British workers general strike to support mine workers, 1926

Timing
May 1, 1926

May 12, 1926

Location and Goals
Country:
United Kingdom

Goals:
The strike was “in support of the mine workers against the attack on their standard of life by the coalowners.” Specifically, this entailed calling for mine workers wages not to be reduced and their hours not to be lengthened (as mine owners were threatening to do).

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention

Methods in 2nd segment:

• 107. Sympathy strike
• 117. General strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 107. Sympathy strike
• 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 107. Sympathy strike
• 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:
Methods in 6th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Segment Length:
2 days

Classifications
Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights

Group characterization:

- industrial workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Trades Union Congress
Partners:
Miners Federation of Great Britain, International Transport Workers’ Federation, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, National Union of Railwaymen, Transport and General Workers’ Union, Union of Post Office Workers, British Employers’ Confederation, Federation of British Industries

External allies:
Foreign trade unions
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:

- British Employers’ Confederation
- Federation of British Industries
- International Transport Workers’ Federation
- Iron and Steel Trades Confederation
- National Union of Railwaymen
- Transport and General Workers’ Union
- Union of Post Office Workers
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Coal owners and the government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Newspapers and journals

Campaigner violence:
Derailing the Flying Scotsman (a prominent British train). There was probably more violence than just this instance, but campaigner violence was mostly unreported.

Repressive Violence:
Arrest of strikers and some isolated instances of force. Overall, this is largely unreported.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
1 point out of 3 points

Total points:
2 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Although the strike ended with promises to follow the Samuel Commission, these promises were not upheld and, ultimately, the miners were given lower wages and longer hours. The strike may have been extremely large, but it was entirely unsuccessful in meeting its goals.

Most of the trade unions involved in the strike continued to exist.

The solidarity of the various unions and industrial workers was almost total. Throughout the strike, some industries fell to less than 5% of their normal output. This suggests a large number of workers (more than 3 million at first with more later) took part in the strike. However, after the settlement was reached with the government, membership of the unions dropped immensely and the funding of the unions also fell drastically.

The general strike of 1926 in Britain was one of the largest strikes Britain has ever experienced and,
simultaneously, perhaps the least successful. Previous strikes in the wake of World War I (such as 1919, 1920, and 1921) were precursors to the strike of 1926 and suggest the extreme volatility of the British economy in the post-World War I time period. Although this strike was a general strike comprised of almost every industry in Britain, the mineworkers’ standard of living was the sole concern of the strike.

Britain’s coal industry suffered immensely because of World War I. For example, many of Britain’s richest known seams of coal were used up in the war effort and productivity was down in the mines from its wartime high. Additionally, the Dawes Plan was allowing Germany to compete with Britain in exports while the British reintroduction of the Gold Standard, pushed and defended by then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Winston Churchill, made the pound too strong, raising the cost of exported goods (coal being one of these goods) from Britain. Britain also suffered from more competition from the United States and Poland in the coal production business. These factors resulted in less production of coal, lower exports of coal, and lower prices of coal. Consequently, mine owners tried to compensate for their loss of income by lowering wages of mineworkers and increasing their hours.

When the mine owners took this policy into action in early 1926, the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) rejected the terms of the agreement. This is not surprising as mineworkers were already only barely surviving in extreme poverty and any decrease in wages was a threat to the livelihood of the workers and their families. The government stepped in and subsidized the mineworkers’ pay for nine months while the government looked for a compromise. To find one, the government established a commission to investigate the coal industry and suggest ways to improve it. The result was the Samuel Commission in March 1926 in which, among other suggestions, it was recommended that the government should withdraw their subsidy and that mineworkers’ should receive a 13.5% decrease in pay to improve the industry as a whole. Emboldened, the mine owners threatened to lock out the mineworkers’ if they did not accept these new terms by May 1, 1926.

The MFGB again rejected the terms and, true to their word, the mine owners locked out more than one million mineworkers. Because of this, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) called for a general strike to begin on May 3 in support of the miners.

The TUC was an organization that united individual unions throughout the various industries of Britain in order to represent the workers and lobby the government on common issues. Because of this, they had the unique capability to call for the strike and expect a response from their constituencies. Thus, when they called for a strike, the wide range of industrial workers complied even though the government was only directly targeting the MFGB.

The magnitude of the strike on the first day astonished both the TUC and the British government alike. On the first day of the strike, more than three million industrial workers did not report to work in response to the TUC’s call for certain less-vital industries to stop working. Although this number is impressive and, surprisingly, almost all workers in the specified industries complied, the TUC was ill equipped and unprepared to handle the strike.

