, Chapter II of *Communism and the General Strike*, by Wilfred H. Crook, Prof. Emeritus, Colgate University (1960).

² Facsimile reproduction in *International Review of Social History*, Ed. Dr. A. J. Rüter, 1936, vol. I.

to do in 1842, and like some 1926 Councils of Action went further and included the unorganised workers in the popular mass trades meetings that elected delegates to the Trades Conferences.

Prior to the General Strike of 1842 delegate meetings of individual trades had taken place in towns, sometimes covering a region. Occasionally delegate meetings of more than one trade in an industry such as the Five trades of Mechanism in Manchester—South Lancashire area—were held, but delegate meetings of all trades came into existence in the course of the General Strike. These Trades Conferences were not the result of previously existing organisation—as with the Trades Councils in 1926—on the contrary Trade Union organisation was still at an early stage of development, nor was there a central directive body like the General Council of the TUC—nevertheless as the strike developed so the Manchester Delegate Conference took on the character of a Central Council of Action, with delegates attending from both individual trades and delegates from local Trades Conferences. The *Northern Star* of August 20, 1842 reports that delegates from Leicester, Dewsbury, Wakefield and Leeds either attended or were elected to attend the Manchester Trades Conference on August 16.

The Conference of the day before, August 15, had delegates present representing 85 trades and the *Northern Star* of August 20 reported that delegates in rotation stated the opinions of their constituents and the instructions they had received from them as to the necessary steps to be taken, and added, “During the day 85 delegates thus delivered their instructions, representing all the respective trades of Manchester, and of most if not all the towns and villages within 20 miles thereof.” The *Manchester Guardian* of August 20, 1842, said; “There are numerous reports of other trades groups continuing to meet in Manchester. They had all probably been sitting continuously throughout the strike and either acted independently of the central conference or, more likely receiving daily reports from their delegates”. The importance of the central trades conferences was demonstrated on the one hand by the thousands of strikers who gathered round the halls where conferences met, waiting to hear their decisions, and on the other by the harassment of the civil authorities, police and military.

One hundred and forty one delegates attended the August 16 Conference at the Manchester Hall of Science, but thousands assembled outside. The extraordinary display of police and military force failed to move the crowd. Eventually the Superintendent of the Manchester Police along with a number of magistrates entered the hall and after failing to intimidate the Chairman, Mr. Alexander Hutchinson, or the delegates, they delivered an ultimatum, that the hall had to be cleared within

ten minutes. In consequence of this illegal interference the proceedings were brought to a close, but not until in the very teeth of the authorities the Conference passed the resolution, “That the people’s delegates, now assembled, do recommend their constituents to adopt all legal means to carry into effect the People’s Charter: that they send delegates to every part of the United Kingdom to endeavour to get the cooperation of the middle and labouring classes in carrying out the same, and that they cease work until it becomes the law of the land.”³ The resolution was carried by over 120 votes.

Many mass meetings of strikers were held at which trades conference decisions were reported, where resolutions were put and delegates elected. Normal picketing and mass picketing took place. Permits to work or finish work in small factories or workshops were issued. As a result of all this, there seems to have been very good direct contact between the trades conferences and the strikers. The trades conferences functioned continuously, but apart from a loose contact with the Manchester Trades Conferences they seemed to have functioned independently. The indications are that many of the forms of activity undertaken by the Councils of Action in 1926 were, in rudimentary form, in operation in 1842. In that sense the Trades Conferences were in fact embryonic Councils of Action.

Councils of Action 1920

If the 1842 Trades Conferences came into existence in the thick of the fierce struggle of the General Strike and because of the vicious persecution were prevented from fully maturing as organs of leadership and struggle, these handicaps did not operate the next time history presented the British Labour Movement with the need for Councils of Action. In 1920 the threat of war by the British Government and the Allied powers against Soviet Russia loomed large. The *Manchester Guardian* in an editorial (9.8.1920), said; “. . . the fact remains that for two years we have waged an unofficial war against Russia. . . .”

