

# General strike of 1926 - causes and impact



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A general strike is when a group of workers from different industries all stop work in support of each other to win certain demands. This would bring the country to a halt and make it very hard for the Government to resist giving in to their demands.

The general strike of 1926 was mainly for the miners; they had low pay and worked long hours. They wanted better conditions and equal rights for all.

In this essay I shall assess the events leading up to the strike and have a look at all the short and long term causes of the strike.

The coal industry before the war was booming. It was used for nearly everything and during the war the demand for coal increased even more. Because coal production was so important to the war effort the Government took over the ownership of the mines and ran them instead of the private owners. Improvements were made in conditions and pay for most miners. When the Government nationalised the mining industry miners hoped it would continue after the war. But in 1921 all mines were returned to private owners. After the war the coal mining industry went into decline. This was because, oil was used as a fuel especially in shipping, electricity became available, more efficient boilers were made, other countries began to mine coal and British pits had been 'over mined' during the war and owners were reluctant to spend money modernising mines. When men from the war came home they found the promises made by Lloyd George were not met and if men have been fighting for their country for four years they are prepared to fight for their jobs and standards of living at home.

There are many long-term factors, these are; conditions and pay of miners, at the time of the General Strike an average of two miners were killed per day. Miners were also suffering from ill health because of their work. Miners argued they deserved higher wages because of the risks they took. Mine owners made millions whilst miners were lucky to earn 50p a day. Miners felt they were being unfairly treated. Another long-term cause was the Sankey Commission. In 1919 the Government formed a Royal Commission to look into the problems of the coal mining industry. Lord Sankey led this commission, but it failed to come up with a solution to the problems of the miners. Most members favoured nationalisation but the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, refused to nationalise the mines. The decline of the coal, mining industry was a major one, during the decline of the mining industry owners had to increase hours and lower wages to maintain profits.

Others were, Change of attitude after the war and nationalisation. A popular idea among trade unionists at this time was 'syndicalism' – this was the belief that several trade unions should go on strike together to bring the country to a halt and so take over the Government for working people. The Miners Union decided to increase their strength by combining with railwaymen and transport workers in a 'triple alliance'. A strike in one of industries meant the other two would stop work as well, so it seemed sensible for them to join together and increase their strengths. A strike of three industries shall have a greater impact on the country and government than only one industry on strike. It shall be harder for the government to keep the country running, so they shall have to give in to their demands. In theory this was a great plan.

In the 1920's in Britain, there was a great deal of industrial discontent. It began with the miners. As already discussed, the coal industry was in decline, since 1918. This meant mine owners had to increase hours and give less pay to keep profits going. They tried not to buy new machinery or improve mines, as this would eat away at their profits. In 1920 mine owners told miners their wages would be reduced. The miners decided to go on a strike with the other members of the tripe alliance (the National Union of Railway Men and the Transport and General Workers Union). It was understood that these two unions would join the miners in a 'sympathy' strike. But on Friday 15th April the two unions decided not to support the miners and refused to go on strike. The miners called this Black Friday. It was a disaster for themselves and other trade unions. The miners went on strike alone but were defeated, they had to go back to work for even lower wages. Later other industries such as shipyards, printers and railway workers were forced to accept lower wages. The unions had learnt their lesson from Black Friday; a defeat for one union was a defeat for all. In the future they pledged to stand together. In 1925, coal prices fell yet again and owners wanted to cut wages just as they had done in 1921 but the miners were ready to strike developing the slogan, "Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day." This time the other industries went on strike with the miners. The Government weren't ready for a General Strike so they brought themselves time buy giving the mine owners a subsidy of £10 million, to keep wages at the same level as they were before the wage cuts were made. This event became known as Red Friday (Friday 31st July 1925) and was seen as a total success for the working class. It also showed what could be achieved if the Trade Unions worked together. However, it was announced

the subsidy would only last 9 months – enough time for the Government to prepare for a General Strike, if there was one when the subsidy ended. The Government set up a commission called the Samuel Commission, headed by Sir Herbert Samuel to deal with the problems of the coal mining industry.

