

# Everywhere and Nowhere

In 1926 the Trades Union Congress called a General Strike in support of a million miners facing huge pay cuts. Over two million workers joined the strike. Famously the TUC's General Council called the Strike off nine days later, having won nothing, afraid that the strike would spiral out of control.

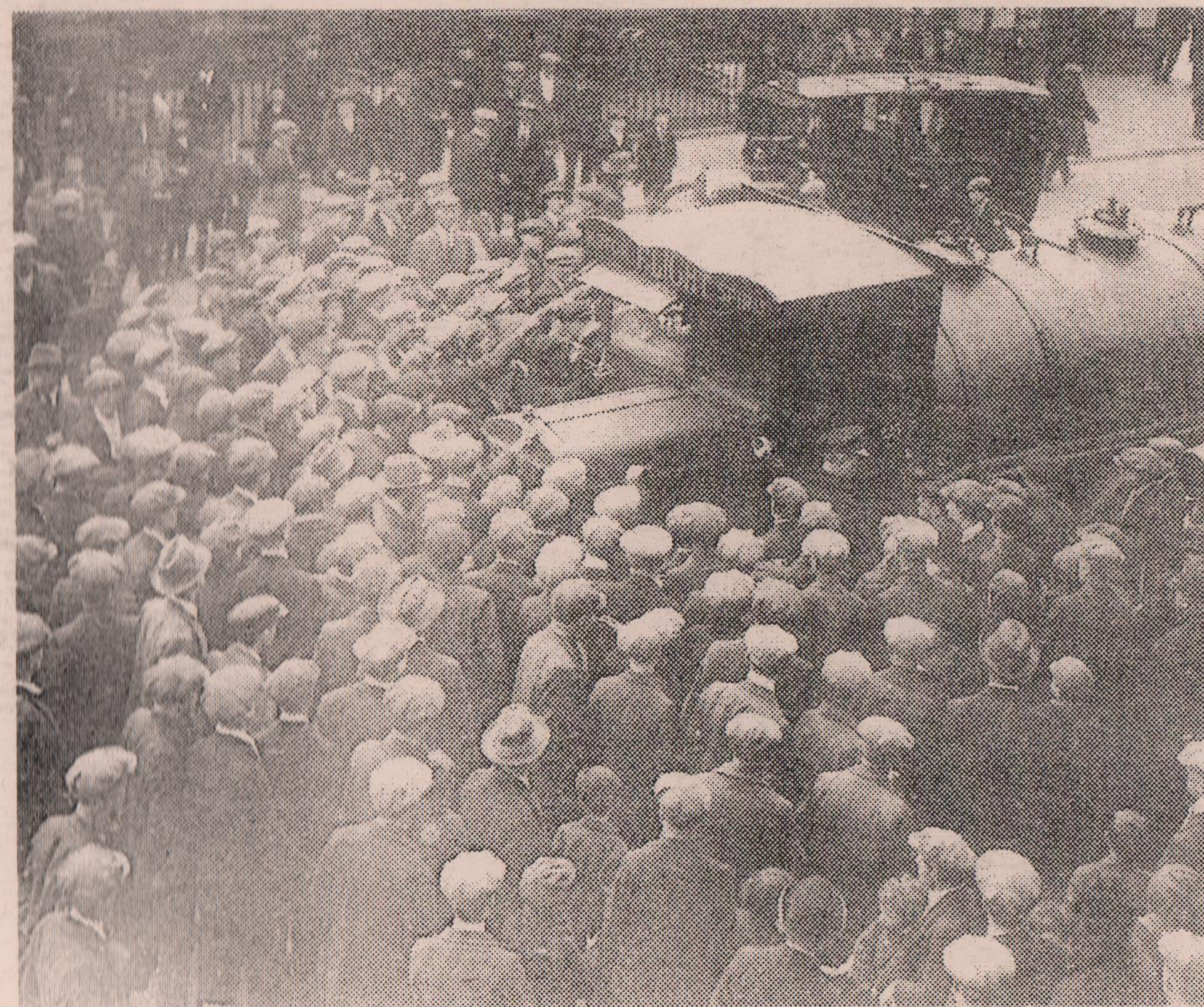


But was the defeat of the General Strike really down to the TUC leaders' betrayal? Or was it more prosaically sabotaged at a more basic level - through the union structures organising the Strike locally?

This pamphlet relates brief accounts of some of the local events of the 1926 General Strike in different areas of London, and examines myths and reality in 1926, as a step towards both a fuller account of London's part in this cataclysmic struggle.

—past tense—

# Everywhere and Nowhere



towards an account of  
**THE 1926 GENERAL STRIKE  
IN LONDON**

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*Cover image: strikers prevent a van full of petrol from entering  
the London Docks, during the 1926 General Strike.*

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# THE GENERAL STRIKE: MYTH AND FACT

*"[the General Strike]... is a revolution that is Everywhere, and Nowhere..." (Fernand Pelloutier).*

## 1926: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In May 1926 2 million workers joined the only General Strike Britain has ever seen. It lasted nine days, before being called off by the people who had called it – the General Council of the Trades Union Congress.

The TUC leadership had unwillingly called the Strike, in support of a million miners who had been locked out of the pits until they accepted drastic wage cuts. The General Council had been forced into action by the overwhelming class feeling of the members of the unions, who both strongly supported the miners and believed a General Strike to be in their own interests in the face of an economic assault from the bosses and the government.

The Strike was in most cases rock solid: increasing numbers of workers were walking out, and towards its end it was spreading into other industries not officially on strike. But the government was very well prepared, having planned in advance - ensuring the amassing of coal stocks to make sure the miners could be defeated and industry could keep going, recruiting volunteer strike-breakers ahead of time, and setting up networks to organise nationally and locally.

On the ground, the strike was organized in each town or borough by Trades councils, local committees of trade union branches, some of which formed local Councils of Action to specifically co-ordinate activity, picketing etc. Through mass picketing, and refusal to cross picket lines, in many areas the Strike Committees gained total control of transport (trams, tubes etc in London), and shut down many industries. In some places they were issuing permits to travel or open to bosses. Local Strike Bulletins, and a national daily paper, the *British Worker*, attempted to keep information flowing to strikers and supporters. Although unions attempted to maintain order, there

were regular clashes with the police, who were busy trying to protect scabs attempting to run public transport and break the strike in other industries...

But, afraid of the possibilities of workers escaping their control, and class warfare overflowing their very limited aims, the TUC bureaucrats tried hard to avoid the Strike, attempted to hamstring strikers on the ground from any autonomous action, negotiated throughout with the government and finally called the strike off, claiming they'd gained concessions, even though none had been won.

Although 100,000 more workers came out on the day following the ending of the Strike than had previously been called out, very quickly most workers returned to work, facing worsening pay and conditions from employers made bold by the defeat – and leaving the miners to fight alone for six months until they were forced to give in and accept wage reductions.

This sellout did leave a powerful legacy of bitterness. At the time, and ever since, the TUC leadership have been blamed for betraying the General Strike, and the miners.

## MYTH AND REALITY IN THE NINE DAYS

Since 1926 the events of the General Strike have become part of the mythological catechism of the working class movement. The events of the nine days have been held up as an example to illustrate many lessons we are supposed to learn.

The following discusses some of the myths – and some of the realities. We're thinking, maybe some of the lessons we need to learn are slightly different to the ones the orthodox left traditions have maintained over the last 87 years...

### **First of all, the myth of 1926 as a great climax of the class struggle.**

1926 was not the climax of industrial militancy, but actually a last ditch action, the end of the wave of militancy that had begun during World War 1 and escalated in the immediate post-War years. 1919 and 1920 had both seen stronger strike waves and more dangerous moments of crisis for the ruling classes. In 1919 the government had in fact told TUC leaders that



strikes had them at their mercy, but had correctly guessed that TUC leaders would back down as they weren't prepared to take power. It was never their aim.

Strikes had been declining in number and effect since 1920; despite grandiose statements of alliance by the unions, the wave of industrial militancy was in many ways faltering. There's no doubt that the fact that over two million people were prepared to go on indefinite strike in support of the miners was a magnificent display of solidarity and fellow feeling; and that many clearly saw that standing by one group of workers was fighting in defence of all. But it was always a defensive strike; in contrast with some of the syndicalist struggles before World War 1, or even some of the events of 1919, it had little sense that it could break its bounds and expand.

### **The General Council sold out the strike.**

This is hardly disputable. It should have been hardly surprising though – the same union leaders had been doing the same for years, (and particularly in the potentially far more dangerous years of 1919 and 1920) - stitching up workers and capitulating to employers. The TUC leaders were more afraid of the workers than of the boss class, they said so, to quote J.R. Clynes of the General and Municipal Workers union: *"I am not in fear of the capitalist class. The only class I fear is our own."* The bureaucrats inevitably became divorced from the day to day struggles of their members, and became closer to the boss class they dealt with.

During the Strike, the TUC did try to shut down autonomy, preventing mass meetings, banning local strike propaganda, and restricting the issuing of permits...

Was the lack of TUC preparedness, their refusal to plan for the strike, a deliberate tactic? Or just dithering and indecision? The TUC General Council (GC)'s strategy seemed to be based on nothing apart from a determination not to let strikers run things themselves.

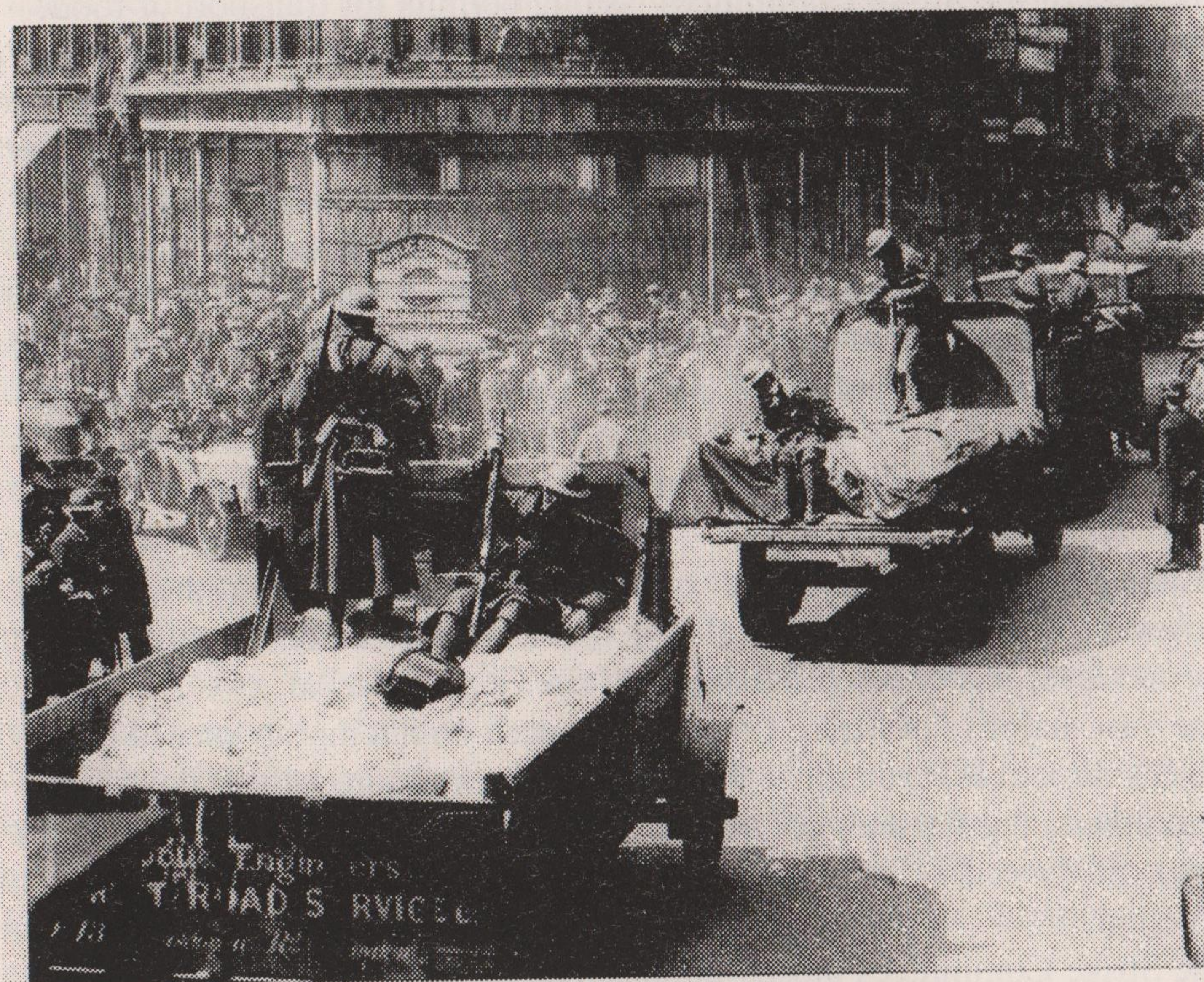
Their other masterplan consisted of a ludicrous decision to divide workers into a front line (transport workers, printers, dockers, builders, iron and steel & chemical workers), to come out on strike immediately on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, and a reserve, to be called out later (including engineers, and shipyard workers). This left workers in many areas very isolated, where the 'front line' were in a minority.

