

The 1926 General Strike is part of the mythology of the working class and the left in Britain.

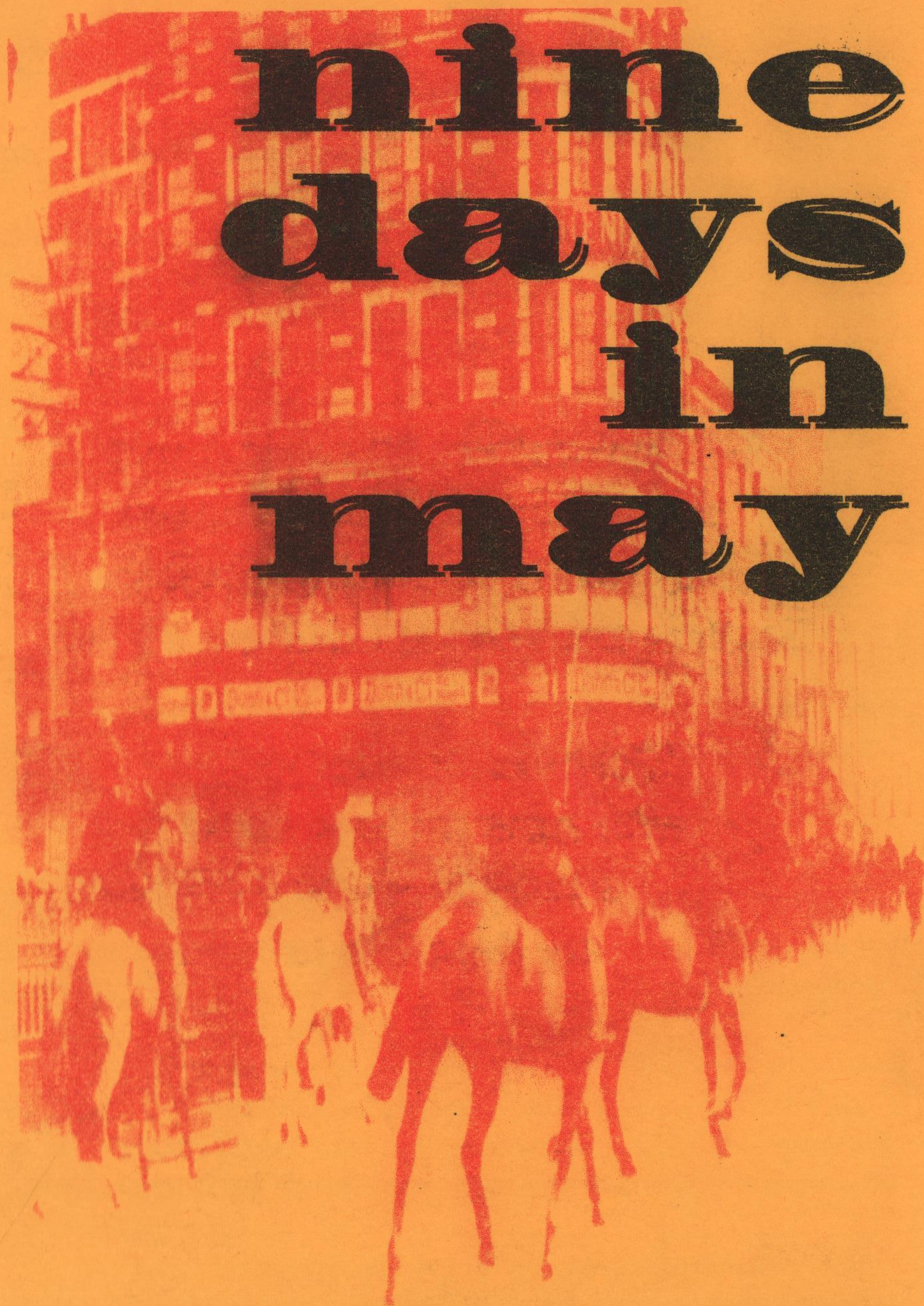
In May 1926 the TUC called a General Strike called in support of miners facing lockouts and wage cuts. In a massive show of solidarity nearly 2 million workers joined the Strike.

Nine days later, afraid of the forces they had unleashed, the TUC called the General Strike off.

This pamphlet describes the events of May 1926 in the South London borough of Southwark: how the Strike was organised on the ground, the clashes between pickets and police, attempts to get out news and information. It is a glimpse into the day to day running of one of the most crucial battles of our history.

12398
P

nine days in may



THE GENERAL STRIKE IN SOUTHWARK

**This pamphlet was originally
published by Union Place
Community Resource Centre/
Southwark Trades Council, 1976.**

**Republished 2005
with new pictures and
a new foreword
by Past Tense**

foreword

In May 1926, the leaders of the Trades Union Congress called a General Strike. Nearly 2 million workers all over the country joined the strike, in support of a million miners, locked out by mine-owners for refusing to accept wage cuts of up to 25 per cent, after the ending of the Government's coal subsidy. The General Council of the TUC didn't want to call the Strike: they were pushed into it for fear of workers taking action themselves without them...

Nine days later, afraid of the losing control of the situation, in the face of massive working class solidarity, the TUC General Council called the Strike off. Since then the General Strike has entered into the mythology of the working class and the left in Britain.

This pamphlet describes some of the events of the General Strike in the then Metropolitan Boroughs of Bermondsey, Camberwell and Southwark, now united into the London Borough of Southwark.

Scenes of clashes between strikers and police at the Elephant and Castle and surrounding areas were immortalised in photographs taken at the time, and the Thames seemed to many as a barricade between the plutocrats of the City of London and the insurgent working class south of the river.

The General Strike was of course a massive defeat for the working class. The TUC General Council capitulated; many of the strikers were forced to accept lower wages and conditions: the miners in whose support the Strike was called were eventually starved into submission.

This pamphlet was originally published (partly) by Southwark Trades Council: unsurprisingly then it concentrates mostly on the activities of local Trades Councils and unions. It describes some of the main events & the atmosphere reasonably well. A weakness is

a lack of accounts of the workers on the ground who stopped scab trams, picketed factories and fought the cops at the Elephant & Camberwell Green.

The accounts here also fail to analyse at all WHY the General Strike failed, despite the powerful unity of the working class nationally and locally. The TUC leaders sold out the Strike, but despite their anger, support for the miners and resentment towards the TUC, neither the Councils of Action, the Trades Councils, the militant left, nor the insurgent workers they claimed to represent, significantly broke out of the official structures, to either broaden the Strike while it was on or to continue it after it had been called off.

Party-obsessed lefties like Tony Cliff & Donny Gluckstein in their *"Marxism & the Trade Union Struggle"* have argued for nearly 80 years that what was lacking was a strong centralised Communist Party to direct the struggle. The Communist Party of Great Britain that existed in 1926 was small and weak, for many reasons, including its own rightwing ideology, the complex history of British communism, the social & economic conditions of the time, and state repression immediately before 1926. But clearly no party however strong or centralised is a substitute for a working class organising for itself. When the union leaders called the strike off, millions of workers, after an initial upsurge, obeyed, whatever their feelings. Workers told not to strike or to go back to work even before the Strike ended, did as they were told. And the CPGB in fact made little attempt to challenge the TUC running of events in fact calling for *"All power to the General Council."*

1000s of working people fought the cops and scabs for nine days, all over the country. But only by breaking out of TUC control and extending the struggle on their own behalf could the outcome have been any different.