First, the TUC refused to ask workers to cut off “essential services” (such as electricity to hospitals or telegram stations) for humanitarian reasons. This significantly lessened pressure on the British government to comply with their demands. Additionally, in attempting to distinguish “essential services” from nonessential services, the TUC confused its local strike committees and undermined their own legitimacy. Second, the TUC attempted to consolidate all authority within their centralized general council and control provincial committees. This lessened the feeling of empowerment for strikers and resulted in less trust of the TUC as many strikers were left-leaning and disliked centralization. Third, the general council of the TUC was composed of strong personalities that seemed more interested in individual power than in running a strike to a favorable conclusion. Finally, and
most importantly, the TUC failed to communicate with the miners adequately and essentially lost the support of the MFGB. All of these factors resulted in a weakening of the TUC in the eyes of both the strikers and the government.

It is also vital to note that the government had been preparing for a strike by mineworkers for almost a decade. In doing this, not only did they create (and successfully execute) plans to handle certain industries shutting down and to maintain vital services, but they also stockpiled over ten million tons of coal. This amount of coal was enough for Britain to function for approximately two months without the production of more coal. Simultaneously, the British government was working with the United States to import more coal should the need arise. This further complicated the strike and made it less effective in the short term.

On May 5, both the government and the TUC produced newspapers espousing their views of the strike. These newspapers allowed for a central voice from both sides to emerge and gave both sides a means to connect with their supporters. They would continue to play a role for the remainder of the strike as propaganda machines.

By May 9, the sustained size of the strike began to worry the government. However, the strike had been largely unsuccessful at completely stopping the nation or forcing the government into capitulation. As a result, the government feared that a prolonged strike, which seemed increasingly likely, would turn extremist or violent. The government then called the legality of the strike into question and, although it was never declared illegal, this opened up the possibility for mass arrests or violence against the strikers. The government also prevented banks from giving money to the strikers and blocked attempts by foreign trade unions to transfer money to the strikers.

This new pressure from the government coupled with the TUC’s increasing loss of control over local committees made the general council of the TUC fearful of both the government and strikers turning to violence and the strikers turning to extremism. Consequently, the general council of the TUC began looking for ways to end the strike without losing face and found it in negotiations with Sir Herbert Samuel—the man whom the Samuel Commission was named after.

Although Sir Samuel had no official function within the government at this point, he did have the ear of the government and served as a conduit to the government in these unofficial talks. Unfortunately, the TUC had even less backing by the MFGB at this point and were actually acting in defiance of the miners. Essentially, it was at this point (around May 10) that the TUC appeared to give up on their initial goals and look instead for an “honourable” end to the strike.

The talks were largely insubstantial as the miners were not present and the agreements were nothing more than reiterations of the recommendations of the Samuel Commission that had been the impetus for the strike in the first place. However, these talks ultimately led to the general council of the TUC ending the strikes on May 12.

On May 12, the general council of the TUC met with the British Prime Minister to announce the cessation of the strike. Although they demanded that the government implement the Samuel Commission as a requirement for the ending of the strike, they only received vague promises from the Prime Minister that such actions would be taken. The government only partially followed through with these promises because the Samuel Commission was already a compromise for the government and the TUC was left so weak by their failure to manage the strike that they lost a great deal of legitimacy in the eyes of both the government and the workers.

Essentially, the TUC agreed to end the strike on the very terms that brought about the strike in the first place because most of the members of the general council became more interested in ending the strikes than in solving the problems they initially faced. It is not entirely clear why this betrayal of their initial goals occurred, but
Renshaw suggests that some of it may be because the general council had difficulty reaching decisions and that many of the members were never truly invested in following through with the strike in the first place.

This resulted in the TUC losing half a million members, a feeling of betrayal by the miners, and the various unions and industries in Britain becoming increasingly fragmented and less unified. It is possible to suggest that the General Strike of 1926 ultimately did more damage to workers’ rights than if the strike had never happened.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

The general strike of 1926 was influenced by previous smaller strikes in Britain in 1919, 1920, and 1921. (1)

**Sources:**


**Additional Notes:**

It was difficult to find reliable sources representing the view or experience of strikers or general citizens in Britain during this strike. Consequently, the narrative and template are largely based on larger actions by the government or the general council of the TUC.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy: Matthew Heck, 26/09/2010

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