

6.30 General Strike in Great Britain (1926)

Source: <https://spartacus-educational.com/TUgeneral.htm> and *New York Times*

Background: During World War I industrial production and mining expanded in the warring nations. After the war supply far outstripped demand. In Great Britain, government efforts to cut production, especially in coal, produced tremendous unrest among workers who were also emboldened by what they believed was a successful workers' revolution in Russia, now known as the Soviet Union. In response to wage and hour cutbacks in the coal industry, a lockout by coal operators, and widespread working class discontent, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) launched a General Strike in May 1926 that lasted for nine days. On May 4, the first full day, there were an estimated 1.5 to 1.75 million workers out on strike. Strikers included bus, rail and dockworkers, and people in the printing, gas, electricity, building, iron, steel and chemical industries. Fights broke out between strikers and police in a number of British cities and Glasgow in Scotland. The General Strike brought much of Great Britain to a standstill, including London, where the Conservative government used "special policemen" and troops to maintain order. After nine days the TUC called off the General Strike without a single concession made by the miners owners. The coal miners remained on strike until the end of November when admitted defeat. When the miners returned to work, companies purged the more militant unionists and established a blacklist to keep out suspected communists. In 1927, the Conservative government passed a Trades Disputes Act, which banned sympathy strikes and mass picketing.

Instructions: The General Strike in Great Britain drew intense interest in the United States. Examine the headlines and excerpts from articles in the *New York Times* and answer questions 1-3.

1. In your opinion, why were the 1926 strike by coalminers and the General Strike in Great Britain so contentious?
2. Based on the coverage, was the strike successful? Explain.
3. Although these were news articles and not editorials, they may suggest a bias. In your opinion, what is the *Times'* view of the strike? On what evidence do you base your conclusion?

May 1, 1926: BRITISH COAL STRIKE WILL BEGIN TODAY; Cabinet Prepares to Maintain Food Supplies as Long Negotiations Collapse. TRADES UNIONS UNCERTAIN Strike Decision Remains to Be Taken -- Last-Minute Effort at Peace Expected. - After months of anxiety over the coal crisis, heightened during the past week by tense days of feverish discussions, the negotiations for a settlement of the dispute between the miners and the owners broke down just before midnight last night and a complete stoppage of work is due to begin today.

May 2, 1926: STRIKERS FOLLOW PRECEDENT OF 1920; Non-Interference With Food Health Services in Britain Is Unions' Policy. TRANSPORT AFFECTS THEM Labor's Avowed Policy May Be Nullified in Practice -- History of the Dispute. - The present strike was ordered by the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, after a majority vote of 3,603,618, because the mine owners and miners could not agree on the manner of operating the mines in accordance with the report of the Royal Commission presented on March 10.

STRIKE SET FOR MONDAY; Transport, Press, Iron and Steel Workers Ordered to Cease Work. - Unless something akin to a miracle happens within the next forty-eight hours millions of workers, employed on tasks most vital to Great Britain's daily life, will quit work and precipitate a general strike of unprecedented magnitude and possibly appalling consequences.

May 3, 1926: CABINET IS FIRM IN WARNING UNIONS; Calls General Strike Order a Challenge to Rights and Freedom of Nation. DEMANDS IT BE REVOKED - Following the break-down of negotiations between the Cabinet and leaders of the trades unions, which has called a general strike, the Government issued a statement, challenging the position of the strikers and declaring that no more parleys would be held until the strike order had been canceled and overt acts have ceased . . . The Government's declaration was as follows: His Majesty's Government believe that no solution of the difficulties in the coal industry which is both practicable and honorable can be reached except by sincere acceptance of the Coal Commission's report . . . If the miners, or Trades Union Committee on their behalf, were prepared to say plainly that they accept this proposal the Government would be ready to resume negotiations . . . Overt acts have already taken place, including gross interference with the freedom of the press, Such action involves a challenge to the constitutional rights and freedom of the nation. His majesty's Government therefore before they can continue the negotiations must require from the Trades Union Committee both a repudiation of the actions referred to that have already taken place and immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the instructions for a general strike.

TRAITS OF LEADERS IN BRITISH STRIKE; Cook of the Miners Known as "the Emperor" of the Labor Movement. - A. J. Cook, General Secretary and active head of the Miners' Federation in Great Britain, is called "Emperor" Cook in the British Labor movement. He is an avowed Communist and is regarded as the chief extremist among British Labor leaders. Cook was born in Somerset forty years ago. At the age of 17 he preached in the Baptist pulpit of South Wales. He worked for nearly twenty years in the coal mines of the Rhondda Valley, and attended the labor college, Earl's Court, after he became an agent of the Miners' Federation. During the war Cook was imprisoned twice for seditious speeches.