Jordan Brown, Past Tense, October 2005.

the national scene

On May 1st 1926 the main industrial dispute in the country was the battle between the miners and the coal-owners, and it was this battle which was to lead to the calling of the General Strike. This dispute was the focus of the power struggle between the owners and the workers. In the coal industry the owners had, for over a year prior to May 1926, been attempting to force reductions in wages and increases in hours worked. On July 31st 1925 the Tory government was forced, in return for industrial peace, to offer a nine month subsidy to the coal industry, a condition of which was the withdrawal by the coal-owners of notices of wage reductions. This subsidy ran out in April 1926 and immediately the coal-owners posted lock-out notices in the face of the total refusal by the miners to accept any reduction in wages or increase in hours worked: *"Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day."*

By this time the masses of the workers were calling for a General Strike in support of the miners' struggle, which they saw as their own. They forced this view on the General Council of the TUC, who proposed "coordinated action" - and this proposal was endorsed on May 1st at Farringdon Hall by a conference of Trade Union Executives representing 4 million workers. The leaders of the Trades Union Congress were still intent on negotiating with the Government. The government, however, broke off negotiations on the morning of May 3rd on account of the action taken by the printers of the Daily Mail ~ who refused to print the editorial which attacked the steps taken by the Trade Unions. The leaders of the TUC were left with no alternative but to call a General Strike to begin on May 4th.

OVERWHELMING SUPPORT FOR THE STRIKE

That day-saw a response to the call which surprised everyone. All transport ground to a halt, no papers appeared, manufacturing industries stopped, workers who were not called out by their unions came out independently and many who were not even in a union joined the strike.

Of the two sides, the Government was definitely the better prepared. Since the



Crowds outside TUC Headquarters waiting for news.

.....
 previous year they had been working to ensure that they would be the victors in any protracted industrial struggle. In September 1925 they formed the 'Organisation for Maintenance of Supplies' (OMS) composed of upstanding members of the middle class, run by retired army officers. Its function was to collect lists of volunteers who would be willing to run the country in the event of a General Strike. On May 1st the Government declared a State of Emergency, which suspended civil liberties and allowed them greater freedom to arrest and imprison so-called 'dissidents'.

WORKERS ORGANISE COUNCILS OF ACTION

On the other hand, the organisation of the TUC was totally inadequate for the requirements of a General Strike, which could only mean that they thought, or indeed hoped, that the strike would be lost very quickly. At a local level, however, the Trades Councils responded by organising in an impromptu but

efficient fashion. They formed themselves into Councils of Action and altogether there were 131 of these throughout the country.

The various functions taken over by the Councils of Action included: control of traffic, picketing factories that were on strike to ensure that the "volunteers" didn't get in, picketing factories not on strike in an attempt to persuade the workers to join the stoppage, distribution of food and information, and alleviation of cases of great distress. In many places the Councils of Action became the only authority, the nearest thing to local control and autonomy in the history of modern Britain. And they had the support of the vast majority of workers in most cases. Their main headache was the constant need to convince workers who hadn't yet officially been called out to go back to work. (Note 1)

This spontaneous development of the Councils of Action worried the Government more than anything else, and it was these organisations that were subjected to the toughest repression by the police. The possession of a newsletter produced by a Council of Action became a crime that could lead to two or three months hard labour - whilst the rather tame organ of the TUC, "The British Worker", which urged the strikers to go for walks in the country, was allowed to continue printing after an initial five hour stoppage.

...AND THEN THE BETRAYAL

After days of secret negotiations with the Government, the TUC informed Baldwin, the Tory Prime Minister, that the strike was off, and the news was broadcast at 1 pm on May 12th. The news shattered the strikers and the Councils of Action, who saw the strike gaining in strength every day and the probability of success with it.

It seems it was precisely this strength that intimidated some members of the TUC General Council such as J. Thomas, who said he "dreaded" that the strike would "get out of the hands of responsible executives". When the strikers discovered that the settlement had not included any guarantees about reinstatement they initially decided to stay out, and on May 13th there were actually more workers on strike than on any other day. But the end had come and the workers were left to barter with their individual employers over the terms of their return, with the result that many people didn't get their job back and many others had to "eat dirt" in order to do so.

Only the miners were left on strike, remaining out until November when they were finally starved into submission and forced to accept the owners' terms.

strike: south of the river

In 1926 the borough of Southwark was very different to the one that we know now. In the area presently covered by Southwark there were the three Metropolitan Boroughs of Southwark, Bermondsey and Camberwell.

The major industries in the three boroughs then were the docks, transport services, engineering works and printing. The workers in these industries were well organised, as shown by the example of Hoe & Co.

R. Hoe and Company Ltd, were a printing press manufacturers in Borough Road, Southwark. They employed 900 men, and the printing engineering workers were amongst the best organised and the most militant in South London. There were three large engineering firms near the Elephant: Hoe's, Waygood-Otis, and Durants (see Stan Hutchins' account, below).

In early January 1926, the 900 employees at Hoe's began an 'unofficial' 10 week strike to protest the hiring of non-union workers, and to demand a £1 per week pay increase. The employers threatened a national lockout in the engineering sector involving 500,000 men. (*South London Press*, March 26 1926) And the workers marched to the Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street to protest against the threatened lockout.

During the General Strike the workers were militant in their picketing of the firm. Stan Hutchins reports that only 20 apprentices remained at work and that they later contributed to a 100 per cent turn out.

TOUGH CONDITIONS FOR THE JOBLESS

Unemployment in the three boroughs around the national average of 12 per cent. The situation of the unemployed was hard. In 1926 unemployment benefit was about 15 shillings per week for a single man. This rate applied for 26 weeks only, after which unemployed received Poor Law Relief administered by the Board of Guardians for the Borough. After this was exhausted many of the unemployed in Southwark were sent to Labour Camps at Hollesey Bay and Belmont in Surrey, where they were forced to work under overseers.

A statement in the House of Commons (reported in the *South London Observer*, Wednesday March 24th, 1926) disclosed that one man in seven, and one woman in three were refused benefit at the Labour Exchange, and left to starve or apply for Poor Law Relief. The unemployed also had to sign on every day of the week.

The National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWCM) was very active in the area in organising unemployed workers before and during May 1926. Membership was very high in Southwark and meetings were held outside the Labour Exchange, where speakers would address the people waiting to collect their money. Many members of the organised unemployed were sent to prison during the period 1925-6 because of their political activities.

SOUTHWARK AND CAMBERWELL IN CONTRAST

There were, however, noticeable differences between the three boroughs, especially in the question of social conditions and political organisation, being dominated by different political parties.

Southwark was the smallest of the three, and it also had the worst and most



Camberwell Trades Council demo during General Strike.

densely populated housing of any metropolitan borough. Its population density was 160 people to the acre, compared with 77 for Bermondsey and a very low 59 for Camberwell. The conditions in one part of Southwark are described in "The Book of Walworth" published in 1925: "It is in the blocks especially in and adjacent to the New Kent Road that we have the greatest concentration of population. Here in streets that are little more than gulleys when their narrow width is compared with the great height of the buildings, live hundreds of people with no outlook in front except the gully, and none in the rear except a still narrower gully into which at one time inconsiderate tenants threw their rubbish to everyone's inconvenience."

On the other hand the borough of Camberwell, with its coat of arms emblazoned with the motto "All's well", could, in its official guide book of 1926, proudly boast of the quality of life that its inhabitants enjoyed, with magnificent green spaces, fine educational institutions and other attractions offered to people wishing to move into the area. The handbook states that the council had purchased land for housing up to the tune of £300,000 and mentioned in particular a new estate of 7 houses and 174 flats that were occupied by "the more thrifty and respectable members of the class for whom they were intended"



The Bermondsey and Rotherhithe contingent on the Mayday march, 1926.

and that at a rent of 10 shillings to 11 shillings per week, the estate was more than self supporting with the account showing a "substantial surplus" after paying loans and interest etc.

BERMONDSEY'S LABOUR COUNCIL

Bermondsey Borough Council was distinguished not only from the other two but also from the vast majority of the metropolitan boroughs by the fact that it had a Labour controlled council. It was also distinguished by its policies, many of which ran counter to the London County Council, with which it was having a continual running battle.

One particular fight was highlighted in the October 1925 edition of the Bermondsey Labour Magazine. The council had applied for permission to build a housing project covering four acres; the LCC first tried to block it by withholding permission until it was almost too late, but then gave permission for the same amount of dwellings to be built in an area of one and a half acres, ordering the council to sell the rest of the land. Some facts about the health of the people show the way that the Bermondsey administration was changing the quality of life in the borough. During the three years from 1921, while the Independent Labour Party (ILP) had been in the majority, the average death rate dropped by 30 per cent and the infantile death rate dropped from 16 deaths per thousand to 76, whilst the death of mothers in became the lowest of all London boroughs.