The short-term cause of the General strike was the Samuel Commission; the commission rejected nationalisation and said the government should end the subsidy. It agreed to wage cuts and said working days should be 7/8 hours long. The report sided completely with the mine owners since the whole commission was made up of rich industrialists.

The Government immediately responded to the Samuel Commission. They declared the subsidy would end on 30th April 1926. The owners increased the hours and reduced wages by 10-25% with the support of the government. Many meetings were held but no agreement was made so on May 1st 1926 the miners went on strike for better pay and conditions.

The government had been preparing for the strike for some time. They built coal stocks to last for 5 months, increased the number of special constables from 98, 000 to 226, 000, drew up detailed instructions for the army, navy and police to guard docks, telephones exchanges and power stations, gave money to the owners of haulage firms to put 200, 000 vehicles at the Governments disposal and set up the OMS . The OMS was a group of about 100, 000 volunteers who unloaded cargo from ships, drove buses and trains. People joined the OMS for a number of reasons. The middle class thought the strike was a threat to them and an attempt to ruin the country economically. Others joined for financial reasons, the Government paid constables £2. 31 a

week plus food. The miners were on strike refusing to accept wages of £1.

58. The TUC (Trade Union Council) wasted their time. They never expected the Government to allow a General strike to happen. The miners made their positions weaker by getting a record level of coal output. This made it easier for the Government to stock up on coal reserves. When the General Strike began the TUC decided to bring out the workers in key industries – railwaymen, transport workers, dockers, printers, builders and iron and steel workers. Nearly 3 million men were taken out of work. And later others like, the engineers and shipyard workers can be called out. In London, at the headquarters of the TUC, there was far less optimism than the workers who were prepared to stay out as long as it takes. There seemed to be little unity between trade union leaders.

The Government were willing to let the strike continue, as they were prepared and confident they could last longer than the Trade Unions.

The TUC had promised their support if an agreement was failed to be reached. So great efforts were made by the TUC to reach an agreement with the Government and mine owners to prevent a general strike. The discussions went on late into Sunday evening (May 3rd) and according to the main TUC negotiator an agreement was close when the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, broke off the talks with the TUC. The reason for this action was that the printers at the Daily Mail newspaper had refused to print an article about the strike the Government had prepared. They were sympathetic to the miners. The TUC apologised but Baldwin refused to re-open talks. Baldwin knew he could win, they had prepared for the strike and knew the TUC couldn't last that long. But in response to the breakdown in

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negotiations, the TUC sent strike negotiations to the Transport, Railway, Dock, Print, Electric and Steel and Chemical workers.

The General Strike began on Monday 4th 1926.

The TUC argued that the miners were facing longer hours with lower pay, imposed by mine owners to keep profits up. They said it was an Industrial Dispute between bosses and their workers. The TUC also believed if the miners were defeated it would lead to lower wages for all workers. It was a struggle for all working class people not just the mining community. The Government argued this was a Constitutional issue and that the Trade Unions were building up their strength to overthrow the Government. The Government did this to worry people and get them to side with the Government and it worked.

Historically it can be seen that the TUC only wanted better pay and conditions. They were not calling for a socialist revolution to overthrow the government.

The General Strike in 1926 started because of the conditions of the miners. Other workers realised if they didn't support the miners their bosses may lower their wages knowing nothing shall be done as they had previously seen in the case of "Black Friday". This was the primary reason why the TUC found the idea of a General Strike appealing, they knew if they stuck together their demands should be met. The Government did not want nationalisation; they were prepared and ready for the prospect of a General Strike. Time was on the government's side and their excellent preparations for the strike led to the government's victory.