In many area workers ignored this directive, or tried to: many walked out

on their own initiative; some were persuaded back to work by the Trades Councils, or their own unions. As the TUC's daily strike paper, the *British Worker* put it: *"the biggest trouble is to keep men in [ie at work] who are not involved."*

Also the GC's instructions were very confusing, so many workers, for instance municipal employees, were left not knowing if they were to strike or not. Most notoriously, workers at one Lewisham factory walked out three times, and were ordered to go back by their union, three times, in nine days. Power workers were supposed to supply light but not power – practically impossible; as a result, where electric workers came out completely, they were sent back to work. This issue was still undecided at the end of the strike. Many electricians walked out or cut off all power on their own bat. Postal, telegraph and telephone workers were never called out, which left communications intact – a crucial mistake.

If all workers had been called out, it would have had a bigger impact; also



*troops on the streets ...*



workers not called out were in practice supporting scab labour, ie using buses, electricians, etc., or told to keep working when members of other unions in the same workplace were on strike - which was demoralising and divisive. Great bitterness arose after the strike because of this issue. For example, at Woolwich Arsenal, there were many workers in several unions doing different jobs - some ordered out, some ordered to remain. Despite strong feelings locally, and calls for everyone to strike regardless, many wouldn't come out without official union backing. When those still working struck they were told to go back by the GC; when the strike ended those who had remained at work (many reluctantly but under union orders) were given preferential treatment, and this fractious legacy lasted for years. Unions did issue strike pay to all strikers - obviously this was useful and necessary, but as with all official strikes, this did keep them under union control. Which was bound to have had an influence on people's thinking, when strikers wanted to carry on after the TUC backed down.

The idea of the Strike Committees issuing permits for transport of food, coal etc, was actually made powerful by the strength of mass picketing, keeping trams, trains, etc from running. Where government control broke down (for example in the North East of England) employers forced to go cap in hand to Councils of Action. But refusal to prevent movement of all materials was another quietist decision made by the General Council; it meant challenging the alate control of food; which the GC was unwilling to do. In fact they offered to co-operate with the government over food distribution, but the government refused, recognizing they had the upper hand.

### **Trades Councils and local unions as local brakes on action.**

Although many trade unionists, and union branches, fumed at the General Council's betrayal, the hard reality is that it was the union structures at ground level that ensured the defeat of the General Strike.

The vast majority of Strike Committees made no attempt to exceed the TUC's directives, even those who were in theory more radical politically than others, (eg the ones controlled by the Communist Party). Some of the latter did exceed TUC guidelines and several Trades Councils were later expelled.

The Strike Committees mostly emphasized the TUC line: strikers should stay away from picket lines, stay off the street - go to church, do your gar-

den etc. Wear your war medals on demos, don't get involved in trouble. Passivity was the watchword: many unions made frantic attempts to organize anything to keep people from getting involved: concerts, sports, etc. Many workers bought into this, co-operating with police, not acting against scabs, going to church, concerts etc, - and staying off the streets. Certainly some of the Strike Committees made their obsession with controlling strikers and keeping the peace clear: many strike bulletins and letters to the TUC talk about keeping order as paramount, and dismiss, slander or disassociate themselves from those taking part in street battles, stopping cars, attacking scab trams and other direct actions. Or they stress the 'problem' of keeping at work those not 'yet' called out: "*Our difficulty to keep others at work... main headache keeping in workers not called out...*" etc. Many spent much energy, trying to control the workers fighting with the cops or trying to take matters into their own hands. Many strike committees, (for example, Wandsworth, and Willesden) set up some kind of picket defence corps, ostensibly to defend strikers against police violence, but as much it seems to prevent any trouble, or autonomous activity, as to shore up the picket lines or defend them against the cops. Recruitment into defence Corps was used to divert people **away** from confrontations with police.

Trades Councils had never been very radical in most cases. Many had been overtly hostile, or at best frosty, towards the grassroots shop stewards movement in World War 1. Although some of this movement had subsequently had some involvement in Trades Councils, ideologically, most Trades Councils were in practice identical with local Labour Party branches: they distrusted outbreaks of independent thinking by rank and file workers. In practice, many Labour and union activists felt themselves entitled to organise things **for** the workers, seeing themselves as an elite with the nous and experience to take charge. Far from seeing a General Strike as an opening to revolution, or social change in any fundamental way, they did however in many cases strongly believe in solidarity, and **were** prepared to risk much in support of the miners.

When the strike was called off, many Councils of Action **did** feel the miners had been betrayed and the strike should continue: in practice, few did carry on. For many, integrated into the structures of the TUC, and the complex strictures of union practice, it's possible they simply could not conceive of a mass wildcat continuation of the struggle.

If the TUC General Council put themselves at the head of the Strike in



order to defeat it **NATIONALLY**, it may not be fair to say Trades Councils put themselves at the head of it **LOCALLY** with the same view – to prevent workers taking things into their own hands. But in practice, their adherence to the TUC's line guaranteed the Strike's defeat.

### **Many workers took autonomous action.**

Despite the General Council's line, and the tight control that trades councils attempted to impose, thousands of workers **DID** take collective action on their own initiative.

In fact it was unofficial action that sparked the outbreak of the strike, when *Daily Mail* printers downed tools in protest at an anti-Union editorial; their union leader tried to get them to go back, though later he denied this (the myth at work: he didn't want to be seen as one of those sellout TUC bastards?) They had jumped the gun, leaving the General Council in the lurch, as they **DIDN'T** want the strike, but the government **DID**, so it broke off negotiations.)

The Strike saw a mass of autonomous actions: street fighting, blocking and trashing trams, buses, harrasing middle class drivers in their cars, stoning the police from rooftops; in the north of England especially streets were barricaded, there were arson attempts; miners even derailed the Flying Scotsman Edinburgh to London train (though they had only intended to knock out the local coal train!)

To some extent this activity was increasing as the strike went on. As well as wrecking buses and trams (smashing engines and motors, and burning vehicles, there were incidents of scab-bashing. For instance, on Wednesday 12 May, the last day of the strike, a strikebreaker called James Vanden Bergh, an undergraduate at Cambridge, was found in the cab of his Central London Railway (now the underground's Central Line) train with head injuries. He had no memory of the attack, and police were treating it as foul play: this was the first reported violence on the tubes.

But in fact, there was a low level of violence compared to other mass strikes (eg the Liverpool general strike of 1911). The Army was called in very little, and used mainly for dramatic effect by the government. The Workers Defence Corps did more to prevent workers violence than to stop pickets getting nicked or bashed.

### **Unionised workers and non-unionised workers in the Strike.**

Large numbers of non-union workers, dismissed by many TUC and union bigwigs before Strike, came out on strike, got involved in the autonomous actions, picketing etc, and many joined unions during the nine days. This on one hand elated some Trades Councils, but it scared the GC. There was a certain snobbery about workers not already unionised, and a dismissal of those involved in streetfighting: the GC line, followed by many trades councils, was all trouble was caused by non-unionists - though this is unproveable in many cases, it's certainly untrue in others, in that union members were arrested for involvement in fighting.

### **Could it have turned out differently?**

What if the Strike had lasted longer? Could it have done? Was it getting more solid or weaker? The government had managed to force food supplies through, eg in London, through the docks; did this show there was no chance of success? Or merely that Strike Committees were unwilling to use any means necessary to win the strike.

There was a lie put about by the TUC General Council that the strike was crumbling at the end – but there is no evidence of this; the opposite in fact. They were bullshitting to cover the fact that they were afraid of rank and file autonomy, although in reality it was minimal.

To some extent a counter-myth has grown up, of the middle classes and posh students actively enlisted to scab, to defeat the Strike and defend the status quo. In daily reality this wound more people up than the idea of the suffering of the miners – there was open class hatred for posh scabs, and to a lesser extent for anyone trying to break the strike, eg by trying to drive to work.

But most volunteers were useless – a small minority could do anything, most being idle and untrained for owt. Their impact has probably been over-hyped, partly by the government, partly by the strata of the upper and middle classes involved. They were only successful in certain areas, not at all in parts of north, very limited even in London, and caused a number of accidents and disasters when put to work on trains, buses and trams.

As the strike went on, with autonomous actions increasing: would all out class war have resulted if it had gone on?



Although thousands of workers came out when they were not authorized to, although some Councils of Action and Strike Bulletins broke the TUC rules, although many stayed out longer after the Strike was called off, the fact is that in the end, most workers didn't break out of the union structures, the structures that ensured their defeat. In reality, given the General Council's back-peddling and then betrayal, and the tight control of local union branches, open escalation of the Strike **controlled from below** was the only way it could have gone forward. Some workers were said to have thought the real fight would start now, with the TUC out of the way; if so not enough, or they didn't or weren't able to act on it. But conditions were in fact loaded against them.

British Syndicalist Tom Brown later suggested that a major tactical advantage could have been gained by the striking workers occupying their workplaces, rather than abandoning them to the OMS and posh scabs. Possibly this is true, but the stay-in-strike he championed was never suggested at the time; the idea was developed only later - admittedly often successfully... The TUC kept emphasizing the industrial nature of dispute... that the Strike was not aimed at overthrowing the government... but in reality the only direction to go in WAS towards challenging the state, in an all out attempt to (at the very least) impose working class interests on the ruling class. A mass strike NOT prepared to do this was bound to fail, in the face of the government's preparations and determination not to bend.

### **The role of the Communist Party**

The Communist Party of Great Britain was involved in the Strike, and in the day to day running of some Councils of Action. But the party was weak, small; it had been weakened by the arrests and jailings of many members in the previous year. The CP spent most of time before and during calling on the TUC to lead. The CPGB's ideology was tightly controlled from Moscow, and its line on the General Strike was "*All power to the General Council*" - in the circumstances, a sick joke. Centralising power in the hands of the GC was precisely the opposite of 'All power to the Workers'. The CP made no attempt to challenge the GC's control, there were no attacks on passive picketing, no discussion of Councils of Action obeying the GC, or of who was running them, and no criticism of the daft two-wave policy. The few CP-controlled Trades Councils and Strike Committees did sometimes push weakly for escalation but barely, and in lit-

tle more than words.

Although its always fun crying "traitor" at the TUC leaders, many who bitterly attacked them, remained fixated on the same union structures, the idea of capturing the leadership of the unions for the left etc. This is as valid today, as then, many of the left groupings still spend vast amounts of time manoeuvring within Broad Lefts etc in the unions... "Union leadership would be ok if it was the right kind of leadership" - ie us. But the Left union leaders in 1926 were as useless as the right were treacherous, left leaders were among ones claiming a victory afterwards, in blatant defiance of the facts... and left controlled unions still attempt to control and hamper the autonomous activity of people struggling on the ground. The Communist Party later became critical of left Union leaders, though they had helped them to power! The daily practice of much of today's union structures is one way that class anger and resistance is controlled, diverted, channeled - this is not to attack all union members or even branch reps, convenors etc; it's a structural problem that draws militant activists in and gradually neuters them in the guise of enabling them to achieve their political aims.

It has been suggested that the Strike Committees or Councils of Action could have provided an alternative structure take over the state, or institute dual power or whatever. Some trotskyist critics of the GC have expressed the view that Councils of Action should have taken more power locally, over union branches and been more centralized bodies DIRECTING strike activity. Since most Strike Committees just didn't want to do this, this is pie in the sky. A Communist International report later suggested the Councils were embryonic soviets... this is simply not born out by reality.

### **After the Deluge**

While national and local union structures may have ensured the defeat of the Strike, the result was a disaster for the trade union movement. It led to a vengeful employers offensive, wages being driven down, blacklisting of many militants.; the government brought in savage anti-union laws. Workers also left in unions droves, partly with the legacy of betrayal and bitterness, but also because hamstrung unions couldn't do much for them.



## Was the General Strike a disaster which should have been avoided?

As with the 1984-85 miners strike, the government in 1926 saw in advance that a clash of some kind with the union movement (most likely over the mining subsidy) was inevitable, and could in fact be necessary, and desirable, as a way to clobber the organised working class. On this basis, they laid their plans carefully, and made sure that if and when the clash came they would win.

The government climbdown of 1925, allowing the Coal subsidy to continue, for another few months, was merely a ruse to buy time to marshal its forces... (much as Thatcher backed down from confronting the NUM in the early '80s, waiting till the time was right...) The stocks of coal it was thus able to build up, left it in a stronger position. The Government also pre-planned scab labour and food distribution, after previous scares with strikes. Forming the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies in advance of the Strike, it recruited strikebreakers ahead of time, and worked out ways of breaking union control over transport particularly.

The GC and the unions, in contrast, were not ready, although with some clear thinking this could have easily have been different. Unlike the state, the TUC leadership wanted to avoid the strike, and did little to ready themselves, in the hope it wouldn't happen. While workers on the ground and some local officials pressed for a strike to support the miners, they neither realised that the government was better prepared, nor were able to overcome the contradictions within the labour movement.