HOW THE THREE COUNCILS RESPONDED TO THE STRIKE

Obviously the political and economic structure of the boroughs colored their response to the General Strike, and it is noticeable that the three boroughs had very contrasting attitudes during that period.

Southwark Council's response was rather limited, not in intensity but certainly in its democratic base. The mayor was the subject of a special meeting called on May 19th "to consider the action of the Lord Mayor Alderman J.R. Want", who'd called off all the council meetings, taking power into his own hands, and had sent threatening letters to all local authority workers warning them not to strike. A motion regretting this action as "thereby depriving the elected councillors of their right to share in the government of the borough" was defeated & an amendment expressing "entire confidence in the Lord Mayor" was passed by 49 votes to 14.

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.

Of the three boroughs it is not surprising that Bermondsey showed the closest cooperation between Council and strikers. As soon as the strike was announced, *"the Borough Council, being Labour, formed an emergency sub-committee which was in close touch with the Council of Action and both the Town Halls were passed over to the Trades Council during the strike, which were used for strike meetings and strike committees."*

A comparison of the minutes of the London councils just before and after the strike shows very clearly how they responded to the situation.

Various local authorities passed motions and then circulated them to other local authorities to be endorsed. Of the many, two reflect their contrasting nature. Hackney requested all other Councils to join them in urging the Prime Minister to ensure that after the strike the local authorities would be able to discriminate against the strikers in favour of blacklegs. Southwark and Camberwell both agreed to endorse that Motion. However, the motion from Bethnal Green condemning the action of the government in breaking off negotiations with the TUC was consigned to the waste paper bin. We cannot discover Bermondsey's response because both motions were passed to the special emergency committee whose minutes are not available. However, we do know that the Government had to appoint a retired Army Captain as its Food and Fuel Agent in Bermondsey, because cooperation was not forthcoming from the usual direction.

TRADES COUNCILS WERE AT THE HUB OF ACTION

At the outset of the General Strike responsibility for the coordination of the strike in the locality fell to the lot of the Trades Councils, which were in the main very unprepared. Bert Edwards writes about Southwark that: *"It's hard to say how the Trades Councils became the centre of things. The only thing you can say is that the publicity had indicated that the Trades Council would be 'the centre ... We had no machinery set up ... we didn't have a typewriter or a duplicator."* There had been a lot of general debate throughout the country about the possibility of a strike, and this of course had been a subject of discussion in the Trades Councils. However the actual declaration of the strike on May 3rd caught everyone on the

hop. *"On the first day of the strike I went around to the Trades Council offices - and I saw to my amazement that there was quite a crowd of people wanting advice. Nobody knew what they had to do."* However, *"there was immediate response to the appeal that the Trades Council turn itself into a Council of Action. The Council of Action formed sub-committees dealing with press and propaganda, a contact committee for keeping in touch with the TUC, a finance committee and an enquiries committee."*

We have very little information on how Camberwell Trades Council organised themselves. There is however 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."*

In Bermondsey the cooperation between the Borough Council and the Trades Council was much closer than in the other two boroughs. The Trades Council formed a Council of Action which was given the use of the two Town Halls which were put to use every day as meeting rooms, committee rooms and for giving out strike pay. The Council of Action *"sat continuously from day to day and endeavoured to coordinate all local efforts for forwarding the strike."* It also had the use of the local Labour Party offices and their stocks of paper, typewriters and office equipment.

GETTING OUT THE NEWS

The production of news-sheets was a very important part of the work of the Councils of Action. All national newspapers had ceased publication on the first day of the strike, although some managed to produce limited editions with scab labour. These were not widely distributed and of course were in opposition to the strike. The Government also produced a news-sheet, *"The British Gazette"*, under the editorship of Winston Churchill but this was naturally very hostile to the strike and carried only very biased or false information. The local papers in South London were also opposed to the strike. The *South London Press* (SLP) was the most widely distributed paper in the Southwark area. When it was unable to produce a full issue it came out with a single sheet *"Strike Bulletin"*.

On May 7th its front page, announced: *"We offer no apology for issuing this week the South London Press at half its normal size. The fact is, we are under a double obligation - firstly to our readers to give them as full a statement as possible in the*

circumstances which led to the country being plunged into a deplorable strike and unwarrantably involving this journal in the dispute, second to our Advertisers ..."

The paper constantly referred to pickets as "hooligans", "gangs of ruffians" etc. On May 7th it reported that "A great deal of trouble was caused by women who, shouting hysterically, flung themselves into the fray". Headlines on May 14th announced "How Rowdyism was overcome by Police and Specials", followed by praise of the cheerful way in which the uniformed forces restored order with their three-foot riot-sticks.

The issue of Friday 21st carries an article on "The SLP in strike time - how it met the great blow against Liberty and Freedom". The report states that by the night of Wednesday 5th all composing and mechanical staff of SLP were out "most of



Police clearing crowds after fighting at Elephant & Castle.

them unwillingly". The following week the SLP was without linotype operators except one lion apprentice and two compositor apprentices. All nine members of the machine and stereotyping staff were on strike. So the directors and four of their sons, together with "volunteers", produced the paper and distributed it by using disguised vans.

The only other form of communication was the BBC radio service, but this was entirely under the control of the Government.

There were a number of publications produced by the Councils of Action with

varying degrees of success. This was because the Government tried to suppress the strikers' news-sheets and prison sentences were handed out to those producing, selling or even possessing such publications.

In Camberwell at least two publications were brought out. The *South London Observer* of Saturday May 15th reports that a man was convicted of selling the "Peckham Labour Bulletin" which was produced in Central Buildings, High Street, Peckham, by Ernest Baldwin (Secretary and Agent for the Peckham Labour Party) and James McLean. 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*.

Southwark Council of Action also produced a news sheet but this was done with some difficulty. To start with they had no duplicator or typewriter, but Tommy Strudwick, a member of the Council Of Action from the National Union of Railwaymen managed to provide this equipment. It was hidden away in a recess in one of his room* but after only a few issues the police raided his house and found it. He was arrested and sentenced to two months' hard labour for spreading disaffection. Strudwick was also involved with two other publications, called "Juice" and "The Young Striker".

Bermondsey Council of Action was much better prepared than the other two. They not only had the stocks of paper, typewriters and office equipment belonging to the Labour Party, but also those belonging to the Borough Council. They produced a daily news-sheet, 6000 copies of which were distributed from seven official points. Much of the information for the Bulletin was collected by Dr. Salter, the Labour MP for Bermondsey. He spent much of his time during the strike collecting information from TUC headquarters and the House of Commons and would phone it in for the news-sheet in the afternoon.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE SOUTHWARK AREA

The three Boroughs were strategically very significant during the General Strike. Bermondsey included the Surrey Commercial Docks. Camberwell was important because it housed Tillings Bus Co., one of the largest in London, and many of the main roads from the south coast passed through the borough. Southwark's

significance lay in the Elephant and Castle, which was the meeting of six major roads which were used by many bus routes and by lorries coming in from the docks and the south.

The police were often evident at the Elephant chasing the people away, by riding at them swinging their long truncheons - but the crowd would reform. According to Stan Hutchins there were stewards from the Council of Action, distinguished by red arm bands, who tried to ensure that only traffic with permits from the TUC were allowed through, but many blacklegging volunteers would try to force their way through, and this led to several occasions of violence and even some instances of death. The Sunday Worker on May 9th reported that a volunteer driver who panicked when the crowd tried to stop him, knocked down a motor cyclist and drove onto the pavement, killing two people. On another occasion a bus driven by a blackleg and escorted by police and special constables was stopped by the strikers, emptied of its passengers, and set on fire.

Another bus met this fate in St. George's Road. where a No.12 on its way to Dulwich was burned. All in all, the bus service, even with the help of the many volunteers (including students from Guys Hospital and Dulwich College who were recorded as heartily laying into strikers, shouting: "Up College!") was very limited.

