

Stalin, Trotsky and the 1926 British general strike

Part Three

By Chris Marsden
30 December 2008

Below is the third and final part of a lecture delivered at a summer school of the Socialist Equality Party in August of 2007. Part one was posted on December 27; part two was posted on December 29.

The development of councils of action during the dispute contained nascent elements of dual power—the equivalent of soviets in Britain. A National Council of Action had first been formed in August 1920 to oppose intervention against the Soviet Union and had prompted many local versions that the Directorate of Intelligence wrote "were taking on more the form of soviets and in some areas forming plans for the seizure of private property and the means of transport."

During the strike, the councils of action came to the fore across the country. A Clydeside striker explains, "The central strike committees and the councils of action were twenty-four hours a day in session. They had their own transport; they stopped all other forms of transport but they had their own courier system to carry messages because there was no such thing as postal services, no such thing as the press. The press had turned in 100 percent and stopped all the papers, and so the council of action had to carry out its work by getting bicycles, old and new, motorcycles, old vans—anything that could run on wheels was used by the couriers and also to take leaders in the strike to certain fronts in the strike."

East Fife council of action had set up its own workers' defence militia with 700 members, and regularly battled with the police.

That this initial expression of dual power did not go further was due solely to the leadership of the Communist Party and the Comintern.

Brian Pearce notes that the CP's fealty to the TUC General Council had rendered it impotent to the point where the social democratic theorist Harold Laski could write in 1927, "It was noteworthy that in the British General Strike of 1926 the communists played practically no part at all," and the journalist Hamilton Fyfe wrote in his diary, "The communists have kept very quiet... On the Continent, in America even, it is the extremists who come to the top in crises. Here they have sunk out of sight."

As for the government and the state, they were doing all they could to eliminate the communist threat. Reports that the Welsh Guards had mutinied and were confined to barracks and that other regiments had refused to proceed against the miners in the Communist press were seized on by police to justify arrests and raids on Communist Party headquarters on grounds of sedition.

As Margaret Morris makes clear in her work, *The General Strike* (Journeyman Press, 1976), the targeting of the CP continued apace throughout the strike.

"Many of those arrested for producing or distributing bulletins containing 'sedition' or 'false rumour' were Communists involved in handling the Communist Party's Workers bulletin or local versions of it.

The mere possession of a copy of these was deemed sufficient grounds for prosecution... the raiding of the Communist Party offices and the concentration on stamping out their publications sent the Communists underground: the leading members changed their address every night so that they could avoid arrest..."

In the aftermath, "The home secretary told the House of Commons that 1,760 people had been summoned for offences in England and Wales during the strike, of whom 150 were accused of 'incitement' under the Emergency Powers Act and the rest of 'disorder'; 632 were imprisoned and the rest were fined. The total number of those prosecuted in Scotland was not given, but 409 people were sentenced to terms of imprisonment, of whom 140 were sentenced under the Emergency Powers Act and the rest for intimidation, breach of the peace, assault, etc... The Communist Party... estimated that between a quarter and a fifth of its membership had been arrested during the strike."

The CPGB itself gives a figure of 2,500 arrested and estimates that 1,000 party members were in that number, with miners especially targeted.

Communist Member of Parliament Shapurji Saklatvala was arrested in 1926 following a speech in support of striking coal miners and was jailed for two months.

The TUC had its version of the same anti-communist policy, insisting that only propaganda it approved could be circulated. It issued a declaration against spies and others "using violent language in order to incite the workers to disorder." Union branches and strike committees went so far as to insist that meetings ended with the singing of "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia" instead of the "Red Flag."

Far from opposing this bureaucratic suppression, the CPGB did its best to enforce cooperation on its members. Hardy of the NMM explained, "We sent out from the Minority Movement headquarters instructions to our members to work for the establishment of councils of action in every area. We warned, however, that the councils of action were under no circumstances to take over the work of the trade unions... The councils of action were to see that all the decisions of the General Council and the union executives were carried out."