MAY 4, 1926: SAYS COAL TRADE IS FAR TOO LARGE; Head of British Railroad Blames Size of Industry for the General Strike. TOO MANY MINES - Blaming the size of the coal industry in Great Britain for the disturbances in it which have led to the general strike, Sir Josiah Charles Stamp, President of the London, Midland Scottish Railroad, said yesterday that there were from 150,000 to 200,000 too many men employed by it.

RUSH TO AID GOVERNMENT; Men and Women of All Classes Enroll for Duty in Strike. - The coming of the general strike and its implied threat to the nation have deeply touched Londoners of all classes. Answering the Government's appeal for volunteers to maintain the vital services, crowds began to gather early yesterday morning in the Foreign Office quadrangle to enroll their names . . . The queues included varied types of professional men, artisans, laborers and students. A special department was reserved for women.

LAST MINUTE PEACE FAILS - Midnight has just tolled. The British general strike is on. Every effort to avert the calamity has collapsed and the doors are now flung wide to what may be the worst industrial disaster in history . . . There can be no doubt about what this strike is about. Premier Baldwin stated it squarely tonight. And thye strike leaders have also stated it, firmly, brutally, ruthlessly, without the mincing of words or the sparing of feeling. "The Government has found itself challenged by an alternative Government," the Premier told the House of Commons tonight amid a breathless hush. "This is a threat to the freedom of our Constitution."

2,500,000 Reported Out in British Strike, But the Total May Increase to 4,342,982

SOCIALISTS HERE HAIL BRITISH STRIKE; Party Convention Cables Its Support to English Labor "in Common Cause."

English Fascisti Issue Emergency Manifesto; Ask Public to Help Save Nation From Ruin - The National Fascisti, a patriotic defense organization, tonight issued "an emergency manifesto," calling for recruits . . . The intention of the Fasciti is to protect any worker whop desires to work from intimidation. The manifesto declares that a majority of the workers have been forced to strike against their wishes by paid agitators.

LONDON NEWSPAPERS HARD HIT BY STRIKE; Four Are Forced to Shut Down, While Others Appear in Restricted Form.

RAILWAYS OPERATE SKELETON SERVICE; London Underground Officials Are Asked to Run Trains of System.

"SOVIET" PLAN IN SCOTLAND.; Union Chiefs Consider Proposal for Strike Council.

May 5, 1926: COAL LORDS DENY MINERS' LOCKOUT - "I believe that the general strike has been called under a complete misapprehension," was the disturbing statement made in the House of Lords this afternoon by a peer who is himself a large coal owner, and, confirmed by another lord who derives his wealth from a similar source, it stood out in an otherwise featureless debate in Parliament.

BOTH SIDES STAND FIRM - For twenty-four hours Great Britain has been in the grip of the stupendous general strike without a sign of weakening among the strikers, or among the employers, backed by the Government, bent on breaking the resistance of the millions of striking workers.

VAGARIES OF THE STRIKE - Huts, tents and all kinds of portable buildings are springing up like mushrooms in Hyde Park, which is the centre for the distribution of food supplies during the general strike. Lorries come and go with a rush characteristic of war days. There is an air of suspense and hurry everywhere.

ARREST SAKLATVALA ON SEDITION CHARGE; Police Seize British Hindu M.P. for Inciting Revolt by Speech in Hyde Park - Shapurji Saklatvala, the Parsee Communist Member of Parliament for North Battersea, whom the United States declined last year to receive as a member of the British Parliamentary delegation, was arrested at his home at High Gate this morning and arraigned at the Bow Street Police Court this afternoon, charged with making a seditious speech in Hyde Park.

May 6, 1926: SPORADIC CLASHES IN MANY SECTIONS; Attacks on Buses Continue in the Rougher Areas of London. - Crowds in the various rougher sections of London showed a menacing attitude, especially toward police, this afternoon. In the Limehouse district, which is one of the roughest districts in the city, taxicabs were driven off and other demonstrations were held. At King's Cross the unfriendly crowds were so large that many of the big shops closed. A crowd at Southwark chased three mounted policemen who were forced to flee.

GOVERNMENT PLANS WIDEN; Aim to Maintain Regular Life of Community in Spite of Strike. - The greatest industrial strike in British history enters upon its third day with both sides confident, defiant and unshaken. Premier Baldwin declared last night that the Government is willing to negotiate with the strikers just as soon as the strike is called off.

EXPERTS SEE NO HOPE FOR BRITISH MINES; Report to American Institute That the Industry Needs a Complete Overhauling. 81 PER CENT. HAND-MINED Inefficiency of Methods Is Said to Have Reduced Output and Forced Crisis.

BRITISH MINERS AMONG LOWEST PAID - That the coal miners are among the lowest paid industrial workers in Great Britain is apparent from an examination of the latest statistics published by the Trades Union Congress. These cover half of the year 1925, and the official publication states that they apply only to certain grades and do not cover the entire industry.