By May 5th it was reported that forty-seven General Omnibus vehicles had been immobilised and, according to a TUC intelligence report, Lord Ashfield, Chairman of the General Omnibus Company, was resisting Government pressure to get more buses on the road. He was only willing to allow the oldest type out because of the danger from volunteer drivers and pickets.

The trams were in the main kept off the roads, but there was an attempt to bring them out of Camberwell Depot on Wednesday May 5th. This was possible once local electricity generating stations had been brought into use with the help of naval ratings. However a large group of strikers and their wives had gathered outside the depot and even the very large numbers of police and OMS could not stop them from smashing the tram windows and pushing it back.

POLICE AND SPECIALS ATTACK WITH BATONS

This wasn't the only incident reported in Camberwell. Charlie Le Grande, a striker from Stockwell who received his strike pay from the Camberwell Bus Depot talks about the huge public meetings held at the triangle near the Eaton Arms and at Peckham Rye. Another 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.

It wasn't only on the streets that the strikers were subjected to attacks from the police. On the 6th May police invaded the Bricklayers Arms, a pub on the Old Kent Road used as a meeting place by the National Union of Railwaymen members working from the Bricklayers' Depot, and arrested strikers. On May 7th



SPECIAL CONSTABLES TOOLING UP

the police raided another pub nearby, the *Queen's Head*, and it was reported to the House of Commons by Dr. Haden-Guest, Labour MP for Southwark, that police had attacked people in the pub and had later chased and attacked women and children in the street.

Another important area of activity during the strike was the Surrey Dock. Two thousand men were employed here, and yet only seven dockers turned up for work on the first day of the strike. Lock gate staff continued to work normally, and electric and hydraulic power was kept going by one foreman, but there were no tugs operating, and three ships with food stuffs were held up with no-one to unload them.

As a bonus - the Transport and General Workers Union reported a response of "wonderful solidarity" from the Port of London Authority clerical and supervisory staff in the Surrey Dock - their first-ever strike. The gates of the dock were effectively closed by a very strong mass picket stationed there from the beginning of the strike. The need to open the docks soon became acute as food began to get short in London, but it seemed an impossible task for the Government, given the large pickets at the Surrey Dock.

"Eighty men taken to the riverside to unload foodstuffs on May 7th refused to move without protection from a large and hostile crowd, the police protection was so long in arriving that when it had arrived the eighty men were found to be missing and the cargo was still awaiting their attention". Later on, a party of Naval ratings were put into Surrey Dock, followed by volunteers brought in from Westminster by boat, who spent the weekend unloading food stuffs to be taken further up river on barges.

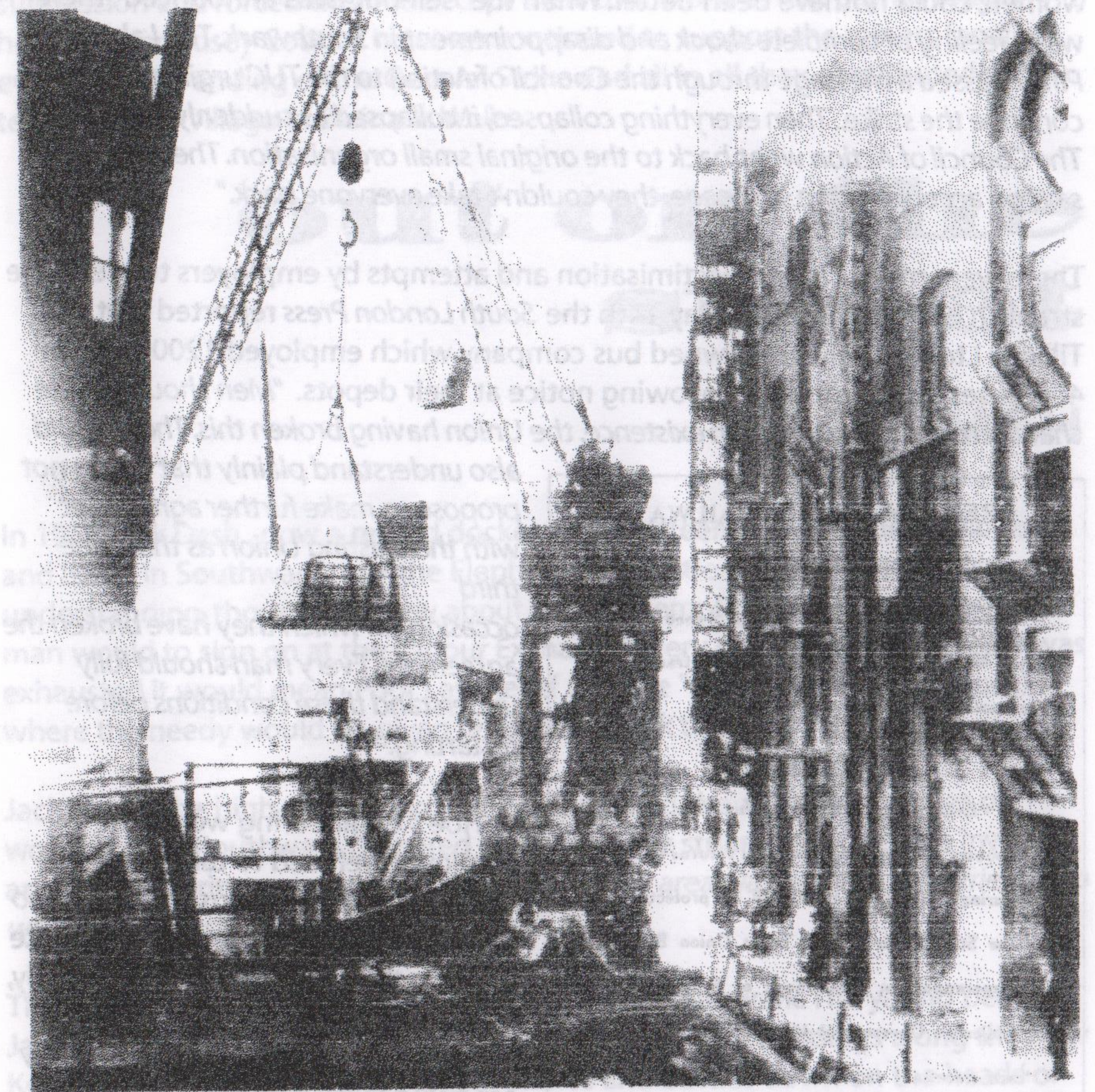
STUDENTS AS BLACKLEG LABOUR

Tooley Street was also the scene of solid resistance to the police and blacklegs and on Thursday May 6th there was a police charge that led to thirty-two arrests. Here too the government were determined to open Hays Wharf and ferried in blackleg labour, mainly undergraduates from Oxford and Cambridge.

As a group, students were some of the most active blacklegs. On Thursday May 6th the South London Press reported that many students from Guys Hospital had signed on as special constables "being involved with a strong sense of patriotic duty". On Saturday May 29th the South London Observer reported that the Governors of Guys Hospital had from the secretary of the TGWU branch at

Lower Road, Rotherhithe, a protest against the blacklegging by students and a statement that the branch would no longer contribute to the hospital's funds.

The South London Press of May 14th reported that "Oxford undergraduates, numbering 250, together with 400 other volunteers, are unloading foodstuff from ships at Hays Wharf Ltd., Tooley St... The manager of Hays Wharf said: The undergraduates are receiving the usual pay of dockers. They moved between 1500 and 2000 tons per day. Normal output at the wharves is 5000 tons a day'."



University students unloading vessels at Hays Wharf, London Bridge, during the Strike.