Many on the left, including ourselves, obsess on the myth of May 1926 as some kind of potential revolutionary situation, thwarted by union leaders holding back class struggle. But in reality it wasn't: few at the TIME saw it as more than an (admittedly huge) industrial dispute, limited to support for the miners. It's possible that it was doomed to failure, given the conditions prevalent at the time. For a general strike to have contained 'revolutionary potential' depended on the willingness, confidence and numbers of working class people prepared to go beyond the trade union structures, ideology and tactics, when it became necessary. Whatever bitterness and anger at the selling out of the miners may have existed (and it **was** widespread), there was no critical mass of people able to translate it into maintaining or extending the Strike.

## THE GENERAL STRIKE IN LONDON Some events, local organisation and conditions...

The strength of the Strike varied greatly in London. Working class areas, mainly in the inner boroughs, and industrial areas, especially round the Docks in East and South East London, were mostly solid. Further out and in middle class areas things were obviously very different.

All in all it's fair to say there was no great breakdown in authority, although there was fierce fighting in certain areas.

At the start of the Strike the tubes were shut down, trains were going nowhere, trams and buses were virtually non-existent and the streets were blocked with cars. Car drivers (mostly middle class) trying to get to work were often stopped by crowds and forced to walk or told to go home! (Many people were jailed during and after the strike for intimidation of



*TUC HQ with despatch riders waiting to spread news*



scab drivers and attacks on buses and private cars.)

On May 5th however the London Omnibus Company had 86 buses going, driven by middle class volunteers (they had none out the day before).

The Ministry of Health issued guidelines to ban local Boards of Guardians, who were in charge of giving relief (dole) to the poor and needy, from giving anything to strikers; this was aimed at Labour-dominated boards like Poplar in the East End. This must have had an effect at the end of the Strike, making it harder for people to stay out.

By Thursday 6th, trams and buses were starting to run more frequently in some areas. But this was not achieved without resistance: 47 buses were damaged by crowds by the 7th of May. By the end of this week the TUC General Council had started to panic; not only was it trying to negotiate with the Government in secret, but it was stamping down on the limited autonomy of the Councils of Action, trying to prevent them from issuing permits to travel, ordering them instead to pass it to the National Transport Committee in London.

The Government's move to break the strikers' stranglehold on the Docks on May 8th was crucial: food supplies in London were running low, there was said to be only 2 days supply of flour and bread in the capital. They laid their plans with care: troops and armoured cars had been gathered in Hyde Park. At 4am, 20 armoured cars left to escort 150 lorries to the Docks. Volunteers had been ferried into the Docks by ship to beat picket lines. The lorries were loaded by these posh scabs while Grenadier Guards took charge of the Docks. Pickets watched but could do little in the face of overwhelming numbers of soldiers. The lorries were then escorted west. This show of strength seems to have overawed the East End strikers: by the next day convoys of food were running freely in and out of the Docks with little resistance.

According to some reports in many areas there was an air of resignation by the 10th, many people clearly believing they wouldn't win this one. This needs investigating and obviously things varied greatly.

By Tuesday 11th tubes were being reopened by scab labour - Bakerloo, City and South London (now Northern Line) running to most stations. When the General Council announced the ending of the Strike, not only were the 'second wave' starting to come out, but other workers not called out had started to strike... The GC's lying bullshit about a settlement being imminent for the miners led to many Strike Committees initially claiming victory. When the scale of the surrender became clear there was widespread

anger and disbelief. It is widely quoted that there more workers on strike on the 14th May, after the end of the Strike, than the 13th. However, it has to be said that the numbers are not so significant next to the fact that strikers could not see how to take the struggle further, and within days most had given up. There has to be some consciousness of what direction to go in, a desire to take things onward. In the face of government control of the streets through use of troops, and a union stranglehold on activity, the desire and direction weren't there.

Many workers did not go straight back to work: for two main reasons. Firstly some angrily tried to carry on the Strike. Secondly, some were told not to return by their unions until terms had been agreed for a return with their employers - for many workers this meant accepting worse conditions, no strike agreements, lower pay and working with scabs who had shat on them. Many firms took advantage of the defeat of the Strike to screw more out of their wage slaves, refuse to hire militants, etc. Quite a few Strike activists were not rehired and blacklisted, in London as elsewhere.

*The following accounts mostly relate to London Boroughs as they existed in 1926. Many have now been amalgamated into larger Boroughs.*

*Bear in mind this is patchy and inadequate - a start towards a detailed account of the capital in the Nine Days. Most of these notes are compiled from the reports of local Trades Councils and Councils of Action to the TUC. So they emphasise the local union involvement and activities of the Trades Councils. To some extent they play up the strength of the strike, and focus mostly on the workers in the unions.*

*Also clear are the attempts of the Strike Committees to "maintain order" ie control the Strike, prevent working class crowds from controlling the streets, restrict the extension of events. More oral histories, accounts of involvement on the ground are needed... Some accounts are longer than others, but this is a work in progress.*

*Maybe collective research could be done and this account could be turned into a full-blown account of the Strike in London.*



## GUIDE TO ORGANISATIONS & ACRONYMS

OMS – The Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies: the government backed organization designed to break the strike.

NUR – National Union of Railwaymen

RCA - Not sure.

URS – Union of Railway Signalmen

ETU – Electrical Trades Union

AEU- Amalgamated Engineering Union

ILP – Independent Labour Party.

TGWU – Transport & General Workers Union.

ASIE & F - Not sure

UPM - Not sure.

ASWM - Amalgamated Society of Woodcutting Machinists.

AEC - Associated Equipment Company, built buses, lorries & motorbikes.

LNW - London & North London Railway.

## NORTH LONDON

### ST PANCRAS

(then a Borough including Camden, Kentish Town. Although Camden Town seems to have had a separate Strike Committee)

St Pancras had a very militant strike committee, dominated by the Communist Party, operating however from the Labour Party HQ at 67 Camden Road. It issued a vocal and provocative Strike Bulletin. Their HQ was raided on 10 May, the police seized a typewriter and roneo duplicator, to prevent the bulletin being issued. The Secretary, J. Smith was nicked. The raid was alleged to be caused by a report in the Bulletin about an "incident in Harwood St".

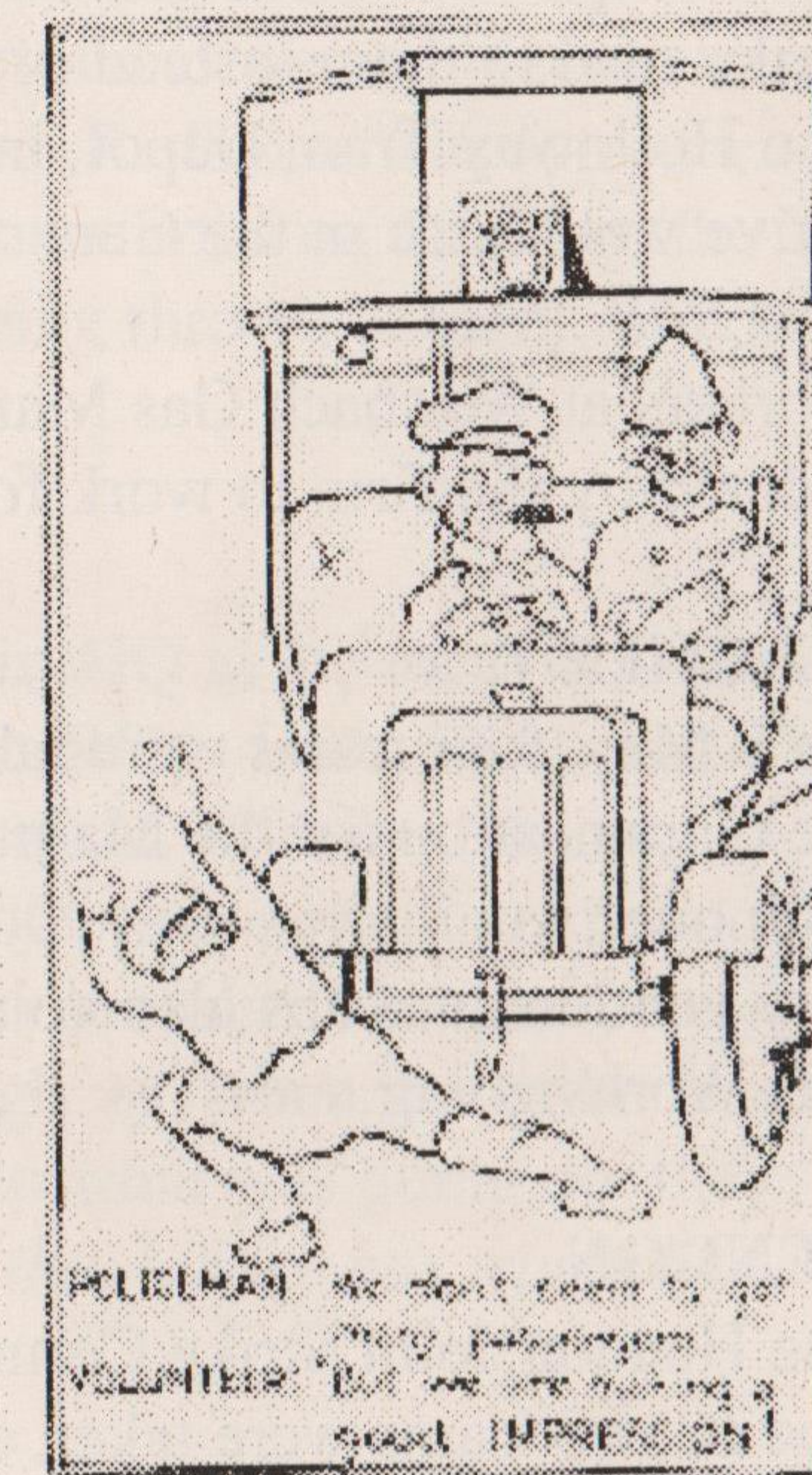
Later St Pancras Strike Committee officials were expelled from the TUC over items in the Strike Bulletin; the TUC had ordered bulletins should not contain anything but central publicity but the Strike Committee issued other statements and news.

St Pancras set up a Workers Defence Corps... to maintain 'order'. The area was solid to the end of the Strike.

In Camden Town, on the night of Saturday May 8th, there was fighting between cops and pickets. Then on the 9th, strikers attacked a bus, so cops charged them, hospitalising 40 strikers. Again on May 12th, there was a confrontation here, 2 people were nicked for "interfering with traffic."

Railwaymen and other workers were mostly solid at Kings Cross and Euston stations.

An attempt at Euston to run a train ended with the "volunteer-run train run into the catch-points near Camden." At Kings Cross everyone, including the women cleaners (previously unionised) joined the strike. Here, too, the attempt to get trains driven by middle class blacklegs backfired: "two of the OMSers took charge of a train. They failed to open the draincocks before starting the locomotive and the cylinder heads blew out." There was further



Source: The  
St. Pancras Strike Bulletin,  
10 May.



incompetence: *"a heavy engine has fallen into the pit of the turntable..."*

### **ISLINGTON**

The area had a militant CP-dominated Strike Committee, reflecting the area's long radical and left tradition, and strong workers movement.

Islington Trades Council was based at 295 Upper Street.

According to the Islington daily strike bulletin no 7 (12 May) everything was favourable there still, the position unchanged. Mass meetings were held in Finsbury Park, and at the Finsbury Park Empire.

At Gillespie Road School, the children had Sir John Simon's attack on the Strike read to them instead of the usual scripture lesson!

The Holloway Tram Depot, in Pemberton Gardens, had a very militant and active workforce in the General Strike. They had their own strike bulletin, *Live Rail*.

Workers at Welsbach Gas Mantle Manufacturers In Kings Cross were ordered by the firm to work for the OMS to break the strike, or be sacked...

### **FINCHLEY**

On 8 May, four trams were taken out of the depot by scab volunteers from the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, several specials manning each one.

City gentleman scabs also volunteered to shovel coal to keep the Mill Hill Gas Works going.

### **HENDON**

The Hendon Joint Strike Committee issued strike bulletins...

One or two trams were taken out on the 7th, though not without resistance: four tramwaymen and two railworkers were arrested in the process.

### **TOTTENHAM**

Tottenham Trades Council Emergency Committee, at 7 Bruce Grove, issued a Daily Bulletin.

### **WOOD GREEN & SOUTHGATE**

The Wood Green & Southgate Trades Council reported the position on May 5th to be *"one of solidarity. Entertainments committee formed and other means adopted to get the men out of the streets."* They reported that there was still a *"position of solidarity"* on May 7th.

### **ENFIELD**

Enfield Trades Council and Labour Party formed a Council of Action. Two committees were set up to co-ordinate the activities of the Trade Unions and other bodies within the area; also to keep in touch with neighbouring Trades Councils or Councils of Action. One met at the Labour Party HQ at 66 Silver St, Enfield, the other at Herewood House, in continuous session all day. Open air meetings were held all over the area.

All workers were reported to be out solid.

Redburns Motor, a small private bus company, based in Enfield, was not unionized and it continued to operate its fleet during the Strike. The routes through Tottenham, Stoke Newington and Kingsland were subject to most hostility. Despite police escorts being provided, Redburns was forced to suspend services for two days. When services restarted on 6th May, the buses had to endure stones and other items being thrown at them, which occasionally resulted in broken windows.