By mid-August 1920 a united Labour Movement in the form of a National Council of Action representing the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, and the Parliamentary Labour Party, came into existence. These bodies had five representatives each, and a further nine leading personalities in the Trade Union—Labour Movement were coopted members. When a special conference of the Labour Movement called by the Council of Action with only four days notice resulted in over 1,000 delegates attending and passing a resolution which made a clear call for “. . . every form of withdrawal of labour . . . to end

³ *Northern Star*, August 20, 1842.

war and the interminable threats of war," the Government climbed down and Winston Churchill was hamstrung and could not fling his battalions into battle against the young Soviet Republic.

The unity of the Labour Movement and every section of it, had never reached such heights. In the leadership of the Council of Action, and the principal speakers at the National Conference were Ernest Bevin, J. R. Clynes, the Rt. Hon. J. H. Thomas, Margaret Bondfield, Frank Hodges, Ben Turner and others. When one reflects that six years earlier, decisions by the Labour Movement to fight war and the threat of war with a general strike and industrial action were overthrown and the masses led into the bloody war of 1914—1918. And when one reflects further that six years later, the leadership of the Labour Movement was to effect a treacherous sell-out, then how come the massive unity of 1920? The answer is simple enough. The leadership was responding to the mood and activity of the working and middle classes.

Why Their Success?

Throughout the year 1919, there was an insistent demand, particularly in the Labour Movement, but beyond as well, for the ending of Allied intervention and withdrawal of all Allied troops from Russia. On February 2, 1919 a great demonstration was held in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, called jointly by the British Socialist Party (BSP), Socialist Labour Party (SLP), and the Independent Labour Party (ILP). There was a unanimous protest and demand for the withdrawal of troops. On June 21, 1919 another Free Trade Hall demonstration took place with Bob Smillie, President of the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), Bob Williams, Rhys Davies, and J. Brassington of the NUR (National Union of Railwaymen). At the annual conference of the Labour Party on June 27, 1919, Rhys Davies moved a composite resolution which was adopted. It called for "... immediate cessation of intervention," and for "... the unreserved use of their (Labour Party and TUC) political and industrial power."⁴

1920 was a year of public campaigning and activity to rouse the masses against the interventionist and war policy of Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. In February a mass meeting in the Albert Hall, London, called by the Hands off Russia Committee, with Tom Mann in the chair, was packed to the doors. Less than a month later another packed meeting was held in the same hall with George Lansbury as the chief speaker. On April 24 Poland invaded Russia along a 250 mile front. The *Daily Herald* carried banner headlines—NEW TRY TO CRUSH RUSSIA. On May 10 the London dockers

refused to load munitions on to the Jolly George. The month of May saw meetings up and down the country, protesting at intervention, calling for political and industrial action. On May 21 the Executive Committee of the Miners Federation of Great Britain sent a strong protest to the Prime Minister. Ten days later the Triple Alliance sub-committee called for a special TUC. On June 9, the Executive Committee of the MFGB issued a call to the organised workers to refuse to manufacture or transport munitions of war for Ireland or Poland. The next day the special conference of the MFGB called for the convening of a special TUC.

This mounting pressure, particularly inside the Labour Movement, had its effect on the official Labour Movement and its leadership. On Friday August 6, Arthur Henderson as Secretary of the Labour Party sent a telegram to every local Labour Party in the country. "... Strongly urge local parties immediately organise citizen demonstrations against intervention and supply men and munitions to Poland. Demand peace negotiations, immediate raising blockade, resumption trade relations. Send resolutions Premier and Press. Deputise local MPs." This appeal found a ready response among the working class and among the middle class. Two days later the *Daily Herald* came out as a special issue on the Sunday with banner headlines—NOT A MAN. NOT A GUN. NOT A SOU! The next day, Monday, a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC took place. The resolution adopted declared that they felt "certain that war is being engineered between the Allied Powers and Soviet Russia . . . it therefore warns the Government that the whole industrial power of the organised workers will be used to defeat this war".⁵ The conference agreed a Council of Action be immediately constituted.

Working Class Pressure

On the same day over 5,000 people attended a mass meeting of protest in Stevenson Square, Manchester, organised by the Manchester and Salford Trades Council and Manchester Labour Party, with Ellen Wilkinson as the principal speaker. The *Manchester Guardian* carried a series of reports of meetings and resolutions etc. from the localities. Barrow engineers will take no part in the manufacture or transport of munitions; Birmingham Trades Council calls for direct action; Merthyr miners threaten to stop work; Welsh railwaymen issue a warning; Clyde workers protest; Nottingham holds a record meeting of protest; Dr. Guest speaks

⁴ *Labour Party Annual Report*. 1919, p. 156.