THE END OF THE STRIKE - UNCONDITIONAL SELL-OUT

Mass support for the strike was growing in the three boroughs throughout the time it lasted. Bermondsey reported to the Labour Research Department that on May 12th there was no sign of weakening whatever. The workers were more solid the last day than on the first. The spirit of the workers, both men and women, could nothave been better. When the "sell-out" was announced *"there was a feeling of complete shock and disappointment in Southwark. The Labour Party passed a message through the Council of Action to the TUC urging them to continue the strike.. Then everything collapsed, it collapsed as suddenly as it started. The Council of Action went back to the original small organisation. The employers said on account of the stoppage, they couldn't take everyone back."*

There were many cases of victimisation and attempts by employers to break the strength of the unions. On May 14th the *South London Press* reported that Tillings Ltd., the privately owned bus company which employed 1200 men on 400 buses had posted the following notice at their depots. *"Men should realise that there is no agreement in existence, the Union having broken this. They should*

GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY.

The following special message signed by the Prime Minister to all workers in all trades was broadcast to-day :-

"Additional Guarantees.

"Every man who does his duty by the country and remains at work or returns to work during the present crisis will be protected by the State from loss of Trade Union Benefits, Superannuation Allowances, or Pensions. His Majesty's Government will take whatever steps are necessary in Parliament or otherwise for this purpose."

FELIX J. C. POLE.

General Manager

PADDINGTON STATION,
May 8th 1926

Notice issued to try & keep railway workers on the job.

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."

At Hoe's engineering works, the employers refused to take the men back as a group *"because they were no longer employees"*, but agreed to take them back if they applied individually, at their former rate of payment and for their former jobs. Hoe's said *"They are being taken on as vacancies are available.*"*

The Labour Exchanges received instructions that those who withdrew their labour were disqualified from

benefit on the ground that they left their employment without just cause. Sections of the workers were luckier and/or stronger - for instance, the dockers and railwaymen held out for agreements against victimisation. The dockers at Surrey Dock maintained their pickets until May 15th when Ernest Bevin came to an agreement with the employers.

Within a week of the ending of the strike, only the miners were still left out. They remained out until November when the employers finally starved them into submission and forced them to accept their conditions of less pay for longer hours. Bermondsey Council however continued to support the miners families even after the ending of the General Strike and all in all they contributed £7000 to the mining village of Blaina in Wales.

out on the street

JACK DASH

In 1926 Jack Dash., now a retired docker, was nineteen years old, unemployed, and living in Southwark near the Elephant and Castle. He had little political understanding, though he knew about being unemployed: the unemployed man would to sign on at the Labour Exchange every day and when the dole was exhausted it would mean Poor Law Relief and the "Bun House" (Poor House), where the needy would be given bread and black treacle.

Jack recalls the high state of excitement that filled the air as the families of working class Southwark prepared to support the strike: everyone was involved, and the solidarity was strong. *"The poverty in the area was great, but the friendship was too - a question of bread and butter."*

There were tremendous battles in the streets of Southwark. The young people, Jack included, would wait on the roofs of the tenement buildings along the New Kent Road for an opportunity to rain stones and bottles down 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 every day, especially around the Bricklayers' Arms, where dockers and railwaymen gathered. Here Jack saw elderly women being beaten by the "cossacks" with their long sticks, and a running fight between the police and the strikers.

"To me in retrospect, it was like Aldgate 1937 all over the Borough." A bus was stopped, emptied of passengers, turned over and burned in the face of police and the specials. There were barriers everywhere, and the Trades Council had control over all vehicles passing through Southwark. No-one really knew what was happening, as there was no radio and few papers. No news, but no division. The atmosphere was magnetic: men, women and children determined to stand united. "I had never seen anything like this deep class feeling" says Jack. "I can't recall anyone arguing against the strike. The courage of the people was tremendous. It was a family affair."

One day Jack went over London Bridge with his mates and saw the tanks, the armoured cars and the Scots troops gathering at the Bank: this had a profound effect on the young people. "In retrospect, I can see it was a great lesson. It was a revolutionary situation and a good political education." Then suddenly the strike was ended. Jack's dad called the congress of the TUC "traitorous bastards," as did many others.

Nearly everyone was sorry that it was over. "The Ruling Class learned a lot from the Strike, there are now more knights round the table than there ever were around King Arthur's."

solidarity in Southwark

STANLEY G. HUTCHINS

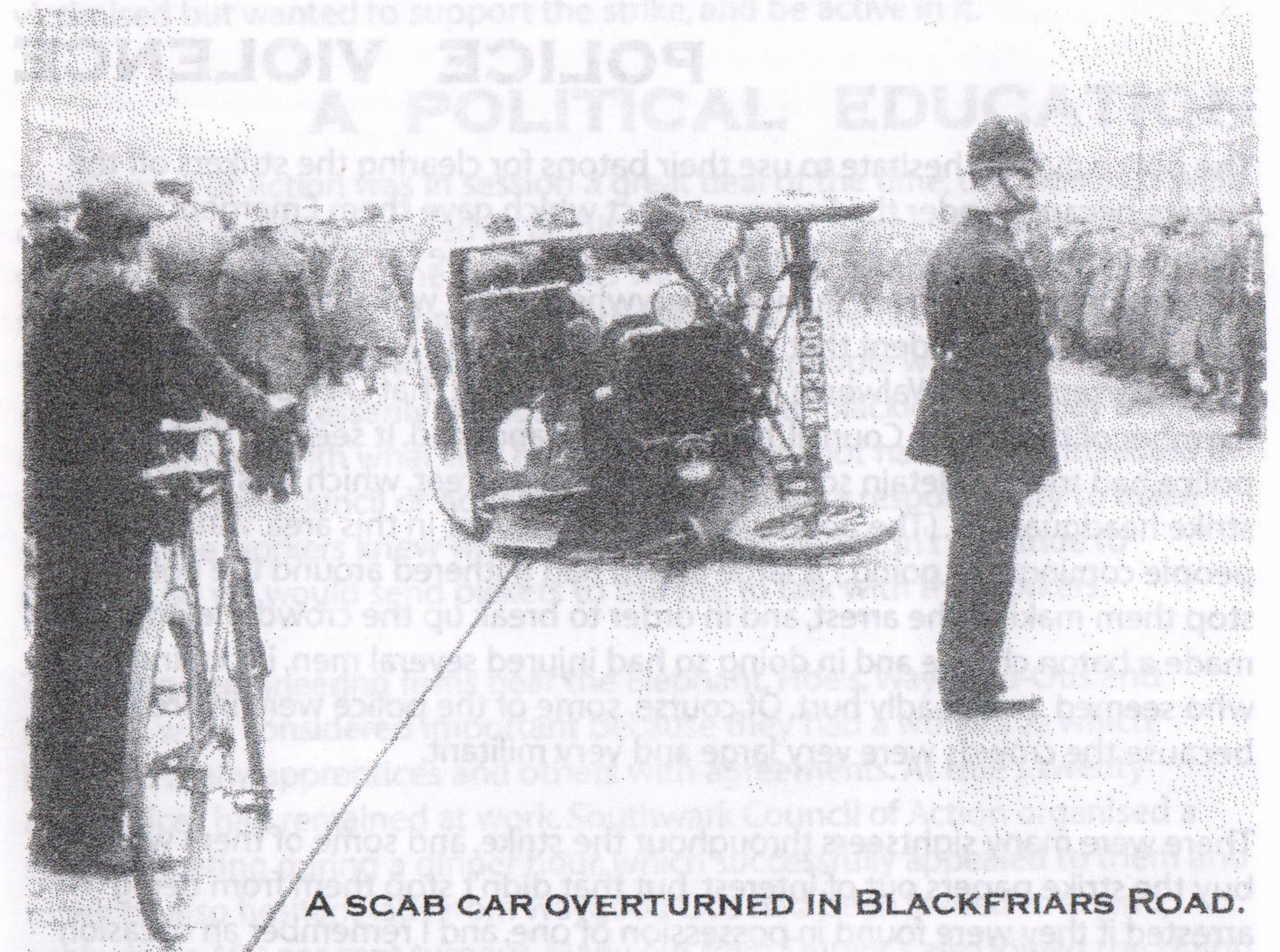
On May 1st 1926 there was a special conference of Union National Executives, called by the Trades Union Congress at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Road, EC.

Union members converged on this demonstration point from all parts of London. As was traditional, it was a very large contingent from the South East, going through Southwark. The demonstrators marched through St. George's Circus, up Blackfriars Road, across Blackfriars Bridge to the Memorial Hall, rallying more people on the way.