### **WEALDSTONE**

Wealdstone Joint Strike Committee, from their HQ at the local Co-operative Hall, sent greetings on behalf of the NUR, RCA, URS, ETU, AEU, Transport Workers, Building Labourers Federation, Printers, National Society of painters, to the Secretary of the TUC, to congratulate them on *"the able way in which you are conducting the present situation..."*

They must have been terminal optimists though, as, when the strike was called off, they felt, despite the confusion as to what was going on, they stated that *"whatever the condition, it means that justice has triumphed."*

### **STOKE NEWINGTON**

A mass meeting of several thousand strikers was held in the Alexandra Theatre, Stoke Newington, on Sunday May 9th: hundreds were turned away.

### **BARNET**

On 2 May before the strike, the Barnet & District Trades Council, based at 5 York Terrace, Mays Lane, passed a resolution supporting the TUC calling a general strike...



## WEST LONDON

### WILLESDEN

Willesden: The Strike Committee formed a 200-strong 'Maintenance of Order Corps', seemingly to prevent things getting out of their control. There was no fighting here.

### HAMMERSMITH

On 6th May, the TUC HQ sent a panicked letter after receiving reports of a "*bad riot at Hammersmith outside OMS HQ. it is said stones were thrown and police used batons.*" It seems "*buses were stopped near the station, and various parts removed by the strikers. When some of the buses returned at 8.30 pm some of the occupants began to jeer at the crowd some of which became angry and boarded some buses roughly handling the drivers and conductors one of whom was badly injured*" (shame). "*Local fascists began to throw stones from a building near by. Later the police made a charge using their batons, and arrested forty three people only one of which was a trade unionist and he was released owing to a mistake being made.*"

On May 7th, buses were wrecked, as strikers fought a pitched battle with cops and fascists. 47 people were nicked.

A mass meeting of several thousand strikers was held in the Blue Hall, Hammersmith, on Sunday May 9th.

### FULHAM

Fulham Trades Council was said to be "*functioning very satisfactorily*" on May 12th... Their premises (possibly in Dawes Road) were raided by the police the night before, all members present at the meeting had their names taken, none were nicked though.

A deputation of shop stewards from the Power Station (South of Townmead Road) went to Fulham's Emergency Committee and asked to turn off the power to 54 firms doing non-essential work: Fulham Borough Council refused; four days later the Power Station workers came out on strike. But volunteers and naval ratings kept the power station going.

However, "*Brothers Stirling and Calfe, of the Electrical Trades Union, employed by Fulham Electricity Undertaking, have been arrested this morning*" (May 8th) so there was maybe trouble over this.

## PUTNEY

Two buses were stopped on the bridge on May 6th and sabotaged... this led to "*fights between local ruffs (?) and fascists, otherwise quiet. No trade unionists took part in fights.*" Yeah right. Fascists were strong in the Putney area in the 1920s and '30s.

## FELTHAM

Feltham Repair Depot: Workers here were heavily involved in the Strike (as they had been in the shop stewards movement in the previous decade). They organised very active pickets here, and produced a strike bulletin, the *Feltham Tatler*.

The Feltham National Union of Railwaymen (from their HQ at the Railway Tavern, Bedford Lane) reported on May 6th that the position was "*simply splendid, all members of all branches full of spirits. We have also had splendid reports from surrounding districts.*"

*Meetings for women and open meetings have been arranged, also concerts and games. The response of the few 'nons' [meaning non-union members] here on Monday was great... Nothing whatever moved from Feltham. 17 reported for duty on Tuesday out of 650 employed. ..."*

## EALING

An attempt to run trains out of the Ealing Common Depot was defeated when pickets blocked the lines.

Ealing Joint Strike Committee reported in their Daily Bulletin on May 8th: "*The RCA position is very strong, all members standing "four square". More 'nons' (non-union members) are joining up and all steps are being taken to get more members out. The Strike Committee is issuing a special appeal to women in this district, also they look to you to see that your wife and friends get on.*"

*The NUR position is grand. All members still in fighting form. There are still a few 'nons' but these are being got in.*

*The T&GWU have inquired if they shall recognize OMS permits of delivery of coal. Instructions have been given in this matter... The report from the Building Trades is to the effect that their members are responding splendidly to the call...*

*Members are reminded of the mass demonstration to be held on Ealing Common tomorrow 8th may, at 3.00pm. A contingent will leave here at 2.30pm...*



... issuing this daily report we would urge all members not be stampeded into panic by the provocative utterances of the Home Secretary. The inference contained in his broadcast appeal for special constables on Wednesday evening to the effect that the Trade Union movement were violating law and order is quite unjustifiable... The strikers are standing firm and they intend to conduct themselves in a quiet and orderly manner."

### HANWELL

Hanwell Council of Action operated from the Viaduct Inn. They reported the position solid on May 8th. However on 7th several lorries of police and special constables and OMS'ers had taken 80 buses out of Hanwell to the Chiswick garage. "Slight trouble was experienced with some onlookers, a number of buses getting their windows smashed. Every effort was made to prevent any violent demonstration, but the trouble was mainly caused by outsiders." Of course it was. It always is! Three people were arrested over stonings, some people beaten up by police. The AEC factory (possibly a bus works?), off Windmill Lane (north of the canal), built by London General Omnibus, saw a big stoppage in the Strike.

### PADDINGTON

The Borough Labour Party were involved in area's Central Strike Committee. The situation was reported to be solid and quiet on May 6th. A large demo to Wormwood Scrubs open space on May 6th was rammed en route by a LNW railway van, which knocked down a striker and injured his legs. The van turned out to be filled with members of the British Fascisti (hiding under a tarpaulin) plus loads of barbed wire. Angry demonstrators kicked off, but were brought under control by Labour stewards! (So the fash were not lynched sadly).

Goods other than food turned out to be being moved from Paddington Station, some of it labeled food... as a result the Committee stopped all work and doubled the pickets to block everything. Blacklegs were also moving coal and coke from the local gas works.

Mass picketing stopped the single pirate bus company operating here by the 6th.

Huge mass meetings were held daily throughout the Borough.

On 8 May, Strikers were baton charged by cops. Then on Sunday 9th, 62 strikers were nicked after mounted police charges.

There were still no buses running by the 10th, and all picketing was said to

be successful still. Another mass demo to the Scrubs was held on the 10th.

### CHISWICK

Chiswick Trades Council formed a Council of Action. They reported on May 7th: "Council have received very satisfactory reports from delegates from councils, strike committees, picket captains, nearly all factories, works in this area have closed down. The non-union men and in some shops women have supported the unions solid. Everywhere splendid order is being maintained so far no trouble has arisen with police etc. mass meetings are being held locally."

However soldiers worked side by side with scab drivers to get buses out, from May 5th.



### SOUTHALL

Southall & District Council of Action operated from the Southall Labour Hall... On 9th May they reported: "The response has been wonderful. Morale of workers splendid. Railwaymen solid to a man. All other trades obeying instructions of council, and everything working to plan. Crowded



*meetings. Mass demonstrations. Men more determined as time goes on."*  
Trams were overturned at Southall according to Syd Bidwell (later Labour MP for Southall)

### FULWELL

There was trouble in Fulwell, near Hounslow: "*Lively scenes at Fulwell Tram Depot were witnessed at the Fulwell tram depot between 7 and 8 o'clock on Thursday (May 6th 1926) evening, when a crowd of about one thousand people gathered, and some of the volunteer drivers, who were sent down by the Ministry of Transport, and who took trams out, were pelted with eggs.*

*A number of women were among the crowd and some of these were amongst the noisiest. On the whole, however the temper of the crowd was fairly good humoured, and no serious disturbances occurred, but it is understood, that one arrest on a minor charge was made."*

*(Surrey Comet Saturday May 8 - Strike edition one page)*

### NEASDEN

Neasden Power Station was a crucial provider of power generation for the London underground, and so the government put some effort into keeping it running. Tube electricians were working, sleeping and eating here - facilities were provided the power station and the electricity substations to ensure their smooth operation. Food had been stockpiled in advance.

Because the scab volunteers were not skilled to the same level as the men that they replaced an Ambulance Officer was arranged to be on duty at all times at Neasden power station. Special constables were also present, and were also on duty at each substation.

### EAST LONDON

The East End was very solid throughout the General Strike. It was described as "*a great silent city, even quieter and more peaceful than on a Sunday.*" This was unsurprising, as East London was overwhelmingly working class in character, with a long history of unionisation and radicalism. But unions encouraged passivity, which sapped the local initiative. The *British Worker's* advice to East Londoners was Keep Calm... Keep Cool... Don't Congregate: most workers following this advice, it resulted in what they celebrated as '*An Easy Time For Police... no traffic whatever to attend*

*to, no crowds to move on....'* When surely they should have been stretched from pillar to post.

### HACKNEY

Hackney Council of Action was formed by the Trades Council together with local union and Labour Party officials, in March 1926, as the period for ending the government subsidy to the mines drew near.

When the strike was declared the Hackney Council of Action took over a local boxing hall, the Manor Hall in Kenmure Road, as their headquarters. Throughout the duration of the strike the Council of Action was in continuous session organising the strike locally. Reports were arriving all the time from various parts of the borough and the place took on the character of a nerve centre. Not everyone was called out on strike at once and there were others. such as local tradesmen who were exempted by the TUC. These tradesmen had to present themselves to the Council of Action, give their reasons for wanting to carry on their business, and if the Council were satisfied they were given a permit and a sticker to be put on their vans. It stated "*BY PERMISSION OF THE TUC*" and the strikers had great satisfaction sticking these on.

Public meetings were held all over the borough, particularly around the Mare Street area and Kingsland Road, and in Victoria Park (though by Saturday May 8th, the military were occupying the Park, closing it off to the public).

Police Intimidation was always a problem for the strikers and it was in Kingsland Road that this manifested itself in an untypical but frightening confrontation on Wednesday 5th May. One eye witness recalls: "*The whole area was a seething mass of frightened but nevertheless belligerent people. The roads and pavement were jammed, horse vans, lorries and 'black' transport were being manhandled; police were there in force and I suppose that for a time things could have been described as desperate. The crucial point came when a fresh force of police arrived on the outskirts, I heard an officer call out, 'Charge the bastards. Use everything you've got'. And they did. I saw men, women and even youngsters knocked over and out like ninepins. Shades of Peterloo. If they had been armed, apart from their truncheons and boots, Kingsland Rd would have gone down in history as an even greater massacre."*

The police carried out baton charges in other parts of Hackney on the same day and the St. John's Ambulance set up a casualty station in Kingsland Rd



a day or so afterwards.

Mare Street Tram Depot, now Clapton Bus Garage: The men had all joined the strike on the first day along with other transport workers and the depot was empty. Even the canteen staff had gone home and all that was left was the picket line outside. Suddenly, under military escort, along came a crowd of 'patriotic volunteers' to start up a tram service. The picket line was not big enough to stop them entering the depot but by the time this was done, word had reached the Council of Action round the corner in Kenmure Road. Within minutes the area outside was packed with strikers. Their attitude was that the 'blacklegs' may have got in but they were not going to let them out! All day the crowd stayed outside and not a tram moved. As evening approached, the poor unfortunates trapped in the tram depot realised that their stomachs were complaining. None of them had brought food in with them and the canteen staff were not working so they just had to stay hungry. A few attempts to escape were made but were unsuccessful and about midnight, the Manor Hall received a visit from the local police superintendent. He asked in the most polite way for the Council of Action to assist him in getting the 'blacklegs' out. The reply was less polite. During the early hours of Thursday morning, a few did escape from the depot but were chased all the way down Mare Street, past Well Street to the Triangle where they were finally caught. At this spot stood a horse trough full of water, so that it was a number of very bedraggled and hungry 'blacklegs' who made their way home that day. No further attempts were made to take any trams out from that particular depot!

Strikebreaking was enthusiastically encouraged by Hackney Borough Council. Right from the start they issued a notice calling for volunteers to man essential services. An office was opened in the public library opposite the Town Hall where strikebreakers could sign on and this was kept open from 9 am to 8 pm. The Council at that time was comprised of 100% Municipal Reformers (Tories and Liberals who stood together on an anti socialist ticket). The Council met on the Thursday and set up a special sub committee to discharge any emergency functions that were needed. A squad of Special Constables were established for the protection of municipal buildings, one of these was the Mayor's son who was 'just down from Oxford' and was on duty at the Town Hall.

The *Hackney Gazette*, the local newspaper, did not appear in its usual format as the printers had joined the strike. Instead the editor brought out a single sheet; which makes interesting reading, especially the bulletin

brought out on the second Monday of the strike (10th May). With a headline *MILITARY ARRIVE AT HACKNEY*, it went on to state that "*Victoria Park has been closed to the public. In the early hours of Saturday morning, residents in the locality were disturbed by the rumble of heavy motor lorries and afterwards found that military tents had been pitched near the bandstand . . . We understand that detachments of the East Lancashire Fusiliers, a Guards Regiment and the Middlesex Regiment have encamped in the park . . . another body of Regulars is stationed in the vicinity of the Marshes at Hackney Wick.*"

Whether this was meant to frighten the strikers or not is not clear but it certainly had no effect on the numbers out on strike in the borough. Despite scares and rumours about people drifting back to work, the number of people on strike in the second week was more than had come out at the beginning on the 3rd May. All the large factories in the borough had pickets outside them Bergers Paint Factory in Hackney Wick, Polikoff Ltd., (a clothing firm at Well Street) and Zinkens Furniture manufacturers in Mare Street were three of the largest. All the public utilities were either closed or being run rather badly by amateurs. The *Hackney Gazette* once again reported that three boys of the Clove Club (the Hackney Downs School 'Old Boys') were driving a train between Liverpool Street and Chingford and that one of the volunteers at the Council's Dust Destructor was a parson who was busy shovelling refuse into the hoppers. That probably explains the Council ending their meeting on the Thursday with the Lords Prayer!