⁵ Report of the Special Conference on Labour and the Russian-Polish War, August 13, 1920, p. 3.

at Woolwich; Ashton Labour Party protests; Gorton United Trades and Labour Council declares against war; at the end of a meeting of worship at the Friends Meeting House Manchester, a protest resolution is passed; Liverpool Transport Workers Federation calls for a meeting of the Triple Alliance; the ILP calls for citizens meetings. The *Manchester Guardian* itself commented:

"At almost every important centre during the week-end large meetings representative of diverse Labour and other interests have protested with remarkable vigour and unanimity against the Government's Russian policy, and pledging the utmost exertion to prevent war."

All this agitation and activity resulted in Councils of Action being formed in the localities up and down the country. No wonder that the Right Honourable J. R. Clynes could say at the Special Conference "... There has been no division of opinion and no wavering of decision of any kind on the part of the whole of the Members of the Parliamentary Party. (cheers). . . . We must be saved from war by an effective League of Labour Action (cheers) working upon lines to make it impossible to send a ship, a gun, to send material or money for this nefarious purpose".⁶ Or that Ramsay MacDonald could say after the Government was forced to climb down, "... That it was Labour's action that saved us from war."⁷

An American writing on British Labour and the Russian Revolution made the shrewd comment that "Those within its ranks who had opposed 'direct action' in every previous crisis would have done so again had the public demand for action not been so insistent," and added "... It was an act without precedent."⁸

The Councils of Action did not have time—nor was there need—to go into action. This was because the Councils of Action represented a real threat to the authority of the Government, and this was so, not because of the speeches of the right-wing Labour leaders, but because of the mass movement in action, backed by all the peace loving people, which forced the official Labour Movement into line.

General Strike 1926

1842 saw the General Strike, and with it the embryonic Councils of Action, for the first time in history, though virtually strangled at birth. In 1920 came the threat of a General Strike, but with the widespread formation of Councils of Action, with body and limbs well formed and in gear for action.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 12.

⁷ *Forward*, August 28, 1920.

⁸ Stephan Richards Graubard, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution 1917-1924*, pp. 112/13.

1926 saw the second General Strike, with Councils of Action operating throughout the length and breadth of the land, most of them confident and with experienced local trade union and labour workers to lead them. Whilst the 1842 General Strike was not exactly a "bolt from the blue", the threat of general strike in 1920 and the General Strike of 1926 came as a result of the agitation and activity of the rank and file of the Labour Movement. In 1926 this resulted in the General Strike taking place, and with it the formation of the local Councils of Action.

The threat of general strike was on the agenda in 1921. The collapse of the Triple Alliance resulted in Black Friday. (A million miners were locked out. The employers demanding the ending of the national wage regulations, annulment of the uniform national increases that had been awarded, and resumption of the old system of district agreements. Seven hours before the Railway and Transport unions were due to come out in support of the miners the strike was called off. The Triple Alliance collapsed.)⁹ Four years later the threat of general strike brought Red Friday. Baldwin had said—all workers have got to take a wage cut. The coalowners had given notice to the miners to terminate existing agreements, and proposed (1) drastic wage reductions, (2) abolition of the principle of a minimum wage, and (3) reversion from national to district agreements. The miners were to be locked out on July 31, 1925. The General Council of the TUC in agreement with the Railway and Transport Unions placed an embargo on the movement of coal. This unity and militant action threw the Government into confusion, they announced a subsidy to the coal industry for nine months to allow a royal commission to make a detailed enquiry.¹⁰ And so for 30 million pounds the Government bought itself a breathing space of some nine months.

Councils of Action Set Up

Whilst the Government utilised the time it had bought to make preparations to deal with a general strike, the General Council of the TUC did nothing. Not so the local trade unions and Labour Movement. In many localities there was a recognition that the Government had bought time and would come back to the attack. Some, like Preston, followed Red Friday with the setting up of a Council of Action, that is some nine months before the General Strike. Hull followed Preston soon after. In some towns Councils of Action were set up a few weeks before the strike started, but most Councils of Action were formed in the last few days before the strike or the first day or two of the strike.

⁹ Allen Hutt, *The Post-War History of the British Working Class*, LBC ed, 1937, pp. 57-60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 109-111.