On May 12, the TUC General Council visited the prime minister to announce its decision to call off the strike. The sole demand was that the proposals of the Samuel Commission be adhered to and that the government should guarantee that there would be no victimisation of strikers. When the government refused to make such a promise, the TUC predictably ended the strike anyway. Lord Birkenhead later wrote that their surrender was "so humiliating that some instinctive breeding made one unwilling to even look at them."

It is testament to the scale of the betrayal that 100,000 came out after the General Strike was called off and there were more people out on strike

on May 13 than at any time during the nine days the strike was official.

The headline in the *Northern Light* read, "There is only one explanation for this treachery—our leaders do not believe in Socialism." The *Newcastle Workers Chronicle* wrote, "Never in the history of workers struggle—with the exception of the treachery of our leaders in 1914—has there been such a calculated betrayal of working class interests."

Even at this hour, the possibility existed for reversing the disastrous course pursued by the CPGB. If a correct line had been fought for, tens if not hundreds of thousands would have responded. As Perkins acknowledges, "The strike was over. But neither government nor TUC believed that the status quo ante could be restored overnight. Both sides were aware that for the extremists, an unprecedented opportunity had arisen. Millions of men idle, many of them bewildered and angry that the strike had ended in defeat when they had been ready to continue the fight, were a recruiting ground for Communism that Lenin himself might have dreamed of creating..."

"Throughout the nine days, the nightmare that had haunted both the government and TUC was that a 'revolutionary situation' of the sort that the Communist strike strategists envisaged might develop. Now the actions of each appeared perilously close to achieving it."

Thousands did indeed flood into the CP, whose membership doubled in the year from 6,000 to 12,000. The Stalinist *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Volume 2*, written by James Klugmann, (Lawrence & Wishart, 1969) explains that "the real influx into the Communist Party began in the last days of and immediately following the General Strike... This was something new in the history of the Party, and very exhilarating it was. The General Council had sold out the strike. The miners fought on. In all the coalfields great mass meetings were held at which workers, above all miners, turned to the Communist Party in scores, and even in hundreds. The July 14, 1926 Executive could report 3,000 new members since the General Strike and *Workers Weekly* sales up to 70,000."

Klugmann writes correctly, "With this new influx a tremendous task and responsibility opened out for the Communist Party. It was a very excellent thing, to win to the Communist Party so many militant workers, mainly from the pits. But these were for the most part men and women who had come to hate the guts of the right-wing leaders, to see them as traitors, to feel hatred and disgust for the system of capitalism. They wanted a new, better, juster system of society, they desired a radical change... But they were not yet Marxists in their theoretical outlook..."

Far from training these workers in Marxism and giving theoretical form to their hatred of those who had betrayed them, the CPGB and the Comintern worked to disorient them by insisting on maintaining the alliance with the TUC in the Anglo-Russian Committee.

In his shameful biography of Trotsky, (*Trotsky*, Routledge, 2003), Ian D. Thatcher once again defends Stalin from Trotsky's criticisms, claiming:

"An important element of the United Opposition's critique of Stalin's rule was, of course, the view that the world revolution was being betrayed by socialism in one country. In the autumn of 1926 Trotsky famously called Stalin 'the grave-digger of the revolution.' If by this it was meant that Stalin willfully wasted revolutionary opportunities, the criticism is clearly unfair. In the British General Strike of 1926, for example, Stalin insisted that communists work within the Anglo-Russian trade union committee established in 1925, not so that reformism should triumph (as he was accused by Trotsky), but so that the reformists could more easily be unmasked. One may question the sense of the united-front strategy employed here, but Stalin sincerely thought that it would bring the communists more influence than any alternative."

As with much of what Thatcher writes, this is not merely a defence of Stalin—whose "sincerity" is hardly the issue—that flies in the face of the historical record. It is a defence that might have come straight from the mouth of Stalin himself.

In the strike's aftermath, Trotsky and the left Opposition insisted that the

Comintern break immediately with the TUC. In *Pravda* letter to 26, 1926, Trotsky declared, "The entire present 'superstructure' of the British working class, in all its shades and groupings without exception, is an apparatus for putting a brake on the revolution."

Stalin denounced this appraisal as ultra-leftism and defended the continuation of the ARC—as a united front that would serve to unmask the reformists!