The end of the Strike came suddenly on Wednesday, 12th May, with most strikers in a buoyant and confident mood. When the news came through to the Strike HQ, the first reaction was one of disbelief. Notices were put up advising strikers not to pay any attention to what they called 'BBC Bluff' but when the official notice of a return to work was given to them during the afternoon, reaction was that the strike must have been successful. The *Hackney Gazette* reported that 'It was publicly alleged that the miners were going back to work without any reduction of wages. There were shouts of 'We've won!' and cheers, while a section of the crowd began to sing *The Red Flag*'.

However, as soon as the truth filtered through to them the reaction according to one participant was "*bloody murder*". Julius Jacobs who was active in Hackney during the General Strike remembers that 'The Bastards' was the most favourable epithet applied to the General Council of the TUC. "*Everybody's face dropped a mile because they had all been so enthusias-*



*tic. It was really working and victory seemed to be absolutely on the plate."* However, the strikers were still in a militant mood unlike their leaders. That evening, a huge march took place. Several thousands of strikers took part in a march from the Manor Hall in Kenmure Road down Mare Street and Well Street to Hackney Wick and Homerton ending up in a mass meeting outside the Hackney Electricity Works at the end of Millfields Road. A drum and fife band accompanied the marchers and it was led by two men with a large banner. Before the arrival of the marchers, police were rushed up to the Works in a lorry which was driven at great speed through the crowd by one of the Special Constables and as the gates were opened for it, a number of soldiers in field uniform and wearing steel helmets were seen inside. The march was so long that after having a mass meeting by the head of the marchers, the speakers had to go to the back of the march which stretched for about a third of a mile and hold another one. The return to work was orderly and in most cases without incident. A certain amount of victimisation of militants took place but no more than anywhere else.

### **BETHNAL GREEN**

Bethnal Green was a Labour-controlled borough. However the Council of Action was said to be Communist Party-dominated. The Town Hall Labour rooms here were used as the Strike Committee's HQ in the Strike. The Council of Action set up a Women's Food Protection Committee to check prices of food stuffs and help those in need. A crowded mass meeting was held in the Town Hall on the evening of Sunday 9th - 100s couldn't even get in.

The Council of Action received reports that the electricity supply was being used for manufacturing, against agreements they'd reached - they threatened to turn the supply off if this didn't stop.

On 10th May, the Committee reported: *"The position in Bethnal Green is still firm and we are making arrangements for the social side of the strike. There have been no disturbances, and enthusiastic mass meetings have been held. Picketing is proceeding smoothly."*

A Bethnal Green Works bulletin was circulated locally on May 10th by the Council of Action.

### **SHOREDITCH**

The Borough council was Labour controlled, and the Town Hall Labour

rooms were used as the Strike HQ.

The police visited the Trades Council office on the 10th, after the power in the borough was turned off completely following disputes over what the juice was being used for.

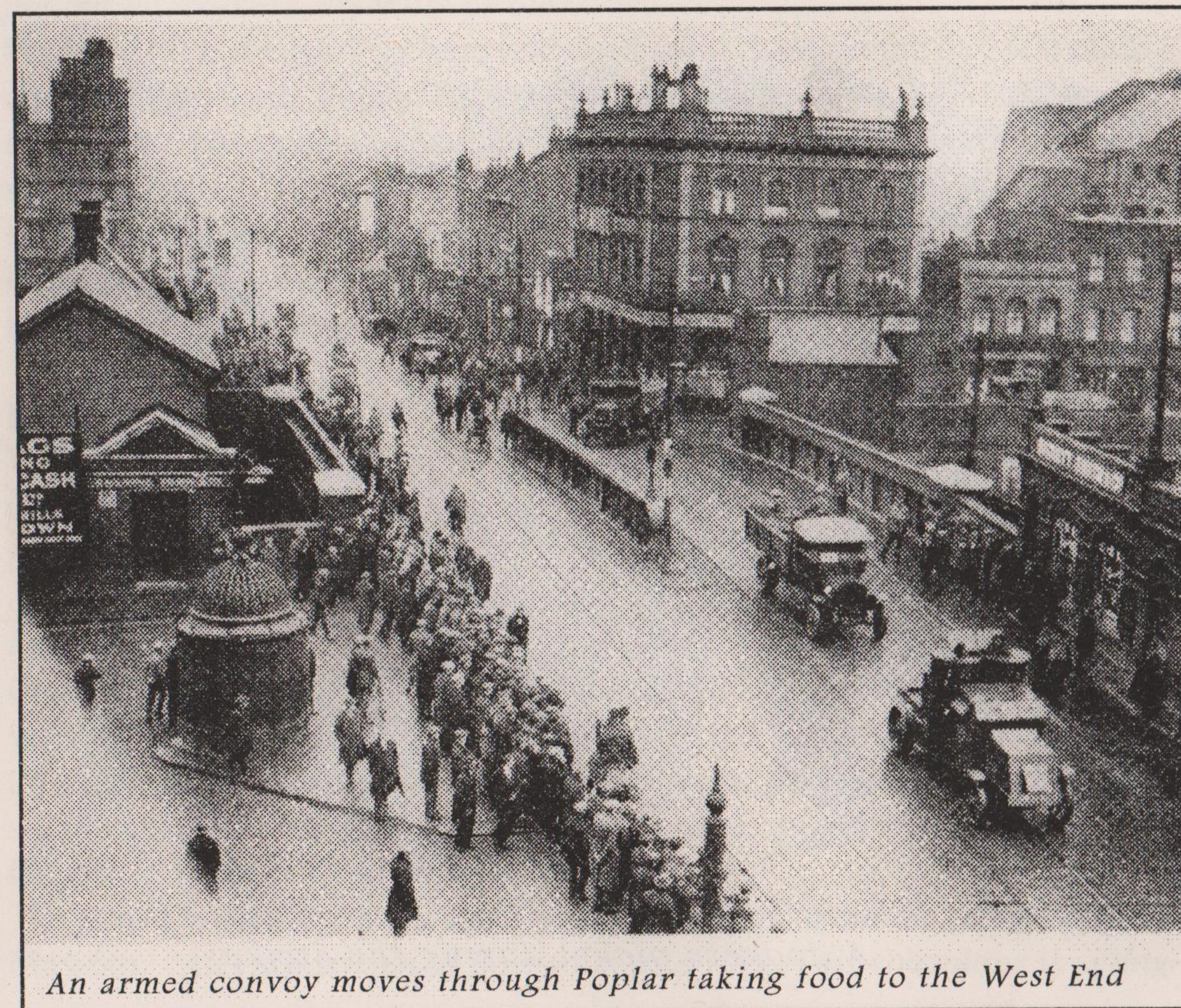
At some point the secretary of Shoreditch Labour Party was arrested, not sure when or what for.

### **STEPNEY**

The Communist Party dominated the Council of Action here...

### **POPLAR**

A borough controlled by left wing Labour Party councillors, including left bigwig George Lansbury. The strike committee, which met at the Town Hall, was said to be Communist Party dominated (but there was a closer relation between Labour and the CP here than elsewhere). The Poplar Strike Committee bulletin was known as *'Lansbury's Bulletin'*



*An armed convoy moves through Poplar taking food to the West End*



On 4 May, strikers battled police in streets. Vehicles were set alight and thrown in the river. There was more fighting the next day (special constables attacked and wrecked three local pubs), and on the 6th, and 7th. Government posters calling for volunteers were defaced en masse locally... There was a food shortage in Poplar by May 11th - ironically convoys of lorries were carrying it out of the nearby docks to the West End. Maybe a little less peace and a bit of steaming in would have fed the locals.

The docks were totally solid, from the start; there was intense picketing here. From the start submarines and lighters were moored in the Docks; apart from having troops on hand, the subs supplied electricity for refrigeration of food stored there. There seems to have been an organized attempt to try to shut this supply to the big refining plant, where carcasses were stored, by the strikers, but it must have failed. The Docks remained inactive till May 8th, when the stranglehold was broken by troops protecting scabs, who unloaded food into convoys which was then driven to the West End.



*A dockers picket during the Strike*

On several days especially 4 May, crowds of strikers blocked the Blackwall Tunnel: cars were stopped, smashed and burned. The police baton charged crowds here on May 4 and beat up strikers, casualties were taken to Poplar Hospital.

By the 11th, the Poplar Strike Committee was starting to get a bit narked with the TUC General Council: *"There has been a noticeable increase in road traffic, much of this is not connected to transport or food... Govt propaganda has been increased in the last few hours through posters and other subversive methods... Intensified efforts have been made to get essential port servants to work under police protection.*

*The above factors are tending to make the rank and file affected by the strike question the correctness of the TUC publications. Local efforts to dispel these doubts are limited.*

*This Council therefore respectfully submits that the time has arrived when a general tightening of the Strike machinery should be put into effect by calling out all workers, essential or otherwise."*

On May 12th, the workers here remained solid. Later in the day 500 dockers meeting outside Poplar Town Hall were attacked by cops who drove through crowds in a van, then jumped out batoning people. Later the cops raided the NUR HQ in Poplar High St, beating up everyone found inside, including the Mayor of Poplar, who was there playing billiards (although hilariously, the British Worker changed this fact in their report to say that he had been *"in a meeting of his committee"*!

### **BOW AND BROMLEY**

The Bow & Bromley Strike Bulletin (issued on May 6th) indicates the attitude of left labour leaders: George Lansbury wrote: *"Don't quarrel with the police. We can and will win without disorder of any kind. Policemen are of our flesh and bone of our bones, and we will co-operate with them to keep the peace."*

Could this have had an effect on the lack of attempts to prevent the convoys of food leaving the East End docks nearby? Only mass resistance to this, probably violent, could have stopped them, and this would have had a significant effect on the course of the Strike in London, which only had 48 hours worth of flour and bread at the time.

The Bow District Railways and Transport Strike Committee reported on May 6th: *"All railwaymen of Bow solid as a rock. This committee is sitting*



at 141 Bow road in conjunction with the Transport workers. We are in continual session, day and night...."

### **EAST HAM**

5th May: *"The combined meeting of workers of East Ham stands solid."*  
However naval ratings were running the East Ham Power Station.

### **WEST HAM**

The West Ham Trades Council and Borough Labour Party formed a strike committee at their office at 11 Pretoria Road, Canning Town; a Council of Action later ran from the ILP Hut, Cumberland Road, Plaistow. The Committee was said to be Communist Party dominated.

They reported much confusion on May 4th among municipal employees (eg dustmen), and gas and electricity workers, as to whether they should strike or not; all thanks to the General Council's ludicrous battle plan.

In Canning Town, on May 4th, there was fighting between strikers and police, after crowds stopped cars and smashed their engines.

At Canning Town Bridge, on May 5th, strikers pulled drivers off trams, leading to a pitched battle with the cops. 2-300 strikers fought police at the corner of Barking Road and Liverpool Road, after coppers baton charged a crowd.

The position on 10th May was reckoned *"stronger than ever."* Local Port of London clerks were being targetted by the Government to get them to return to work in the Docks, under police protection.

A mass meeting of several thousand strikers was held in the Canning Town Public Hall, on Sunday May 9th.

### **ILFORD**

Ilford was more residential than industrial.

Ilford Trades Council formed a Joint Strike Committee, based at the local Labour Hall, Ilford Hill. Local unions had their own strike committees, as elsewhere, the Ilford Committee left it to them to sort out picketing. They also 'took charge' (which seems to have meant co-opting them into committees) of some local members of unions whose bureaucracy refused to issue any advice or guidelines as to what to do (eg the AEU)

A local Strike Bulletin was issued by people not connected to the trade unions.

The Strike was said to be *"All Solid"* on May 5th here; it was reported still

solid by May 10th, with no trams or buses at all running, and one or two odd trains per day. *"Everything quiet and orderly, and there has not been the slightest disturbance"*

### **LEYTON**

Leyton Trades Council set up a General Strike Committee, at their offices at Grove House, 452, High Rd, Leyton.

The Trades Council reported *"a very pleasant relationship with the police"*.  
Get a room, really.

### **WALTHAMSTOW**

Walthamstow Trades Council set up an Emergency Committee, at their office/meeting hall, at 342 Hoe St, E17. On May 6th they reported:

*"The position here is as solid as a rock, have had difficulty in keeping men at work on essential Health services. Non-unionists are flocking to our side every hour... The electricity works running under our jurisdiction, great number of factories have had juice for power purposes cut off... In the main all are remaining calm and violence is exceptionally noticeable for its absence, we are using every endeavour to maintain peace..."* Possibly a bit optimistic though, this last, since Walthamstow saw lively scenes at some point, with Winston Churchill's coach reportedly being overturned on Walthamstow High Street.