The haste with which the Councils of Action came into existence naturally created problems for them. Nor were matters helped as a result of the vague instructions from the General Council of the TUC. To add to the difficulties there was the confusion created by the fact that the local trade union organisations and their officials felt obliged to take their instructions from their union headquarters. But these immense difficulties were countered by the tremendous militant spirit of class solidarity, by the will to victory, by the creativeness of the working class, all of which led to the speedy development of the Councils of Action, and in the majority of cases the Council of Action quickly became the authoritative and accepted local leadership.

St. Helens Example

An insight into how a Council of Action functioned in the strike was related by Bob Davies of Westhoughton, who at the time of the 1926 General Strike was the vice-chairman of the St. Helens Council of Action.¹¹ He said that the St. Helens Trades and Labour Council had set up the Council of Action some weeks before the strike. It started functioning properly on the first day of the strike and met every morning after. All the trades and the trade union branches whose members were on strike were represented. Many who were affiliated but never sent delegates to the Trades and Labour Council were represented by regular attenders throughout the strike at the meetings of the Council of Action, which were held every morning commencing at 10.30 am. Between 60 and 70 attended each day. After the roll call delegates would get up and make reports on their sector of the strike.

One of the things the St. Helens Council of Action took charge of was the issuing of permits for the carrying of foodstuffs. The Council of Action decided that they would issue permits for the transport of food in the town. They decided that permits would be granted to personal applicants and only after satisfying the Council would a permit be issued.

Another most important first step was the arrangement of a meeting between the Chairman and Secretary of the Council of Action and officials of the St. Helens Co-op Society. As a result of this meeting a provisional agreement was made to cooperate in the distribution of foodstuffs should a scarcity arise during the strike. It was understood that pickets would bring the food lorries to the Co-op warehouses.

Mass meetings were held every afternoon on the

market square at which officials and members of the Council gave reports of developments in the strike. of local events, and plans and activity for the next day or two. On the Sunday of the strike a mass meeting was held in the Hippodrome. Over 2,000 were packed inside and as many at an overflow meeting outside. James Sexton, local MP and Joe Tinker, MP for Leigh were the principal speakers. Bob Davies held the fort for an hour outside until the MPs came out. "Sexton was very Right Wing and Tinker more to the Left, but both spoke like revolutionaries. The enthusiasm was enormous and had affected both Sexton and Tinker" commented Bob Davies.

The Council of Action issued a strike bulletin. Materials for the Bulletin were supplied by delegates. Couriers on motor bikes took the Bulletins to the Councils of Action in Liverpool, Warrington, Wigan, Southport, Preston, Earlstown, Leigh, etc., and brought back any local material available. The Bulletins were also taken to all St. Helens TU branches whether on strike or not.

One of the best organised groups was the tramwaymen. They achieved a 100 per cent turn-out by the second day, and then took part in the general picketing. Most of the 300 members attended the meetings to hear the report of Bob Davies, who was their delegate to the Council of Action. These meetings were real morale boosters. The members would stay on after the meeting to take part in general picketing or go out in groups to chalk the pavements with announcements or messages, or to put posters up or other propaganda activity.

As each day went by so the spirit of the strike gripped the delegates and in turn the delegates conveyed this spirit to the mass of the strikers and those not called upon to strike. Some engineers though not called on to strike came out at the beginning. Each day strengthened and deepened the conviction of these leaders of the St. Helens workers, in the justice and correctness of their stand in defence of the miners. "There was plenty of political discussion among the Council of Action delegates. 'Left-wing and Right-wing' was not heard. It was there, but it was submerged in the over-all action at the time. Workers were in confident mood," commented Bob Davies. "As the days went by these workers felt they had a bit of power and if the strike had not been betrayed these workers would have gained an understanding of the power of the organised working class." Bob added "Maybe that's why Thomas and company betrayed it."

Councils Embodied the Unity of Labour

"The Council of Action in its most comprehensive form is the most suitable model, embracing representatives of the workers' economic and political organisations, of the Co-operative Societies, of

¹¹ Bob Davies has now published an account of the St. Helens Council of Action in *1926: the General Strike*, edited by Jeffrey Skelley, Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, pp. 330-339.