During the General Strike (from midnight May 3rd to May 12th) Southwark was an extremely important place, because the Elephant and Castle was a major junction of five main roads coming through Camberwell Green from Dover, and roads coming via the New Kent Road and Newington Causeway from the docks.

There was an immediate response to the appeal that the Trades Council turn itself into a Council of Action. This rallied the Unions and many that usually didn't take up the option of being represented on the Trades Council rallied to the strike centre, which was at 124 Walworth Road.

Among the most energetic leaders of the Council of Action was Bert Edwards of



A SCAB CAR OVERTURNED IN BLACKFRIARS ROAD.

the National Union of Vehicle Builders. Also there were brothers M. Bodger and Bonner whose picketing was most regular and persuasive.

I represented on the Trades Council what was the oldest branch of the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks - Lambeth and Newington, the branch that covered Southwark at the time.

Of course, we did not want to starve ourselves out, so we would let food lorries through. Unfortunately, the authorities tried to get through by pretending that they were carrying food when they weren't, and this would sometimes lead to angry scenes and violence. To get the lorries through they had to have a permit from the Council of Action pickets, who wore a red ribbon so that they could be distinguished from the ordinary strikers. Most of the couriers of the Council of

Action were motor-cyclists, with arm bands, running messages... The Council of Action was always a hive of industry, people coming and going all the time, offering their services, whether to help produce something or take messages etc.

There were occasions when the strikers came into direct conflict with the police, particularly at the Elephant and Camberwell Green.

POLICE VIOLENCE

The police did not hesitate to use their batons for clearing the strikers off the streets, because under the Emergency Act which gave them Emergency Powers the police could search and take into custody anyone they thought was in association with the strike. Almost everywhere there was something happening. I just missed one incident that was significant. When I arrived at the strike headquarters in the Walworth Road one day I found that Dick Beech, a militant member of the Trades Council, had his head bandaged. It seemed that the police had tried to detain some men in Heygate Street, which was near the strike headquarters. (The police were always evident in this area, watching the people coming and going.) A large crowd had gathered around the police to stop them making the arrest, and in order to break up the crowd the police had made a baton charge and in doing so had injured several men, including Dick, who seemed quite badly hurt. Of course, some of the police were injured, too, because the crowds were very large and very militant.

There were many sightseers throughout the strike, and some of them would buy the strike papers out of interest, but that didn't stop them from being arrested if they were found in possession of one, and I remember an occasion when a city gent was arrested after having bought a strike paper and was jailed for two months with hard labour.

One of the problems that the Council of Action had to deal with was security, and a difficult question that we had to answer was about W.F. Watson. He was a member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. He had served a prison sentence after the first World War, for making a speech at the Albert Hall that was thought to be seditious. He had offered his services to the Trades Council but he had previously publicly admitted that he had accepted money from the police for information, his excuse being that he thought that the money could be donated to the cause. This of course made him suspect, and there was an enquiry by the Council of Action as to whether or not he should be allowed to work with it. He was a very capable man who knew how to run an office, and organise things. We eventually decided that he could continue to work but only

under direct supervision. (Note 2)

I was 19 years of age at the time of the General Strike and I was elected Assistant Secretary of the C of A when the strike was called. I was then a shop assistant in the City, so was not called out on strike, but in order to carry on with the TC work I used the excuse that I was unable to get transport. This was a common excuse that many workers used when they didn't want to be victimised but wanted to support the strike, and be active in it.

A POLITICAL EDUCATION

The Council of Action was in session a great deal of the time, the meetings were called when anything needed to be discussed, such as who should be permitted through the pickets etc. The large firms with organised workers would provide their own pickets, but in some places the workers were not organised and to these places the C of A would send pickets. Many people would automatically go to work, not necessarily because they wanted to blackleg, they may not have been up-to-date with what was happening, or may not have been interested in politics, and the Council of Action saw that they had a responsibility to make sure that the workers knew what was happening and didn't continue to blackleg. So we would send pickets to the site to talk with the workers.

Three large engineering firms near the Elephant, Hoe's, Waygood-Otis and Durants, were considered important because they had a workforce which included many apprentices and others with agreements. At Hoe's twenty apprentices had remained at work. Southwark Council of Action organised 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. Many out from Durant's also joined the Union.

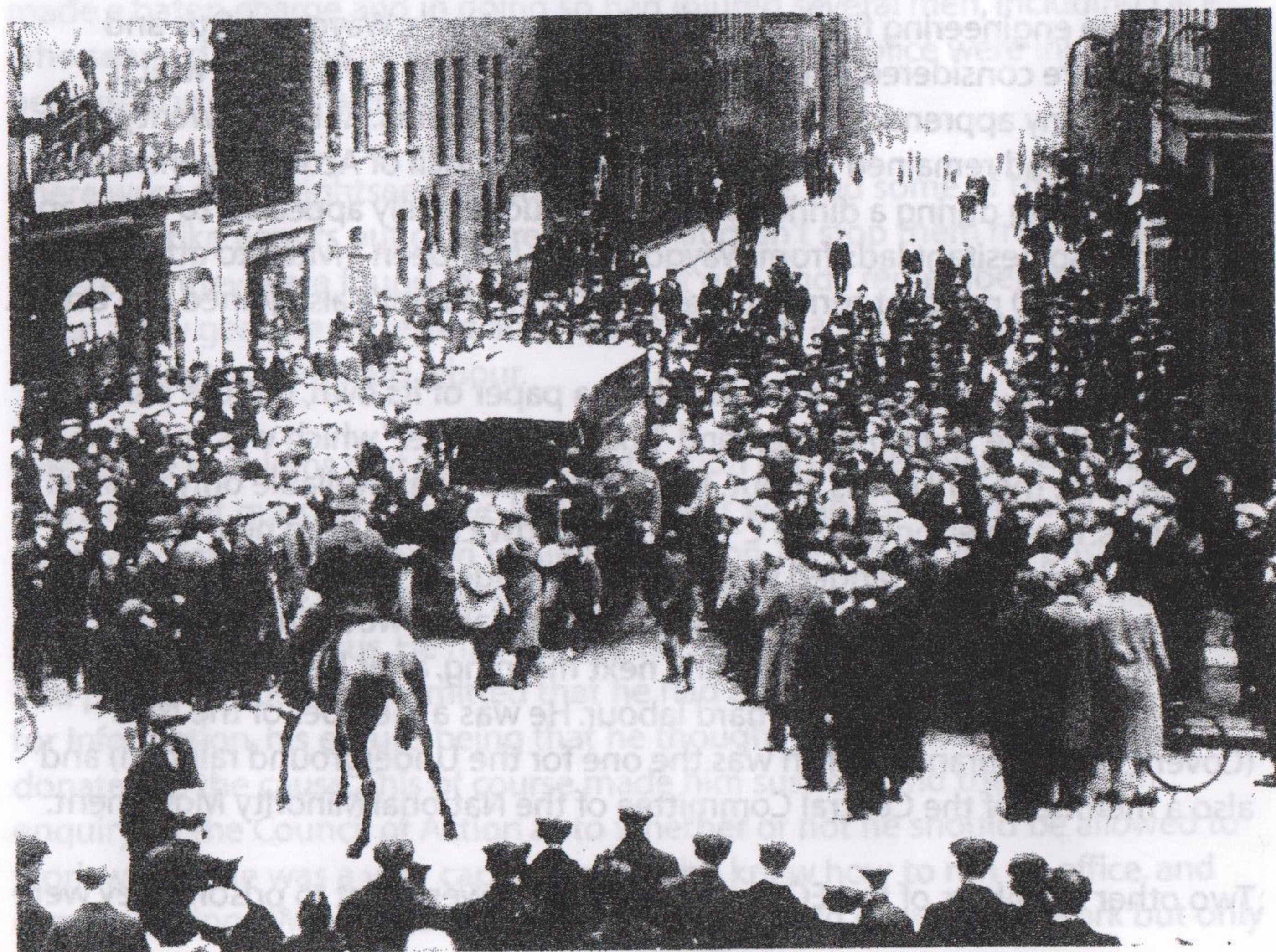
Southwark C-of-A did not, I think, produce a paper of its own, but the pickets would "push" the *"British Worker"* and *"The Young Striker"* which was trying to explain what the strike was about. The latter paper was available only in small quantities. However, one of the C-of-A, T.R. Strudwick who lived near the Elephant and Castle, arranged with me to reproduce a news-sheet, and one night we worked until midnight - he would type and I would run them off. Unfortunately, he was picked up early next morning, after being followed, and was sentenced to two months' hard labour. He was a member of the NUR (Covent Garden branch, which was the one for the Underground railmen) and also a member of the Central Committee of the National Minority Movement.