On 10th *"all men not essential are out with the strikers."* But the fact that many men were not getting their strike pay was causing *"grave unrest"* by the 11th.

Mass meetings were held at William Morris Hall, Somers Road, and outside St Johns Church, Brookcroft Road

The May 12th Walthamstow Official Strike Bulletin reported

*"Messrs Baird & Tatlocks had their 'juice' cut off, as their output does not come within the description of essential services... It was reported that local cinemas were again using the screen for the spreading of strike 'news' (I guess this means anti-strike news. typist). An undertaking has now been given that the Gazette will be cut off entirely if it contains strike items. Careful watch is being kept, and if any attempt is made to get behind the agreement, the 'juice' will again be cut off."*

**STOP PRESS NEWS. THERE IS NO TRUTH IN THE RUMOUR THAT THE STRIKE IS OVER."**

But it was.



## DAGENHAM

Local union and Labour party branches, some unemployed, and mens and women's co-operative guilds, set up a Council of Action on May 3rd (there had been no Trades Council here previously). It was based, or at least the secretary was based, at 6 Arnold Road), and went into continuous session during the strike. The CoA set its functions out as: to maintain order and discipline among the local workers, to watch local Trade movements to maintain contact by means of our established cycle and motor cycle with the neighbouring Barking Labour Party, and to establish a local distress fund...

On May 8th they reported to the TUC: "*All solid. Local non-union firms all out and all joining unions... No distribution, everybody orderly. Meetings held on (?Lution) Institute grounds every evening... Vigorous boycott of all trades increasing...*" The meeting also demanded the calling out of all union workers, in defiance it would seem of the GC line...

Many employees of non-unionised firms came out here: 500 new recruits joined unions in the first week of the strike. Local traders who increased prices were boycotted by workers.

## BARKING

A letter (dating from probably 8<sup>th</sup> May) from Barking Labour Party/Trades Council, with the NUR and other organisations attached (based it seems at Railway Hotel, Barking) to the TUC General Council, reported that the strike there was "*as solid as ever. Space being greatly indulged in and the most uniformed order is established. Public sympathy is with the strikers, well organized meetings, full houses, excellent speaking... the workers will fight to the end... Barking Labour Party are supervising the distribution of meals etc, and [forcing?] the local authorities to the utmost and are also organizing pastimes and meetings of every description...*

*No notice is being taken of any notices issued other than the TUC GC.*

*... The railways refused to accept pay as it is being 'made up' by blacklegs. March with bands being organized for Sunday. Services at the church."*

On 10<sup>th</sup> May they reported to the GC that a local "unofficial strike committee now disbanded." But it is unclear what this was - a rival strike committee? It could be sign that there was dissent, or Trades Council repression of some form of self-organisation... But this is speculation.

On 11<sup>th</sup> the Barking Central Strike Committee wrote that the "situation is

exceptionally splendid, all trades answered the call 100%.

The general workers not yet called out, are eagerly awaiting the call. Industrial side thoroughly organized, all is peaceful. Social committee set up..."

Barking Trades Council reported to the TUC that "*the only difficulty being experienced in that district is all the efforts of the Strike Committee are required to keep the electrical workers at their duties until the General Council informs them that they may join the strike.*"

## SOUTH LONDON

### DEPTFORD/NEW CROSS

No 435 New Cross Road (the Labour Party rooms) was the Deptford & Greenwich Strike Committee HQ. The Deptford official Strike Bulletin was published from here; the Council of Action sat in continuous session.

They reported to the TUC that: "*May 4th: "All tram and busmen are solid. Stones Engineering Works - all out.*

*Francis Tinworks - all out.*

*All dockworkers are out solid.*

*Grahams Engineering Works (non-federated) - all out.*

*There are a few firms who have not come out but we are concentrating on them immediately.*

*We are arranging mass meeting in this district.*

*Pickets have been posted at all these works."*

May 5th: "*The latest position is as follows:*

*Braby's Galvanised Iron Works - all out.*

*Scotts's Tin Works - all out.*

*Royal Victoria Yard (government victualling yard) - all out for the first time in history.*

*Elliot's Engineering Works - all out.*

*Port of London Clerks have been reported out but I have not been able to get this confirmed up to now..."*

On 7 May, the old bottle factory, Deptford Church Street, was the scene of heavy picketing; pickets fought with the cops. Deptford power station was run throughout the Strike with help from the armed forces. Along with workers who continued at work, they stayed on site all the time. Apart from this every works in Deptford was out in the Strike.

On 8 May, Strikers battled the old bill in Deptford Broadway, which was



'rendered impassable by a dense crowd' according to the Kentish Mercury. **New Cross:** During the strike most local works were solid on strike, but the importation of middle class strikebreakers led to clashes at the tram depot (now the bus garage) Volunteers including British Fascisti attempted to take out trams from the tram depot on May 7th... it was blocked off by pickets who had jammed tramlines with metal rods forced into tracks. 1000s blocked the road, leading to hard fighting with the police. A full blown riot followed.

On 9 May, fighting erupted between police NS strikers leaving a mass strike meeting at the New Cross Empire, (on the corner of Watson Street and New Cross Road) That night armoured vehicles drove around New Cross. Several mass meetings of strikers were held at the New Cross Empire music hall.

### LEWISHAM

Mass open air meetings were held here in the Strike. But many middle class strikebreakers were recruited from the better off parts of the Borough.

Confusion was rife here as to who was to strike and when: at a government factory here, workers struck and went back 3 times in 9 days, although more research is needed to find out if they were ordered back by the Trades Council.

The Chairman of the Board of guardians was said to have told men applying for relief to sign on as Special Constables to help break the strike.

On Downham Estate, Downham, building workers on the new estate being constructed struck on first day of General Strike but were ordered back to work by the TUC.

On Thursday 13th, some busmen went back to work when the Strike was called off, but there was total confusion... strikers and scabs working side by side, which led to anger of busmen, who marched on the bus garage to sort out terms. Their way was blocked by cops, a tram came along, they broke the police line and fought a great running battle in the streets. Some local strikers allegedly thought that the real fight might start now, with the TUC out of the way.

### GREENWICH

There was a big battle in Blackwall Lane after strikers marched on the Medway Oil and Storage Company where 200,000 gallons of petrol and kerosene were stored. They stoned the twenty-five policemen sent out to

dispose them, were baton charged and fought back for twenty minutes. Two men were nicked, and given five months with hard labour. The newspaper report says that they planned to fire the fuel, this seems unlikely, but you never know.

At 'Charlton Pier', during the General Strike there was at least one day of fighting here, as a strike-breaking convoy and police were attacked by strikers.

I'm not sure if this is the same incident as a report of a crowd of women in Charlton pelting supply transports with rotten vegetables, and a crowd of blokes trying to set fire to oil storage tanks, but being driven off.

Two men in Charlton were given a six months prison sentence for trying to stop a bus in Charlton.

### WOOLWICH

Woolwich Trades Council met at the Labour Institute, Beresford Street.

There was a very long and strong left working class tradition locally, especially in Woolwich Arsenal and the Dockyard.

On 5th May, pretty much everyone was out on strike: both the Dockyard and the Arsenal were described as "*like an industrial mausoleum. No sound of a hammer breaks the stillness... not a wheel is turning.*"

But on the 7th, Workers Union members were scabbing at the Silver's Rubber manufacturers, making tennis balls. This works was supplied with "Black Juice" (electricity produced by scab labour). The local Workers Union official had told the men to stay at work.

All ETU men were out.

Workers at Woolwich Arsenal were all out, bar foremen, but their week's pay in hand from the week before was being withheld by bosses... They were told that if they got their money they would be let go. Huge mass meetings were being held. Feeling locally was so strong, the Woolwich librarian was attacked after he gave two special constables a lift in his car. On 10 May it was reported that "*Everything is going strong in Woolwich. In spite of the pin-pricking policy of the Arsenal authorities the men are remaining firm... No trams buses or trains are running... 750 men and women have joined the TGWU since last Thursday from the united Glass Bottle Works Charlton.*"

Woolwich T&GWU reported on May 10th: "*At a mass meeting comprised of members of the above unions [TGWU, NUR, RCA,], a resolution was put and unanimously carried that - Owing to the most unwarrantable attacks*



*made upon our members in various parts of the surrounding districts by police, based upon authoritative facts, which has resulted in injuries and arrests. These attacks have happened without provocation...."*

*"Workers at one big glass works" according to the British Worker, "gave a percentage of their last week's wages towards the strike funds 410 joined the union... and threw in their lot with the strike..."*

Confusion over the GC's instructions caused endless problems day to day here - at the big Siemens works, electricians came out, but other workers didn't. Eventually power shortage closed the factory down anyway. At Johnson & Philips, the convenor called the workers out three times, then they were ordered back three times. There were heavy battles outside this factory between pickets and scabs - the scabs lost apparently!

In the Woolwich Arsenal, and Dockyard there were a number of demotions and sackings after the General Strike. A dispute over demotions of strikers on the Woolwich Ferry (shut throughout the strike) lasted several days after the official end of the Strike.

In Plumstead, on Monday 10th, strikers were attacked by cops all over the area; they raided two strikers' houses, batoning the occupants.

In Eltham (then part of the Borough of Woolwich), the Council of Action reported on May 10th: "*satisfaction in this district. With the exception of Kidbrooke RAF Depot, excellent. Everything is running well. We are gradually getting our organization on good working order.*

*Kidbrooke: Picket has included about 60 women. Great effect. Air force officers up at 6am getting blacks (scabs) in by lorry. Several ceased work. Women organising and forming a section of this council.*

*Propaganda: British Worker selling like hot cakes. Chalking squads, meetings, lectures, and concerts being arranged."*

Woolwich as a borough is interesting, as it had been Labour-controlled since 1919; but the Labour mayor saw the strike as a threat to public order, and feared the subversive potential of the Communist Party (*some hoped!*) So the Council organised concerts, plays and other events with the deliberate aim of keeping people occupied and away from confrontation. How much this desire to prevent trouble led to the huge effort in other areas to put on social events, can be deduced from this explicit example. Woolwich always had a large barracks for troops - during the strike they were confined to barracks, apparently there was a fear that they might strike too...

## WANDSWORTH

In Wandsworth, trades council secretary Archie Latta called together a Council of Action for Friday, April 30. 48,000 copies of The Wandsworth Strike Bulletin were distributed by the end of the strike. Wandsworth had a corps of motor and pedal cycle dispatch riders operating for the Council of Action, and the trades council report - confirmed by Plebs' League survey of responses to the strike call ~ says the Borough was '100 per cent' solid during the strike. The Trades Council also encouraged a rent strike. 'Warple Way', St Faith's Mission Hall here was a centre for organising picketing (This may have been near the old Warple Rd, which was where Swandon Way is now, next to the old Gas works).

Wandsworth was one of the solidest strike areas in all of London.

There was trouble every day of the strike. Crowds were attacked by cops & special constables every day at buildings where specials signed on for duty. On May 7th a crowd demolished a wall for missiles; the next day a picket line was baton charged.

## BATTERSEA

On Monday, May 3, the day the strike was announced, Battersea trades council formed its Council of Action, after local trades unionists returned to Battersea from the Mayday march to Hyde Park. Local Communist-Labour MP Saklatvala had called on the troops camped out in the park to join with the workers - he was to be jailed days later for sedition. The CP dominated the Council of Action here.

Crowds of marching pickets set off on the first day of the strike to Morgan's, then Carson's paint factory, ending up after a tour through the borough at Nine Elms. The Council of Action later endorsed the marching picket. Unsuccessful attempts by strike-breaking 'volunteers to start a tram service led to clashes between newly recruited police specials and pickets on Friday, May 7, at the Clapham tram depot. And on Saturday, May 8, the left wing Councillor Andrews, a member of the Council of Action, was arrested after addressing a meeting at the Prince's Head, Falcon Road. When the Council of Action tried to organise a meeting there the following day, the police banned it.

On May 8th cops baton charged strikers in Battersea. Crowds were involved in street actions every day of the Strike.

A message sent early on Sunday to the Council of Action from F. Reeves, secretary of the Nine Elms joint workers' committee based at the Clapham



Trades Union and Social Club, 374 Wandsworth Road (the building still stands), referred to Friday's clash with the specials: "My committee last night strongly complained of undue batoning by irresponsible youths called specials, and in view of the seriousness of the position requests me to urge you to take immediate steps to set up a Workers Defence Corps."

A 'Special Picket Corps' was set up, its duties included strengthening any ineffective pickets, providing bona fides for those engaged on officially endorsed work, preventing attempts to create disturbances, and stewarding meetings. That evening Battersea town hall was packed to hear South Wales miners' leader Noah Ablett. He was afterwards arrested for saying he was happy repeat Saklatvala's remarks about the army.

The Council of Action also co-ordinated the work of the trade unions in the district, provided rooms and halls where members of the various unions could sign on and receive strike pay, also where members from other districts could sign. They formed a picket committee who organised pickets and supplied them badges. They ran meetings every day in the Town Hall (Grand Hall) and gave concerts to the strikers and their wives and children free. These were arranged by the social committee (St John's Hall, York Rd, - was taken over as a social and organising centre for local strikers and their families.). Their propaganda committee published a bulletin of information (2,500 copies a day) as to the progress of the strike in other districts, and was responsible for supplying the British Worker. They had other committees who advised men and women as to the best method of obtaining relief, to collect reports from other districts and the TUC.