Labour groups on local authorities and all other definitely Labour organisations . . . during the strike the most important factor in the successful working was the coordination of all Labour forces.” (Emile Burns, p. 86)¹² Many Councils of Action achieved a composition which was complete or near complete unity of the whole of the local Labour movement. Brighton Council of Action in addition to trade union branch and strike committee representation, also had four from the Labour Party, four from the Co-op, two from the ILP and one from the Working Women’s Council. The St. Albans council had representatives from the Co-op and Co-op Educational Committee, the Women’s Guild, the local Labour Party, the ILP, and the NCLC. At Rutherglen the local Unemployed Committee were represented. Paddington had delegates from all bodies in the Borough and every branch of the trade unions whether affiliated to the Trades Council or not.

In some of the bigger towns or areas—Merseyside, London, Teesside, Methil in East Fife, the most successful being Northumberland and Durham, attempts were made to set up District Councils of Action intended to act as links between the General Council and the local Councils of Action, or with neighbouring towns and villages. These were not successful, they did not achieve the same comprehensiveness as the local Councils of Action. Emile Burns comments on these efforts: “On the whole, therefore, although there is not sufficient experience of the working of such a District Council of Action to justify any detailed suggestions, it can be said that the aim should be to establish an all-in organisation on a district basis.” (p. 81).

Picketing was, in the main, organised by the individual unions on strike. Mass picketing became necessary in some areas because of blackleg transport. Bolton Council of Action reported that 2,280 pickets were mobilised in two days. All wore a white silk ribbon badge. Twenty-nine push bikes and 57 motor bikes were mobilised for picket and messenger work. Pickets were on duty four hours and had 20 off. (The Swindon Council of Action arranged with the Co-op. Society to keep 300 gallons of petrol in hand for supply to dispatch riders). At Doncaster and Barnsley mass picketing stopped blackleg traffic, but also led to severe conflicts with the police. On the other hand in Methil, East Fife, a Workers’ Defence Corp was formed at the beginning of the strike with 150 men, but after police charges on the pickets, the Corps was increased to 750 men. The area was patrolled by the Corps, organised in companies under ex-NCO’s. “. . . and there was no further interference by the police with pickets”.

¹² Emile Burns—*General Strike: Trades Councils in Action*, reprinted by Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, £1.25.

Activities and Problems

One of the most effective weapons on the Government side was its propaganda machine. Lies and misleading propaganda was poured out in a never ending stream. *The British Worker*—the organ of the General Council—whilst it reached a circulation of one million by the end of the strike, gave very little leadership or help to the millions of strikers or to the Councils of Action. Lines of communication over the country as a whole were never planned or organised. On the other hand local Councils of Action in the bigger towns produced local bulletins, a few printed, most duplicated. Local offices of the Labour Party, TU’s, CP, Co-op, ILP, provided the technical equipment. These Bulletins gave reliable news, and published denials of false statements from the Government and Government sources. They contained reports of the situation nationally and of local activity, many carried editorial paragraphs on the character of the strike, and on the conflict with the Government. The better organised Councils produced as many as 10,000 daily. Humorous paragraphs, verses and cartoons found their way into some of the Bulletins. The Bulletins played an important role, not only in giving authentic local and national news, countering misleading propaganda, but also played a part in the organising work of the Councils, and helped to maintain and strengthen morale.

A serious weakness was the lack of cooperation between the Co-operative Movement and the strikers. There were no national agreements, and only in a few localities were sympathetic understandings arrived at. And yet the very limited experience of co-operation showed what a tremendous strengthening of the strike could have taken place had there been a national agreement and local cooperation. In some areas local Co-op. Societies gave credit to their members on strike; credit vouchers issued by the Council of Action or TU were accepted by the Co-op. and food supplied paid for later by the Council of Action or the TU; some gave money, either loans or donations; some provided rooms for offices or meetings; one or two advanced strike pay because of the difficulty of cheques arriving on time; some kept prices down and this forced private trades to do the same; one or two Co-ops had direct representation on the Councils of Action or their Executives.