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I feel the TUC should have been more prepared for the strike and built their case more for the general public to see that the workers were being unfairly treated by the business owners together with the support of Government. Additionally, all the unions should have shown greater solidarity if they had any hope of obtaining better working conditions and pay. Although the idea of a General Strike is theoretically unstoppable there were measures the Government could taken to avoid the strike, by the Government breaking off negotiations just when a deal seemed possible it seems that the Government wanted the strike to go ahead in order to break the resolve of the unions and set an example that a general strike could never succeed, and they should have been more aware.

**How accurate is this interpretation of the General Strike as a violent dispute? Use the sources and your knowledge to explain your answer.**

The General Strike started on the 4th may and lasted until the 12th May; throughout this time some areas were hit by violence from striking workers, leading it to be an idea of a violent dispute. There is presented evidence which backs up the idea that the strike was a violent dispute in a few areas, especially the docks. This essay will measure how precise source C is at interpreting the violence of the location using evidence obtained from looking at other resources. The restrictions of the source will also be evaluated to decide any omissions or possible uneven analysis.

The sight depicted in source C is definitely an aggressive one, there are many policemen with the crowd of strikers and not many of the strikers are being controlled. This illustrates that the circumstances were out of control



causing a great deal of force to be required. This is helpful to show how violence was coped with throughout the strike given that 200, 000 special constables were under oath to support the police if strikes took place. Similarly the armoured vehicle just before the front of the portrait implies that plenty of force was necessary to put an end to the strikes which took place. Equally to the points mentioned above an equipped officer is illustrated in the image aiming a machine gun. This tells us that the soldiers felt endangered by the amount of violence being used and were prepared to use arms to look threatening- especially with his finger on the trigger showing that he was ready to open fire. On the other hand this could also illustrate that the soldiers used weapons to frighten and irritate the strikers causing further violence, as The British Worker wrote that this was happening. This tells us that violence was used regularly by both sides of the strike. The information given in the source is useful in terms of portraying the strike as violent and with the advent of the machine gun pointing at the crowds the painting shows an image of a brutal state willing to open fire in order to oppress its people. During the period of this painting it was an era of communism and socialism spreading and the pictures tries to draw some parallel in terms of oppression and class war.

Nevertheless, there are also several restrictions in the source which cause it not to be completely dependable. For example, the picture depicted is close by a dock; this is exposed by the cranes shown in the surroundings of the image. The London Dock was the only district in which it was essential for soldiers to be called in and maintain order. The docks in general were mainly well-known areas that strike took place in. Consequently, the sources

consistency is in subject as it does not correspond to the whole country and in many places there were no strikes at all, for that reason it is an unreasonable judgement of violent disputes. Only 4, 000 people were prosecuted for violence or incitement to violence out of the millions of people striking, which is an extremely small number proportionally.

It is an image of a food convoy, which were usually violent events; so it is not possible to suppose strikes similar to these took place every day, hence the stability of them is not possible to conclude. An additional unreliable point is that it was painted for the Electrical Trade Union which suggests it can be pro-union and so exaggerating the strength of the soldiers to make it appear if the strikers were being forced. In support of the above reasons we cannot trust the consistency of the image even though it does suggest some helpful information.

Even though the image has numerous implications of violence, it does not actually show any real violence. Nevertheless it is acknowledged there were cases of violence and these are mislaid in this source. For instance, there are reported cases of attempts to deflate tyres and of throwing stones to butt in the movement of those who ' black-legged' the jobs. An additional example was noted where strikers tried to damage a railway line. Other examples of violence used in the General Strike are given from source A, so it does not give the full picture of the types of violence being used, which it would also be vital to know when studying violence used in the General Strike.

The painting was painted in 1964. So, at the time there was communism in Russia, and the fear of communism taking over in Great Britain was high, so

the Electrical Trade Union wanted to make Communism and Socialism look better than Conservatives.