Trouble was reported in Falcon Lane Goods Yard on May 11th when pickets were chased by police specials. That day, the Council of Action wrote to transport workers in Unity Hall on Falcon Grove, asking pickets to report to St Faith's Mission Hall, Warple Way, Wandsworth, to be deployed nearby. A surviving memo to Wandsworth reads: 'We have been informed that the British Petrol Co. Wandsworth are working in full swing. Also at Messrs. Bagg, Ryecroft Road, Streatham, all trades are at work. Will you kindly have the matter investigated so that necessary action can be taken.' Pickets were out in force at Garton's Saccharum Works, where the owners had threatened to sack anyone who did not turn up for work by midday on Wednesday. No-one turned up by midday!

Near the end of the strike, probably on Tuesday, May 11, special constables battered trade unionists in strike committee rooms at Nine Elms' - most likely these were in a building which still stands, close to Nine Elms cold

store, near to Vauxhall railway station.

Nine Elms Goods Yard had a very militant workforce: there had been many mass meetings held in a dispute shortly before the General Strike.

On May 9th cops attacked strikers in Battersea. There was more trouble on May 12 after news of the end of the strike.

At Price's Candle Factory, York Road, possibly the largest employer in the area for many years, all workers were out.

The news of the strike's ending reached Battersea 'like a thunderclap'.

(According to CP member and later pioneering trotskyist Harry Wicks) Council of Action chair Jack Clancy had reported to the TUC 'all factories of note idle' and 'the general spirit prevailing is magnificent', the Council of Action dispatched him to TUC headquarters in Ecclestone Square to check on the rumours. Addressing a packed town hall with the grim truth, Clancy



Local trades unionists march along Battersea Park Road on the first day of the General Strike. The banner in the foreground is that of the Nine Elms general workers, followed by Battersea builders labourers and the South West District Communist Party



was confronted with angry booing and jeering. Wicks says Clancy was 'shattered' by the incident. The Communist Party members handed out leaflets encouraging a continuation of the Strike - Alf Loughton, later a trades council delegate and later still a mayor of Wandsworth was arrested while carrying such leaflets - but Wicks believes the Communist Party attempt to steer the strike came too late and after too much muddled analysis in the run-up to the conflict. In any case with the exception of the rail-workers, who stayed out because of attempt at massive victimisation by the employers, there was a relatively orderly return to work. The Council of Action continued in form for a period, but unlike other boroughs, it could not simply return to being a trades council, because it was composed of two halves, one acceptable to the Labour Party and TUC, the other not.

### LAMBETH

Lambeth Trades Council, based at New Morris Hall, 79 Bedford Road, SW4, turned itself into a Council of Action. It organised different committees - the Communication Committee had 300 vehicles for organising, carrying messages etc. They produced the 'Lambeth Worker' strike bulletin, which was raided by the cops. There was fighting in the street in Lambeth on 8th May.

In Vauxhall people built barricades on the south side of the Bridge... police fought strikers in the streets, chasing them through back streets near the Embankment, where women rained down bottles on the cops' heads! Groups of strikers gathered outside pubs. Author Graham Greene, then a student, was a special on Vauxhall Bridge: later in life he thought better of it, and said he should have been on the other side.

Kennington Park was used as a rallying point for strikers.

The Trades Council held a "very successful demo" on May 9th in Brixton's Brockwell Park, 20,000 attended. They were planning another for the following Sunday, and wrote to the TUC General Council asking what speaker could they send down! (the GC had other ideas of course).

Brixton was said to be very quiet during the Strike. There was a recruiting centre for special constables here, many were sent to other areas where there was more trouble, eg Camberwell. Brixton and Streatham were said by the South London press to have a full bus service running by Tuesday 11th. Lambeth Council of Action were a bit belatedly organising a Joint Transport Committee meeting on the 11th to try and put a stop to this. In Brockwell Park strikers played several games of cricket - though not with

the police! No fucking Plymouth-style football-with-the-enemy here. There was fighting in Clapham High Street on the evening of Friday 7th, when a number of lorries occupied by strikers and sympathisers tried to block traffic. Foot and mounted police charged and cleared the street.

### BERMONDSEY

Bermondsey Borough Council was left Labour-controlled. It passed a resolution in support of the Bethnal Green Trades Council motion attacking the Government for cutting off negotiations with the TUC on May 2nd.

There was a riot in Tower Bridge Road, not sure on what day: 89 people were hurt in police baton charges. There seems to have been fighting here several times.

A bonfire of copies of the government's anti-strike newspaper, the British Gazette, was reported in Rotherhithe on May 6th.

A mass meeting of several thousand strikers was held in Rotherhithe Town Hall, on Sunday May 9th.





## CAMBERWELL

Camberwell was a large borough, including Peckham. Camberwell Borough Council fully supported the Government against the strikers, it was cooperative with the Emergency Powers Act and its functionaries, and it appointed the Treasurer and Town Clerk as the officers in charge of food and fuel.

Camberwell Trades Council organized the Strike locally. A letter to the TUC from G.W.Silverside, General Secretary of the Dulwich Divisional Labour Party in which he explains that at a meeting on May 3rd it was decided to collect money and distribute literature. Also "*the question of the possibility of duplication arose*" and Mr. Silverside explained that he had been in touch with the "*Secretary of the Camberwell Trades Council who informs me that there are three duplicators available and that they are prepared to duplicate anything that may be necessary.*"

According to a post-Strike Report by the Trades Council:

*"only a fortnight before the strike, [we] obtained a roneo duplicator and a typewriter. When the possibility of a strike loomed up we made three tentative preparations for this eventuality, viz:*

*(a) We enquired for an office, which we might take for a month as a minimum.*

*(b) We obtained a lien on a hall where we might have a large meeting and would run no danger of the hall being cancelled by opponents.*

*(c) We made arrangements for a Committee meeting to be called the day after the general Strike began, if it did so begin. On May Day we thought the importance of demonstrating was sufficient to warrant us paying for a band, banner bearers etc, and for us to give a lead in having a good turn out. This we had organized and we secured a fine response from Camberwell workers. Whilst on route to Hyde Park came the news of the General Strike declaration - truly a fitting send off, thus demonstrating to the rich loafers in the West End out power and solidarity."*

The Strike Committee organised effective picketing of workplaces. Tramwaymen and busmen, who made up 3000 of the 8000 workers affiliated to the trades Council, were solid, as were roadmen of the Borough Council also came out, (bar one depot where men were reported working.) Reports which came to the Strike office as to the need for pickets were transmitted to the Strike Committee concerned at once by an organised

messenger network.

The Trades Council concluded that: "*we were not ready. We quickly improvised machinery... Everything had to be found on the spur of the moment, and we rose to the occasion fairly well I our own estimation., considering the difficulties of lack of our own premises, voluntary workers, and having to set up, equip and run an office after the Strike had commenced.*"

In the Borough of Camberwell as it was then, two strike bulletins were produced, the *Camberwell Strike Bulletin* and the *Peckham Labour Bulletin* - both from Central Buildings, High Street, Peckham. The *South London Observer* of Saturday May 15th reports that a man was convicted of selling the *Peckham Labour Bulletin*. The paragraph headed "*French workers refuse to blackleg*" was thought by the court to be provocative. Police Inspector Hider in his evidence stated that it would cause "*a certain feeling among certain people*". Inspector Hider also saw copies of the *Camberwell Strike Bulletin* also produced at Central Buildings on a duplicator by Eddy Jope, who denied any connection with the *Peckham Labour Bulletin*. Trams were not running, till the local electricity generating station was reopened by naval ratings.

On May 5th, commercial vehicles were stopped & trashed here by strikers. The trams were in the main kept off the roads. Altogether there were 12 attempts by OMS (government organised volunteers, mostly middle class) recruits supported by police and special constables to run trams from Camberwell Depot to New Scotland Yard - resulting in crowds of pickets and supporters attacking scab trams, smashing their windows and pushing them back inside, preventing them from running.

The *British Worker*, a daily paper put out during the Strike by the TUC, reported: "*BANNED TRAMS SCENE: An unsuccessful attempt was made shortly after four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon to run LCC tramcars from the Camberwell depot.*"

*Earlier in the day two lorries with higher officials of the tramways Department and OMS recruits arrived at the Depot, where a strong force of police had been posted.*

*A large crowd, including tramwaymen, their wives and sympathisers, collected, and when the first car came out of the Depot gates in Camberwell Green there was a hostile demonstration.*

*Some arrests were made. Following this incident the cars were driven back*



*in to the Depot to the accompaniment of loud cheers.*" (*British Worker*, 5th May 1926.)

Newspaper reports that "*Women pickets stopped them by putting kids in front of the vehicles*" seem to be rightwing propaganda spread at the time (by the *South London Press*, which was resolutely opposed to the Strike) - there is no evidence for it!

Buses were also stoned in Camberwell on Saturday night (8th May) There were huge public meetings at Camberwell Green, as well as at Peckham Rye and at the triangle near the Eaton Arms, Peckham. An eye-witness account describes the police activity during a public meeting at Camberwell Green as terrifying. He was ten years old at the time. He had been taken by his father and was standing on the edge of the meeting only to see waves of police with drawn truncheons marching on the people, who broke and ran after repeated baton charges.

Camberwell Borough Guardians took a hard line during and after Strike - issued '*Not Genuinely Seeking Work*' forms to stop strikers getting any relief.

Many scab 'volunteers' working to defeat the strike were posh students, including a large no. from ultra-posh Dulwich College.

Mass meetings of strikers held on Peckham Rye, and at Peckham Winter Gardens, where a mass open air meeting of several thousand strikers, families and supporters occurred at a social gathering held by Peckham Labour Party on the evening of Sunday May 9th.

Tillings Bus Co., Peckham was a big employer in the area: 1200 people worked here on the private buses. Large numbers of police specials were stationed to ensure these buses were never stopped from running. Many Tillings workers were out in Strike: after the end of the strike, Tillings took advantage of the defeat to shut out unions, issuing a notice at the depot: "*Men should realize that there is no agreement in existence, the union having broken this. They should also understand plainly that we do not propose to make further agreement with the existing union, as this is the third occasion on which they have broken the agreement. Every man should fully understand these conditions before restarting.*"

After the TUC sellout, there was confusion in the area. Crowds of workers

gathered at the Tram Depot, not knowing what to do. many wanted to continue the Strike and the TUC General Council were widely denounced. Each worker had to sign a form on future conditions of service, hours and wages. Some never got their jobs back at all.

At the end of the Strike Camberwell Trades Council sent £10 to the Miners from the funds collected during the Strike, continued that support as the miners fought on alone after the TUC sellout.

The Communist Party, strong locally, produced a daily bulletin, the *Camberwell Worker*, for the first week at least.

## SOUTHWARK

124 Walworth Road, the local, and later national, Labour Party HQ, was the local General Strike centre. Many workers were out on strike here, the area had a long radical workers tradition.

There were fierce battles with the police in the streets of Southwark all through the nine days of the Strike.

*"The young people would wait on the roofs of the tenements along New Kent Rd in an opportunity to rain stones and bottles on the heads of the specials and strikebreakers in their protected vehicles below. The police would respond with waves of violence: there were ugly scenes day esp. around Bricklayers Arms where dockers and railwaymen gathered. A bus was stopped, emptied of passengers, turned over and burned in the face of the police and the specials. There were barriers everywhere and the Trades Council had control over vehicles passing through Southwark.. The atmosphere was magnetic, men and women and children determined to stand united. It was a family affair."*

The Bricklayers Arms railway depot was a centre of organising, solidly picketed throughout.

In St George's Road, on May 5th, a No.12 Tillings strike breaking omnibus to Peckham was seized, burnt out and towed away.

Crowds battled the police daily at the Elephant & Castle; a bus crashed here on 6th May, killing a man. There were also battles at Heygate Street, New Kent Road, Walworth Road, (where crowds blocked trams with railings on the lines: bricks and bottles were chucked at police when they cleared the lines), and Old Kent Road, where near the Dun Cow pub, a tram was overturned by crowds... passengers were pulled off and scab drivers assaulted.

But these street gatherings at Walworth Road, Heygate St, and Elephant &



Castle, to prevent scab vehicle movements, also served as a place to swap general chat and exchange info, organise, sometimes even becoming something like a street carnival.

There was also occasional sabotage of scab vans and buses.

Tommy Strudwick, NUR member of Council of Action was arrested for 'spreading disaffection' with hidden duplicator in his Swan Street room which produced strike bulletins.

Hays Wharf, a local dock, was solid against scabbing in the General Strike, but posh students unloaded here.

At Barclay & Perkins Brewery, Bankside, only two workers were on strike (according to the lying rightwing toe rag *South London Press*); others were enrolled as special constables!

There was mass picketing in Tooley Street every day, and this led to fighting on Thursday 6th May: 32 people were arrested after a baton charge.

R. Hoe and Company Ltd, a printing press manufacturers in Borough Road, employed 900 men, and the printing engineering workers were amongst the best organised and the most militant in South London.