Two other members of the EC of the local C-of-A were sent to prison. They were

Walter (Wally) Southwell and Thomas Bishop, both unemployed. It was alleged that they, with a group of strikers, had pulled up garden railings and laid them across the road to stop unauthorised lorries and passenger traffic passing through, and for this they received a sentence of three months hard labour each.

There were many "posh" students in those days who had middle-class attitudes who would wear "plus-fours" (originally a golfers' attire) to show that they were engaged in scabbing etc. and also engaged in militant action against the strikers, but they would mostly get the worst of it if it came to a show-down.

Many vehicles were attacked in endeavouring to pass pickets or large numbers of strikers massed at the Elephant and Castle, a key position during the Nine Days.



nine days

BERT EDWARDS

**SOUTHWARK COUNCIL OF ACTION,
PRESIDENT - 1926**

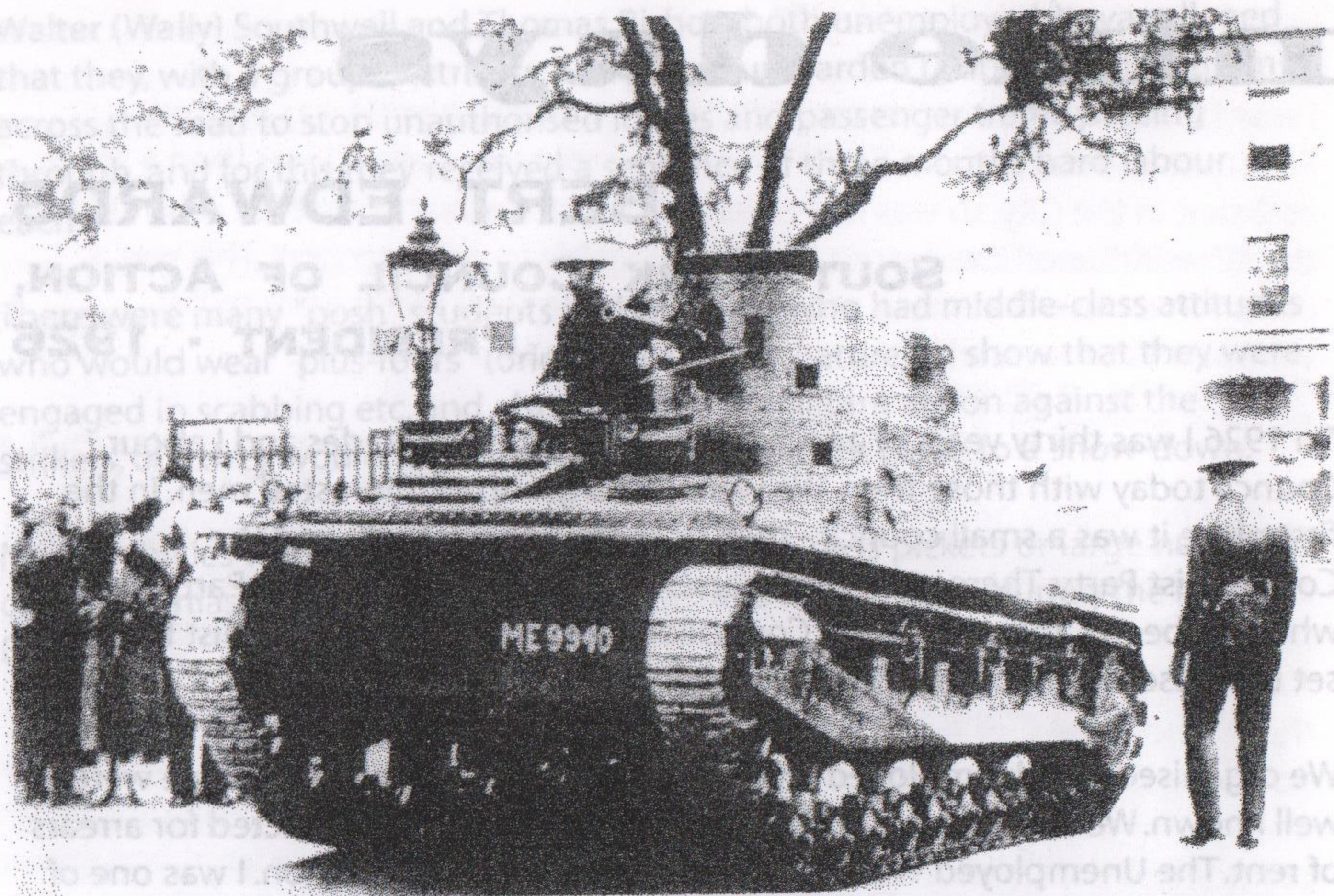
"In 1926 I was thirty years of age. You can't compare the Trades and Labour Council today with those then. We were just a group of interested men. In the first place it was a small council - men from the Labour Party and the Communist Party. There were two members of the British Socialist Party on it, who had been Labour Borough Councillors, and when the Communist Party was set up these two kept their posts.

We organised the Unemployed Workers Movement. I was active and we were well known. We were stopping evictions - people were being evicted for arrears of rent. The Unemployed Workers were a communist organisation. I was one of the founders, with Wal Hannington.

It was the only body fighting evictions. I was coming down to the Elephant and Castle one day and two women came out to me: "*We've got some trouble*". It was a dirty November morning and they took me down to where two little kids were under a table in Maywood Street, shivering. I had a chat and they told me "*This chap just down the road has evicted this family*". I knocked on the door to talk to the chap who had evicted them. No answer. I got in through a bedroom window after climbing up from the table. There was a lady in bed but I went straight on through to the top of the stairs and there was the chap and his son with big sticks. When I walked downstairs it took him by surprise - they put the family back.

We had that much control that the bailiffs would come and ask if we were defending a particular eviction - and if we were they wouldn't come. We always barricaded up the door, and they had a bucket and rope to feed the defenders. The police would come and then there would be trouble. We told the owners - you'll do so much damage to your property it won't be worth it.

During those years we would also raid factories which were doing overtime. As the Unemployed Workers Movement was communist, they had nothing to do with the Trades Council, after the exclusion of communists from the Labour Party in 1924.



Army tank on the streets, London, May 1926

BUILDING UP THE UNION MOVEMENT

After the war I went into motors. I became a member of the National Union of Vehicle Builders in 1920. Then I became associated with the Trades council as a delegate of the Trinity Ward of the Labour Party. When the prescription on communists took place I became a delegate from my TU branch. The work of the Trades Council was very insignificant. It was only a small group of interested men. The idea of the shop stewards movement was very very small. It started in Clydeside during the war. We tried to get in contact with all the branches in the area and being a Trades and Labour Council with the Labour Party. We used to work with the Labour Party on political work. We used to deal with building shop organisation. I should think there were only 10 or 15 members of the council.

If a strike came on all we could do was have speakers. The Labour Party didn't take an active part. Unfortunately the Labour Party weren't interested in building the trades union movement. If there was a strike you'd collect money and speak. The Communist Party having a hall in Browning Street, they always

used to hold strike meetings there.

The attitude leading up to the General Strike was the build-up of agitation and this was centred on the issue of the miners. We had had Black Friday in 1921 - when the NUR and the TGWU and the miners agreed on joint action and then, on a Friday in 1921. when the Government attacked the miners, the agreement did not operate. It was the attitude in the Trades Union Movement that there was a possibility of a General Strike. The right wing members of the Movement said "As far as a General Strike is concerned the masses will come out in support of anybody but themselves. You won't get a General Strike on the question of the miners."