In a speech on the Anglo-Russian Unity Committee of July 15, 1926, Stalin claimed that the issue was whether "we, as Communists, work in the reactionary trade unions. It is essentially this question that Trotsky put to us in his letter recently in *Pravda*..."

"Can we, as Leninists, as Marxists, at all skip over and ignore a movement that has not outlived its day, can we skip over and ignore the backwardness of the masses, can we turn our back on them and pass them by; or ought we to get rid of such features by carrying on an unrelenting fight against them amongst the masses?"

Getting to the point, Stalin declared that "if the reactionary trade unions of Britain are prepared to join in a bloc against the counter-revolutionary imperialists of their country, why should we not welcome such a bloc?"

In line with Stalin's sophistry, the theses of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) plenum on the lessons of the General Strike, 8 June 1926, stated that "for the English union leaders to break up the committee would be such a demonstratively anti-working class act that it would greatly accelerate the leftward movement of the English working masses."

"In these circumstances, for the Soviet unions to take the initiative in leaving the committee... would deal a blow to the cause of international unity, a thoroughly 'heroic' gesture, but politically inexpedient and infantile."

The 15th All Union Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) passed an October 26, 1926 resolution declaring: "The Party holds that the advanced capitalist countries are, on the whole, in a state of partial, temporary stabilization; that the present period is an inter-revolutionary one, making it incumbent on the Communist Parties to prepare the proletariat for the coming revolution... The opposition bloc starts out from entirely different premises. Having no faith in the internal forces of our revolution, and falling into despair owing to the delay of the world revolution, the opposition bloc slips away from the basis of a Marxist analysis of the class forces of the revolution to one consisting of 'ultra-left' self-deception and 'revolutionary' adventurism; it denies the existence of a partial stabilization of capitalism, and, consequently, inclines towards putschism."

"Hence the opposition's demand for a revision of the united front tactics and the break-up of the Anglo-Russian Committee, its failure to understand the role of the trade unions and its call to replace the latter by new, 'revolutionary' proletarian organisations of its own invention."

For its part, the All Russian Council of Trade Unions published a manifesto on the General Strike stating that it had been betrayed by the TUC and the Labour Party right wing, but insisting that "in spite of the fact that the Trade Union leaders have inflicted a heavy blow upon the British working class, upon the cause of international unity and upon the Anglo-Russian Committee, we not only do not propose the abolition of the Anglo-Russian Committee, but call for its whole-hearted revival, and a strengthening and intensification of its activity."

Naturally this line demanded that the CPGB continue to do everything in its power not to antagonise the trade union leaders.

Following the general strike, the TUC General Council issued an ultimatum to trades councils forbidding them to affiliate to the Minority Movement. This was opposed by trades councils including Glasgow, Sheffield and Manchester, but the CPGB leadership urged compliance!

Pearce quotes Murphy as explaining, "The workers could not understand this new alliance of the communists and the General Council,

and their resistance was killed."

Similarly, in September 1926, Harry Pollitt wrote of the TUC's congress that year, "In view of the overwhelming decision for complete solidarity registered at Scarborough, the new General Council will simply *have* to prosecute more vigorously the fight on behalf of the workers. True, the right wing of the Council is strengthened by the return of one or two people who do not support the idea that we are involved in a class struggle, but I think that the mass pressure from behind will force even them to toe the line."

It was left to the TUC to officially quit the ARC at its 1927 Edinburgh Congress, to which the Soviet delegates were refused a visa.

The terrible impact of the betrayal of the general strike cannot be overstated. Trotsky had argued that the very survival of British imperialism now rested not on the right-wing social democrats, but on the supposed lefts, without whom the right wing could not maintain its position in the labour movement.

In his autobiography, Trotsky asks, "What were the results of the Stalinists' British experiment? The Minority Movement, embracing almost a million workers, seemed very promising, but it bore the germs of destruction within itself. The masses knew as the leaders of the movement only Purcell, Hicks and Cook, whom, moreover, Moscow vouched for. These 'left' friends, in a serious test, shamefully betrayed the proletariat. The revolutionary workers were thrown into confusion, sank into apathy and naturally extended their disappointment to the Communist Party itself, which had only been the passive part of this whole mechanism of betrayal and perfidy. The Minority Movement was reduced to zero; the Communist Party returned to the existence of a negligible sect. In this way, thanks to a radically false conception of the party, the greatest movement of the English proletariat, which led to the General Strike, not only did not shake the apparatus of the reactionary bureaucracy, but, on the contrary, reinforced it and compromised Communism in Great Britain for a long time."