ANTI-STRIKE UNITS COVER GREAT BRITAIN - The Government announced today through the Ministry of Health the complete official antistrike organization wherewith it has covered England and Wales. For combating the strike the land has been divided into ten districts, each under a Civil Commissioner with a complete staff. At the head of them all is Sir W. Mitchell-Thompson, Postmaster General, with the title of Chief Civil Commissioner, whose headquarters are in London.

May 7, 1926: 2,000 FRENCHMEN STRIKE; Quit Jobs In Automobile Plant to Show Sympathy With British.

JAPAN STIRRED BY STRIKE; Labor Leaders Appeal for Funds to Aid British Unions.

Severe Rioting in Scotland - Riotous scenes took place in Edinburgh and Glasgow today and many charges had to be made by the police. Street cars were attacked and windows smashed.

BOTH SIDES ARE OBSTINATE; Conflict Is Becoming a Test of Dogged Endurance. - There is no sign of yielding on either side in Britain's great general strike. The excitement of the first days is giving way to dogged obstinacy. The glamour of the unusual which colored the strike's beginnings has faded. It has left behind nothing but drabness and sameness and the uncanny feeling of coming terrors if neither side breaks the other soon.

May 8, 1926: FOREIGN UNIONS WILL HELP BRITISH; Movement to Raise Funds Starts in Continental Countries and in India.

RAIN DISHEARTENS STRIKERS IN LONDON; Subway and Buses Continue to Improve Services as Volunteers Are Trained.

BALDWIN AND THOMAS MEET; Premier and Labor Leader Believed to Have Sought Peace Formula.

PUBLIC NOT WITH STRIKERS; People Who Are Usually Sympathetic With Labor Show Apathy

HINTS OF DRASTIC ACTION; Pledge of Protection Is Given to Troops in Any Necessary Measures.

Green Promises Support For British From A.F. of L. - President William Green of the American Federation of Labor has promised aid to the British strikers. The nature of this support has not been disclosed, but in view of the fact that Secretary Citrine of the British Trades Union Congress informed Mr. Green that prompt financial assistance would be most practical, it is expected that it may take that form.

May 9, 1926: *BRITAIN STRUGGLES WITH A CRUCIAL ISSUE; Origin of the Social and Economic Dispute That Caused the Revolutionary Upheaval -- Coal Industry, Weakened by Post-War Conditions, Is a Sore Spot for Which No Remedy Has Been Found*

May 10, 1926: *STRIKERS ASSERT RANKS ARE GROWING; Others Quitting Work of Own Will, They Say in Reply to Baldwin's Attack*

BALDWIN STRATEGY IS WINNING STRIKE FOR GOVERNMENT; Aggressive Action Keeps Vital Services Going as Unions Balk at "Trump Cards."

WOMEN AND RAIN MAY END THE STRIKE; Wife Is the Mentor in the British Workman's Home, and He Must Earn Food. SHE WANTS HIM AT WORK Rain Would Drive Him Home -- Three Wet Days Would Drown the Strike, Authority Says.

May 11, 1926: *STRIKE IS STEADILY SAGGING.* - Britain's great strike is just one week old, and it certainly appears to be sagging steadily toward its end. The Government and the strikers have met face to face, and at the end of this, the first, week the advantage appears to be emphatically on the side of the Government.

SOLDIERS MOVE FOOD; STRIKERS ONLY 'BOO'; An Armed Caravan of 220 Trucks Passes From Docks to Hyde Park Depot. VIOLENCE IS SUPPRESSED Great Force of Police and Military Bring Quiet to a Rough District.

INFORMAL PARLEYS STARTED IN BRITAIN TO END THE STRIKE - There are now going on informal conversations looking to the finding of a formula which will permit the ending of the British general strike. Neither the Government nor the Trades Union Council officially are represented, but those undertaking the effort are in touch with both sides.

May 13, 1926: *BALDWIN OFFERS FAIR PLAY; Promises to Resume His Efforts for Peace in the Coal Industry. STRIKE IN MINES GOES ON Great Majority of People Hail Victory With Cheers, Some With Tears of Joy. FEW WORKERS DISGRUNTLED* - With shouts of joy, deep-drawn sighs of relief and tears of thanksgiving, the bulk of Great Britain's population heard the report at midday today that the great general strike was over. The news spread with astonishing rapidity. It leaped from group to group on the streets.

Public Opposition Defeated the Strike; VICTORY IN STRIKE IS WON BY PUBLIC Aroused Citizens Refused to Be Browbeaten by the Leaders of the Unions.

May 14, 1926: *BRITISH EMPLOYERS BAR OUT STRIKERS; Men Returning Find No Jobs or Face the Prospect of a Reduction in Wages.* - Those who believed that the collapse of the general strike would mean an immediate return to every-day conditions had a rude awakening today. Throughout Britain everything is still askew. It will be many days, weeks maybe, before the railways, for instance, are in normal running order . . . The strike is over but the lock-out has begun . . . It is now the turn of the employers to strike. Ten days ago employees refused to continue working. Now the employers refuse to allow them to resume work.