Overall, Source C is a precise explanation of violence in some areas and how order was kept by soldiers of armed policemen; yet its consistency should be questioned given that the view shown was at a food convoy near a dock- both were the most ordinary areas of violence during the strike. It could also be questioned whether the artist was biased since he was painting the image for the Electrical Trade Union. There is also a need of information about violence in erstwhile areas of England, and in relation to dissimilar types of violence used; consequently it is helpful in the direction of studying violence in the General Strike alongside with other sources, but not on its own. Lastly Source C is an accurate explanation of the war, but not sufficient information can be drawn for it to be entirely helpful by itself and there is an explanation to consider why it is not entirely reliable.

### **Is There Sufficient Evidence in Sources A to E to Explain Why the T. U. C. Called of the General Strike?**

The General Strike was stopped by the Trade Union Congress on the 12th May 1926. Whether it was a 'working class conflict in opposition to the establishment' or an 'uprising of the unthankful lower classes', it was a stepping stone in Trade Union movement, however it did not appear so for a while later when Trade Unions lost value and resources. The Strike pulled the labour class mutually to work for one reason and it proved that the essential ideas of Trade Unions were well stuck. The General Strike was not continued for several reasons which I will summarize in the following essay. I will

consider sources A to E and see if there is sufficient evidence controlled within them to make clear why the T. U. C. called off the General Strike.

The Government had organized for the Strike extremely enhanced than the T. U. C. which was in excess of confidence after the new subsidy in 1925. The government had used the more nine months to prepare for an all-out strike and they did a number of things. Firstly, they prepared Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, where the nation was broken up into regions and every one had volunteers to keep essential services available such as, food supplies and transport. There was sufficient coal to supply electricity. Also, the primary members of the British Communist Party were detained and imprisoned for sentences of 6-12 months, under the Incitement to Mutiny Act. The Chancellor of the Exchequer Winston Churchill was in charge of making a certified government newspaper for the duration of the Strike. The British Gazette was extremely biased as it was written by the government.

The key aim of the General Strike was to 'hold-up' Britain. Not including a total shutdown of the British nation, the Strike would have had slight impact. Source B can be reliable as it is a photograph from the time, shows us that the nation still had a skeleton transport scheme, only 40 buses from a fleet of 4400 were in operation however necessary supplies were being delivered. Consequently from this source we can see that the Strike was not having a huge impact or the consequence wanted by the T. U. C. Black-leg workers were middle class and jobless people who filled in the jobs of people who were on Strike. E. g. they drove busses and trains. If Britain did not have them, Britain would have totally closed down and the Strike would have been effective, however the majority of the men were pleased to help. The trouble

was 'black-leg labourers' were proving to be to some extent excellent at filling in for the strikers who became terrified of losing their jobs eternally and so they returned to work. However, the Source B photo may also be seen as a staged photo as the policeman in the photo appears to be posing for the photo.

The government was provoking the strikers to become violent. They had armed policemen and soldiers protecting food convoys and the black-leg labourers, as if daring the Strikers to battle. An extract from English History 1914-1945 says, 'Churchill tried to provoke conflict by parading armoured cars through the streets'. We can see how the government tried to do this from photographs taken during the Strike, though from the photos we can also see the peacefulness of the crowd. In Source C we can see a painting of sturdy, well-fed strikers fighting at the Docks. This was obviously not the real condition the men were in as Britain's populations consisted mostly of undernourished, over-worked males-who would have been worse due to the Strike. This source is bound to be unreliable and biased because it was drawn by a member of a Trade Union 28 years after the end of the Strike, even though there was some violence the painting shows just a snapshot of the whole picture and what was happening across the country. From Source A we learn that 'altogether 4000 people were prosecuted for violence or incitement to violence and about a quarter of these received prison sentences'. This is an inconsequential number among the millions of strikers and not a major reason to call off the Strike but if there had been aggression the T. U. C might have never recovered. For if there had been hostility the Trade Unions would have lost the sympathy vote and therefore most of their support.