He wrote in 1928: "Temporary agreements may be made with the reformists whenever they take a step forward. But to maintain a bloc with them when, frightened by the development of a movement, they commit treason, is equivalent to criminal toleration of traitors and a veiling of betrayal..."

"Given such a condition of the working masses as was revealed by the general strike, the highest post in the mechanism of capitalist stabilization is no longer occupied by MacDonald and Thomas, but by Pugh, Purcell, Cook, and Co. They do the work and Thomas adds the finishing touches. Without Purcell, Thomas would be left hanging in mid-air, and along with Thomas also Baldwin. The chief brake upon the English revolution is the false, diplomatic masquerade 'Leftism' of Purcell, which fraternizes, sometimes in rotation, sometimes simultaneously, with churchmen and Bolsheviks, and which is always ready not only for retreats but also for betrayal."

Replying to Stalin's claim that a revolutionary strategy was putschism due to the stabilization of capitalism, he continued, "*Stabilization is Purcellism*. From this we see what depths of theoretical absurdity and blind opportunism are expressed in the reference to the existence of 'stabilization' in order to justify the political bloc with Purcell. Yet, precisely in order to shatter the 'stabilization,' Purcellism had first to be destroyed. In such a situation, even a shadow of solidarity with the General Council was the greatest crime and infamy against the working masses."

As to the impact of this infamous political crime on Britain, the miners returned to work in October 1926 and the victimizations and job cuts began. By the late 1930s, employment in mining had fallen by more than one-third, while productivity per man rose by the same proportion.

In 1927, the British government passed the Trade Dispute and Trade Union Act, which made sympathy strikes and mass picketing illegal,

barred civil servants unions from affiliating to the TUC, and stated that union members must contract-in to pay the political levy to the Labour Party.

In 1928, under the instigation of Citrine and Hicks, talks were held between TUC Chairman Ben Turner and Sir Alfred Mond, chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries. Their aim was to establish the machinery for joint consultation about the general problems of industry between the employers' organisations and the trade unions. The plan for corporatist class collaboration they hatched out was never formally adopted, but it might as well have been.

In June 1929, Labour came to power once again, under Ramsay MacDonald. By November that year the Wall Street Crash plunged the world into recession. MacDonald responded by pushing for austerity measures demanded by the civil service, which were not accepted by the cabinet.

On August 24, 1931 the government fell. MacDonald, along with JH Thomas and others, crossed the floor to form the National Government with the Conservatives and Liberals. Thomas was put in charge of employment. The "devil's decade," the Hungry Thirties, when unemployment reached three million in 1932, had begun.

Thomas, it should be noted, was forced to quit Parliament in May 1936 after being found guilty of leaking budget secrets to his stockbroker son Leslie, Conservative MP Sir Alfred Butt and businessman Alfred Bates.

The line taken by the Comintern also had a terrible impact on the Soviet working class. They had been told that the lefts on the TUC General Council were in the forefront of the struggle of the international working class and had responded accordingly. During the strike, they had collected the equivalent in rubles of over a £1 million—in 1926!—to help the British strikers.

At the height of the strike, the TUC refused to accept the money, with Hicks of the Anglo-Russian Committee reportedly calling it "this damned Russian gold." Days later these same lefts signed off on the strike's betrayal, but were still hailed for months afterwards as vital allies of the Soviet workers in the struggle for peace and against intervention.

It was an experience that could not have been designed to better spread disorientation and political cynicism—a mood that helped consolidate the grip of the Stalinist bureaucracy over the state and party apparatus, and which helped pave the way for the expulsion of the Opposition from the CPSU in December 1927. Moreover, it was an alliance bound up with another that was to prove to be far more deadly—with the Kuomintang in China under Chiang-Kai-Shek.

Concluded

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>