As the strike developed so the scope of the activities of the Councils of Action broadened, more sub-committees were set up and so the need for a Council of Action executive or a more permanent leadership was felt. Some Councils of Action were meeting for four and five hours every day, dealing with reports, with questions and problems they were faced with. A few Councils did have Executive Committees acting as a central leadership

available all the time. In connection with this question of leadership, Communist Party members and militants in the localities gave of their best to organise the work and maintain continuous leadership. The Communist Party was wholly devoted to the preparation and effective carrying through of the General Strike. How serious a threat to the plans of the Government this was can be gauged from the fact that as far back as October 1925 the Government arrested 12 leaders of the CPGB tried them and sent them to prison for six to twelve months.

Great changes took place between 1842 and 1926, but a common feature of both General Strikes was that of class confrontation, the element of Dual Power existed. Had either strike continued for a period of time then the question of class power and rule would have become the dominant issue. In 1842 Capitalism in Britain was on the ascendancy and the Labour Movement in its early days. In 1926 capitalism in Britain was already in decline. Now, 50 years later, Capitalism in Britain is in deep crisis. In contrast the working class has been greatly strengthened, both politically by its consistent anti-Tory stand, but also by the addition of millions of white collar workers, nurses, hospital workers, technicians, managerial and staffs joining the Trade Union and Labour Movement. There has also been a tremendous growth of the anti-capitalist and democratic movement in the form of the militant Women's Liberation, the Student movement, the fight against racialism and for international solidarity. The conditions that gave rise to the threat of General Strike in 1920, again in 1921, again in 1925, and the General Strike of 1926 exist and have intensified. The lessons of these great historic events need to be learned and applied.

Role and Functions

One of the most important experiences of all these events was that of the role and function of *Councils of Action in the localities in times of great class battles*. In times of day to day class struggle the trade unions and the Labour Movement fulfil the role of defending and advancing the interests of the working class. But to be alert to the possibility of great class battles, to be prepared to transform existing organisation to meet the needs of a sharpened class confrontation, that is the responsibility and duty of all class conscious workers and militants. The principal method of the formation of Councils of Action was the transformation of the local Trades Councils, or Trades and Labour Councils into Councils of Action. Today there is a great need to strengthen the Trades Councils; to win the affiliation of all local trade union branches, including the white collar and other workers who have in recent years come into the trade union movement;

to win the association of the students and youth with the trades councils; to win the women workers to participate in the work of the trades councils. All this would result in a tremendous strengthening of the Trades Councils.

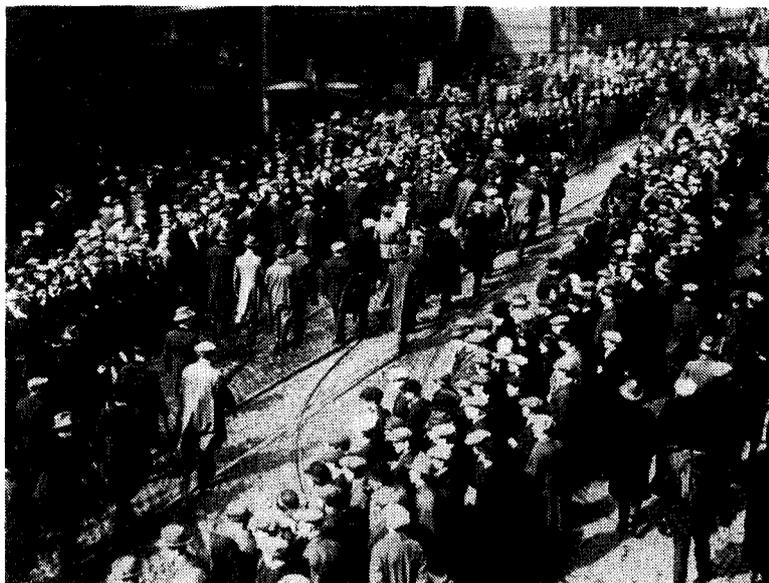
And if to the Trade Councils there came as delegates a sufficient number of local and district trade union officials and leading personalities, together with leading rank and file workers from the factories, and if among them were officials or active people in the local Labour and Communist Parties, and in the local Co-operative movement, then the Trades Councils would be representative of the local Labour movement. Such a Trades Council would be enabled to take decisions based on thorough debate and exchange of views and have the confidence that its decisions would be carried out.