Solidly out in the 1922 engineers lockout; from then until the General Strike men here were said to be in "open revolt". In 1925 AEU members here began an overtime ban in a campaign for higher wages. In early January 1926 some were sacked and replaced by non-union labour. As a result both shifts started a stay-in-strike. Hoe's then locked out all 900 workers, who began an 'unofficial' 10 week strike to protest the hiring of non-union workers, and to demand a £1 per week pay increase.. Hoe's went to the Employers Federation, who threatened a national lockout in the engineering involving 500,000 men, unless the Hoe's men went back to work. (*South London Press*, March 26 1926) And the workers marched to the Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street to protest against the threatened lockout. But the AEU ordered a return to work, saying the men had been morally right but technically wrong. Bah!

During the General Strike Hoe's workers struck straight away, though not called out by the AEU, and were militant in their picketing of the firm. Stan Hutchins reports: "At Hoe's twenty apprentices having remained at work had the Southwark Council of Action organise a special meeting during a dinner hour. which successfully appealed to them and to which also hesitant lads from Waygood Otis had been invited to attend, achieving a 100 per cent turnout."

After the end of the General Strike, Hoe's workers were forced to re-apply

individually for their jobs. The firm considered they had sacked themselves. At the *Queens Head* Pub, Southwark, two lorries full of cops ordered drinkers out of the pub and beat them up, when strikers ran in here after roughing up a special at Power Station...

### CROYDON

According to the *British Worker*, in Croydon, "*Ruskin House, the local Labour Party's headquarters, is the scene of great activity. Trade unions are regularly reporting there, and everybody is in fine fettle.*" The Strike Committee set up a Workers Defence Corps; otherwise the main local activity seems to have been organising "*concerts of the highest quality... a cricket team... acrobatic performances...*"

A local bulletin, the *Croydon Worker*, was produced. The Trades Council organised a procession on Sunday May 9th, from Ruskin House to Duppas Hill.

### WIMBLEDON

Wimbledon was a largely middle class area, the strike didn't bite as much here as elsewhere in South London. However, strikers that were out remained solid. The local Labour Party did get involved, organising out of the Labour Hall, at 105 Merton Road.

Women carriage cleaners at Wimbledon Park railway depot were all out. Lots of support work and fundraising was done for the locked out miners, after the end of the General Strike.

### MITCHAM

Mitcham Council of Action reported to the TUC: "*The situation here is quiet and orderly... Branches affected by the dispute and the men are solid. The unions affected here are as follows: T&GWU: busworkers, and general transport; Altogether Builders, Labourers, and Constructional Workers Society, General Workers Union.*"

*Messrs Pascalla, chocolate workers are picketed for transport purposes and no goods are entering or leaving their premises.*

*The Council of Action are holding meetings all over the district..*

*Police are sympathetic. The sergeant gave us a shilling for a single copy of the British Worker." (!!!) "We are very pleased with the situation generally especially when we remember the crusty old Tories who reside in this district. They are forgetting their Toryism however."*



## KINGSTON

Kingston & District Trades Council issued a "Victory Bulletin" during the Strike from The Hut, Dawson Road. On Sunday 9th a demo was held in Kingston described as "the finest that has ever been held" there. It marched from Fairfield to the Market Place. Mr Penny, local MP, enrolled as a Special Constable."

According to May 11th Bulletin the following workers were out:

AEU metal workers all ceased work at KLG (?).

All transport workers were out solid.

ASIE & F (any idea what this is?): all solid.

RCA, Plasterers, Municipal & General Workers, UPM (?), Sheet metal workers, CPA, ASWM, all out.

ETU: all out but scabs working Municipal undertaking.

NUR: one signalman had gone back at Surbiton.

Malden branch solid, bar one porter who went back.

All men and women from Kollys Directories and Knapp Drewett & Sons (printers) out.

## PENGE

A Penge & Beckenham Joint Strike Committee ran from the Trades & Labour Club, Royston Rd, Penge. They held mass meetings.

## SIDCUP

On 8 May, 11 strikers were hurt here in fighting with cops.

## CENTRAL LONDON

### WESTMINSTER

Westminster Council of Action ran from 12 Berwick Street, SW1. A local strike sheet was issued, the *Westminster Worker*.

When the strike ended, they reported that large numbers of men especially in the printing trade, when they applied to go back to work, were being faced with crap conditions - tear up the union card, reduced wages etc; if they refused they would not be rehired.

The small National Fascisti group, which obviously thought the General Strike was a big commie plot, issued a daily newsheet during the 9 days, which they mainly distributed in the West End. The Fascists volunteered to act as strikebreakers.

Hyde Park was taken over by the government as the food depot for London during the Strike.

No 32 Ecclestone Square, Belgravia, was HQ of the TUC. Ironically it was a former home of Winston Churchill, who worked tirelessly to defeat the Strike... though not as effectively as the TUC General Council! Crowds gathered outside every day throughout the Strike, and there was a constant flow of messengers coming and going from Strike Committees.

Wellington Barracks was the organising centre of the troops used in London during the Strike.

Carmelite Street, off Fleet Street, was part of the old heartland of newspaper printing. Late at night on 2 May, on the eve of the General Strike, *Daily Mail* printers refused to print the paper's front page editorial attack on trade unions. They downed tools; this led the government to break-off negotiations with the TUC, sparking the outbreak of the Strike.

Left labour paper the *Daily Herald* also had its offices here. The TUC had agreed for their daily *British Worker* to be printed here as a strike sheet. One day, a crowd gathered here to await copies. Suddenly cops charged the crowd, emerging from the half-built *Daily Mail* building opposite. They raided the *Herald* building, seized copies of the *British Worker*, and stopped



1926. The Embankment during the General Strike. The cars stopped, the drivers walked.



the machinery. This led to a stand off...but the *British Worker* was so unsubversive the regulations to suppress seditious papers didn't apply! They were allowed to carry on.

The London Society of Composers refused to go back till 16 May, 3 days after the Strike was called off.

There was also a failed arson attack on the *Times*, in Printing House Square, (near Blackfriars Station) on the afternoon of Wednesday 5th, and an attempt by pickets that night to seize bundles of the ultra-establishment paper as it was being loaded onto cars. The *Times* was kept going by members of posh London clubs, aristos, MPs, the like.

### MARYLEBONE

The Emergency Committee of the Marylebone Trades Council, at 53 Church Street, issued daily bulletins. Mass meetings of strikers were held in the Dance hall in Lisson Grove. Also women organized through the local Women's Co-operative Guild, 153 Earl Street. Free concerts were held for strikers/families at the Dance hall.

An outdoor mass meeting was held on Sunday 9th, a large crowd gathering in Church Street. An alarm was raised when a car full of Special constables forced its way through the crowd...

Marylebone Station was deserted throughout the strike.

### FINSBURY

Finsbury Trades Council, based at 295 Goswell Road, was involved in setting up the Council of Action. A strike committee was in continuous session. Two local NUR branches met continuously at Friends Meeting House. The Council of Action held hourly propaganda meetings in the early days, well attended by strikers & their families...

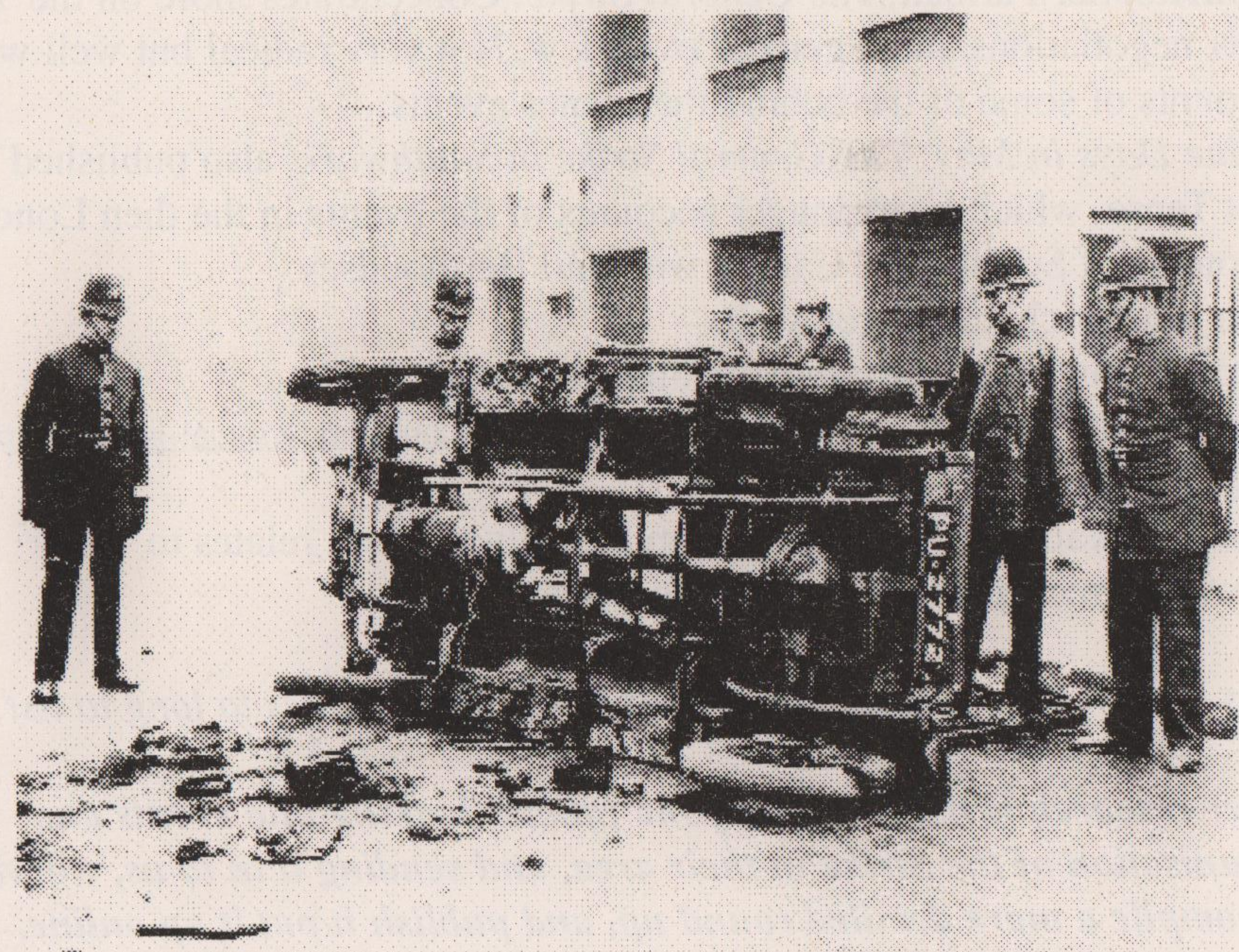
They reported 1900 men of the Carriers section of the T&GWU had signed on with them on May 4th. "*The temper of the public is very good, many are keenly following the lead of this council, and no opposition is met with anywhere.*"

Finsbury Strike Committee officials were disaffiliated by the TUC over items in the Finsbury Strike Bulletin; the TUC had ordered bulletins should not contain anything but central Publicity Committee-issued items. Frost, Secretary to the Trades Council, was arrested under the Emergency Powers Act over comments about troop movements in the Strike Bulletin.

At Smithfield Meat market, volunteers opened the Market here on 10th

May, having to be protected by many police: Smithfield had a long militant union tradition.

Farringdon Street Goods Depot, which normally handled several thousand tons of meat and merchandise, was paralysed throughout.



*The wreckage of a car burned by strikers, May 1926*



## SOURCES:

- The *British Worker*, official strike paper of the TUC General Council.
- Reports from Councils of Action, Trades Councils and other union bodies to the TUC, during the Strike.

There's useful stuff online at: [www.unionhistory.info/generalstrike](http://www.unionhistory.info/generalstrike)

- Local Strike Bulletins: too many to list.
- Dave Russell, *Southwark Trades Council, A Short history*.
- *History of Battersea & Wandsworth Trades Councils*.
- Barry Burke, *Rebels With a Cause, The History of Hackney Trades Council*.
- The *South London Press*, sarf London's finest scab paper, still the absolute pits 87 years on.
- Keith Laybourn, *The General Strike, Day By Day*.
- Tony Cliff & Donny Gluckstein, *Marxism & The Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926*. Good account of the failings of the TUC and the CPGB. Obviously some of their other conclusions may grate a bit.
- Christopher Farman, *The General Strike*. Concentrates more on the TUC-Govt negotiations and a general overview. Not very radical but well written accounts of some of the behind the scenes events.
- *Nine Days in May: The General Strike in Southwark*, also published by Past Tense, which gives longer accounts of the events in the then London boroughs of Southwark, Camberwell and Bermondsey.
- On Woolwich and Greenwich:  
<http://greenwichindustrialhistory.blogspot.co.uk/>
- Syndicalist Tom Brown on 1926: <http://libcom.org/library/social-general-strike-1926-failed-brown>
- On the rivalry between West Ham & Millwall, as it relates to 1926:  
<http://libcom.org/history/millwall-not-scabs-shock>

*Plus lots of other research picked up from many sources too long to list.*

***More research is needed. If anyone fancies looking into events and organisation of the Strike in their area, and sending it in to us, we will try to compile a more detailed round up, and publish it/put it up online.***