Source A is relatively reliable because it is written after the event by a third party. The government could have created far more effective propaganda from a violent strike than a peaceful one. The government also used propaganda to incite brutality. The main line of attack was through The British Gazette, but the strikers had a newspaper too, The British Worker, and they were able to combat the propaganda and broadcast messages, encouragement, warnings and advice to their followers. The sources from both newspapers announcing the end of the Strike use words that conjure up images of war, for example, surrender, peace and unconditional. In my view this was a final attempt on both sides to justify the Strike, as wars are thought of as 'just causes' by some and would make the government happy because they had 'victory' and the workers more angry and devoted to their cause due to their 'losing'.

The Strike had lost some early support due to a number of peoples believing that the Trade Unions were attacking the British system of government and attempting to overthrow it. They linked it to the Russian Revolution which was known for its violence and brutality (towards the upper classes). The Russian Revolution had begun with widespread strikes and troubled workers, so people were afraid. Also individuals were afraid of syndicalism, the belief that the workers should run the industries as this is rather like communism and would leave many factory and mine owners redundant or in the same circumstances as their own workers. Some early support for the Strike had dried up, perhaps it was going on for too long and people lost interest or perhaps supporters became worried as to how it would affect themselves and their jobs. The Strike could be perceived as a class war and this is

illustrated in Source C which shows workers united and fighting for a common cause against a brutal government. Perhaps people believed the working classes were trying to hold the rest of the country to account for its hardships. Others believed it was just two obstinate groups of people on a collision course and assumed they would work out their problems.

Unity in the Trade Union Congress might have been fractured. In a source I have seen; a Punch Cartoon from April 1921 'An Employer's View of the Triple Industrial Alliance' there is a three headed dog representing Cerberus- guardian of the gates to the underworld. The three heads, labelled 'transport', 'miners' and 'railways' are different. 'Miners' looks angry and unsettled whereas the other two look tired and fed up. This shows where most of the turmoil in the T. U. C. was coming from. The 'miners' head is in the middle- as if it is controlling the other parties. Though this is from an employer's viewpoint it cannot be ignored as the miners seem, throughout the Strike and even before, to be the angriest, most dangerous of the groups-perhaps the others weren't quite so supportive of the Strike and didn't want it to drag on. Another place we can see the miners playing a domineering role in the Strike is Sources D and E. These both state that 'negotiations are to be resumed in the coal dispute' and that the 'miners call delegate conference'. There is no mention of the other groups of people on Strike-the miners clearly were forthright and more important.

So to conclude these sources can tell us opinions and views on the General Strike from both sides but they are mostly biased due to the uses they served. . Source A shows that the strike was mainly peaceful and the government was not able to provoke them which reflects that the strikers

were not angry about the strike and hence were looking for a peaceful end to the strike as soon as possible. Source B is vital in explaining why the strike was called off as it shows that the strike was not having the desired effect since goods and services were still being provided by the government.

Source C portrays a violent picture but this was not the case across the country. The painting shows that the unions did not have much option but to have a strong, united confrontation with the government but most of the strikers did not have the desire for this and the unions failed to keep the strike going by not being able to have deep unity. Source D shows that the strikers were somewhat glad the strike was over and tried to show that it ended as they had achieved their aims through negotiations and there was no need to continue with the strike. This puts on a brave face in the face of what in fact was a defect of the Unions that led to the end of the strike.

Source E shows that the government had totally defeated the unions and hence ending the strike, although this was a government paper and can be seen as biased, it turns out to be true as the unions did not achieve any of their aims. However, the two newspaper articles announcing the end of the General Strike are very brief and showed how the government and T. U. C. were trying not to draw great attention to it, as if both sides agreed it was an embarrassment. At the end of the Strike the T. U. C may have hoped that new and unofficial proposals by Sir Herbert Samuel would permit the miners and mine owners to renew negotiations. This was not so. Most men got their jobs back but 3000 men endured recrimination from employers and the railwaymen had to accept pay cuts on return to work. The miners remained on strike for several months. They were ultimately forced back to work after hunger and cold, under the conditions they had neglected in April. All the



recommendations of the Samuel Commission, including the ones the government had accepted, were ignored.