The traditional functions of a Trades Council—that of working for one hundred per cent trade union organisation, giving help and assistance to small and struggling unions, special help to poorly organised sections like women and youth, solidarity action with workers on strike, campaigns for shorter hours, etc.—remain most important. However in these days of economic and political crisis, inflation, mass unemployment, direct and indirect attacks on the standards of the working and middle class people, and also the great international issues—the threat of war, violent and brutal fascist dictatorships, as in Chile, also are very important. All this calls for progressive policies and wider activities by the Trades Councils without neglecting the local social and democratic questions. They also need to give support to activities organised by other bodies working for social and democratic advance.

By adopting policies that help to advance the whole movement and with a broadening of activities, Trades Councils will become more authoritative bodies, easily and quickly transformed in times of crisis into Councils of Action, ready to meet the needs of the situation.

In the June or July issue
BERT RAMELSON
 on
**THE ROLE OF THE
 GENERAL STRIKE TODAY**

THE STRUGGLE



General Strike: Demonstration in Albert Street, Manchester (Working Class Movement Library, Manchester)



Railway sidings idle



Mass Meeting on Clapham Common, May 9

Marxism versus Reformism in the General Strike

Jack Cohen

(Jack Cohen helped to form the YCL in his native Manchester in 1923 and joined the Communist Party in 1924. He worked full time for both YCL and Communist Party for many years and was in South Wales as YCL organiser during both the General Strike and the Miners' Strike.)

Like wars, general strikes cannot be approached in any abstract or generalised way, regarding them as, by definition, a prelude to, or part of, revolution or as being primarily industrial struggles. Each general strike must be treated concretely in the light of the political and economic features which give rise to it.

The 1926 General Strike has, therefore, to be seen firstly in the light of the post-World War I crisis of British capitalism, its weakened position vis-a-vis the United States, the continuing slump after a very short-lived boom, involving large-scale unemployment, and the determination of the ruling class to place all the burdens of the crisis on the working class expressed openly in the notorious statement made by the then Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, in 1925, that "the wages of all workers must come down".

The mining industry, then under private ownership, became the focal point of the struggle because it was technically backward, unprofitable and its owners determined that come what may, profits were to be squeezed out of the miners by imposing longer hours and reduced wages. They attacked first in 1921 and again in 1925, when, confronted with the threat of solidarity action by the whole trade union movement which could have developed into a general strike (Red Friday), were rescued by the government with a nine-months subsidy and the labour movement held off by the appointment of a Royal Commission on the industry—both of which were used to make preparations for a full-scale attack on the miners and through them on the entire trade union movement.

The second feature which needs to be taken into account was the character of the leadership of the labour and trade union movement, especially its basic outlook.

Although the 1914-1918 war and the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 had stimulated advances by the left (rise of the shop stewards movement and the militant struggles it led, the big increase in trade union membership, the adoption of socialist aims—clause 4—in the Labour Party Constitution at its 1918 Conference, and particularly,

the formation of the Communist Party in August 1920), the dominant positions in the Labour movement were held by right-wing leaders of the Thomas-Bevin-Cramp-Clynes-Citrine variety in the trade unions and Henderson and MacDonald in the Labour Party. This, despite the advance of Left policies at the Scarborough TUC in 1925 and the winning of seats on the General Council by men who, until the 1926 General Strike, had fought for left-wing policies in the Labour movement (Hicks, Purcell). The dominant ideology of these right-wing leaders was class-collaborationist, reformist, acceptance of the social and political status-quo and a total devotion to parliamentarism and "the Constitution" as the sole methods of political advance.

Two Lines in the General Strike

The implications of this situation were to be seen in their attitude to the General Strike, in the character of their leadership of it, and, above all, in the frantic haste with which they betrayed it.

Detailed accounts of the General Strike and marxist analyses of its outcome are available (see particularly *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain—the General Strike, 1925-6*, Vol. II, by James Klugmann, on which I have leaned heavily in this section and, the recently published *1926, the General Strike*, edited by Jeffrey Skelley, both published by Lawrence & Wishart.). Here I want to contrast the two lines of marxism and reformism in the General Strike itself, reflecting the two opposed lines in the British labour movement which have been in conflict for many decades, especially since the formation of the Communist Party in 1920.

These two opposing lines were contrasted most sharply in all phases of the 1926 General Strike—in the period leading up to it i.e. from July 1925 to May 1926, during the Nine days and during the six months when the miners were left to battle on their own.

From July 1925 to May 1926

During this period the government was busy making its political, administrative and military