It was around that that the Trades Council was considering what organisation was necessary, then the discussions and negotiations with the miners were coming near to a climax, at the last meeting of the Trades Council we discussed what we'd do if we were asked to organise for a strike. I had a certain amount of experience of organisation in the motor industry. We had a rough idea we'd have to set up committees. Then there was the May Day demonstration just before the General Strike was declared, when there was a lot of general discussion and support for the miners.

THE DAWN OF THE STRIKE

I was working for a motor firm in Putney, Gordon England. On the Friday before the strike the manager came down and said "We want one representative from each department to meet the manager." When we got to a meeting with Gordon England he was very reasonable. He said "I respect my workers. If I buy a machine for £1000, I see it is kept properly so it keeps its value. I'll treat my workers as a machine. I give them good wages to keep them going." We talked about keeping the firm going. On Saturday morning he came out into the factory. He called all the men together and spoke to them from the gallery. He asked them all to come to work on Monday. I asked for a right of reply, I climbed onto the staircase and spoke from there. I told them the reason for the strike and what would happen if we were defeated. I put a resolution to stand by the Trades Union Congress and it was carried. That was the attitude in other factories too. On Monday I went back. organized the pickets and gave them instructions to contact their local Trades Council.

First Monday of the strike I went to my National Union of Vehicle Builders District office in Baker Street to report and receive instructions. Then I went down to the Trades Council offices in Central Southwark Labour Party rooms at

Walworth Road. We'd arranged the different members of the council would meet there, and by that afternoon we held our first strike meeting.

On the Sunday night before, about half past ten, there was a knock on my flat door. The wife had already gone to bed. It was my brother Albert. He worked in a garage in Liverpool. He'd brought the family to Yarmouth for a holiday when the strike broke out and he didn't think he could get petrol to get back. He came straight to my place to see if I could help.

During that Monday morning I took him to Eccleston Square, the head office, contacted the transport committee and he was booked as a runner from Liverpool to London. The conditions for a TUC long-distance runner was he should have a co-driver. Albert's co-driver was his brother Bob. Bob was working with a socialist Russian in Liverpool - and the Russian had talked a lot of socialism to the boy. So he was pleased to get this job to come down with his brother.

That Bob Edwards later became General Secretary of the chemical workers union.

ORGANISING IN SOUTHWARK

At the Labour Party office in Walworth Road there are two rooms on the ground floor and we used the back one as an Executive Committee meeting place as the large one had so many people coming in with enquiries.

When I arrived on that Monday of the strike, I saw to my amazement that there was quite a crowd of people wanting advice. Nobody knew what they had to do. But it was decided we should set up sub-committees: press and propaganda; finance; a contact committee for keeping in touch with the General Council of the TUC and the London Trades Council; an enquiry and disputes committee which was difficult to work, because of the number of people coming in and out of the room asking advice and asking permission to join the strike, and requesting travel passes. We decided we would co-opt onto the executive of the Trades Council any Labour or Trades Union members we knew were interested. and by that means we extended our operating committee.

I think the most interesting was the propaganda committee. We decided this should be a functional committee. One of the people on it was Tommy Strudwick of the NUR and a member of the Communist Party. Another was a chap called Dick Beech. He was a travelling salesman and had married one of James Connelly's daughters. He had good contacts, being a travelling salesman. Straightaway he produced a small leaflet for sale. He became a distribution

centre. Also we thought the committee should contact the other action committees in London - to coordinate strike news for distribution. Dick Beech must have had a small car at the time, as he was a salesman, and he would go to markets to put up a stand. We got him registered with the TUC to get a petrol allowance.

Then there was the question of getting credit with the shops. We invited along any active men - we called them shop stewards, whether they were or not. But that gave them standing. We only had our own contacts and anyone who came forward. Anyone who was interested in the dispute - a lot of people came in like this. We had no organisation.

It was without internal or external organisation. It must have been the propaganda in the lead up, because people who had never been in a Trades Union, when the call came, marched out. The factory where I worked at Putney, with hundreds of workers, with not even 20 of them in the union, they all came out. I would say there was a similar atmosphere in other factories.

ACTS OF THE TRADES COUNCIL

It's hard to say how the Trades Council became the centre of things. The only thing you can say is that the publicity had indicated that the Trades Council would be the centre; the Daily Herald and the Communist Party had been saying that.

We had no machinery set up, we didn't have a typewriter or a duplicator. That is where Tommy Strudwick was useful. He had both. He lived in Swan Street backing onto a factory, he had small rooms, and in the front one he had all the material: typewriter, duplicator and so on, to produce the strike news. He had disguised it in a recess with a similar wall, paper pasted onto a hardback covering it up. I had to pass the house on my way to the Trades Council and would pick up the papers. The police must have followed me, as it was shortly after at one time that he was raided. They rooted around and accidentally knocked the paper cover that was disguising the duplicator. He was arrested and charged with incitement to disaffection and he received two months hard labour.

We made a rule that the Executive would meet at 9 o'clock and we'd stay in action as long as there was work to do. You didn't know when you were finishing. It is difficult to describe the atmosphere. There were groups of people involved who were industrially and politically ignorant.

For food we decided to contact the co-op shop in Walworth Road by the Westmoreland Arms. I went to the Poor Law officers, but they weren't helpful. They said they were under instructions.

There were a lot of people who came in with enquiries to the Council, people working in the distribution of food, hospitals, electricians who had been told to stay in work, and wanting to come out. They would come to ask if they should come out on strike, and workers with no organisation too. You can't appreciate it now. This is the part that frightened the top leadership. They said you'd never get the working class to come out in support. But as Lloyd George said, *"This is not an ordinary strike, this is the whole of the workers against the Government and therefore it is treason."*

Women came into the Trades Council - they wanted to know about food and the question of rent. We set up a special committee but there were very few distress cases brought to us. I had little to do with this. My job was coordinating work outside. We had no difficulty - I don't remember having to get any grants from the co-op. The arrangement was they would give out tickets which could be settled when things were over.

On the third day when I arrived at the office at 9 o'clock the caretaker told me that a new man had called at the office and gone through the letters. After further investigation I found it was W.F. Watson. He was a member of the district committee of the Amalgamated Union of Engineers, a man with great standing in that Union and later in the Trades Union movement. I knew Watson, having met him in my activities as a shop steward - and had discussed this question with him: W.F. Watson had received £100 on May 18 1918 from a Mr. B. On July 18th he received £3 a week from the Special Branch for providing reports. He wanted to be co-opted onto the executive committee. When I explained who he was we stopped it.

On Wednesday, Tommy Strudwick brought the first copy of the strike news.

On the fourth day Thursday May 6th the executive committee met again in the small room, although the doorkeeper was instructed not to let anyone in. We discussed:

1) Finance 2) The British Gazette and British Worker. We had copies of both and Brother Tommy Strudwick suggested putting sections from each production in the next issue of the strike news for the following day. 3) We had no direct contact with the London Trades Council. 4) On the press, Dick Beech reported contacting a number of Councils of Action for collecting information. 5) There were no hardship cases reported. 6) There was a discussion about how to

control the crowds at the Elephant and Castle.

The room was very busy all day. The police arrived asked for the officials and they were informed that they were not on the premises. On the Council of Action we had men from the T&GWU, the NUR and the engineers and all the unions who had active men - some of them would come once or twice, then they wouldn't come again. The individual unions organised the pickets and if we got anyone prepared to help, they were allocated by a sub-committee. We tried to have a rota.

CROWDS AT THE ELEPHANT AND CASTLE

It's difficult to realise the crowd of people there was at the Elephant and Castle. It was almost impossible to organise. They would come and go, there'd be a fight. The group would break up and they'd collect again. The police came down to the Trades Council office - they wanted to know if we were responsible for organising the disputes there. I told them it was all spontaneous. We had no control over the crowd. But the trouble was caused by the police action beating



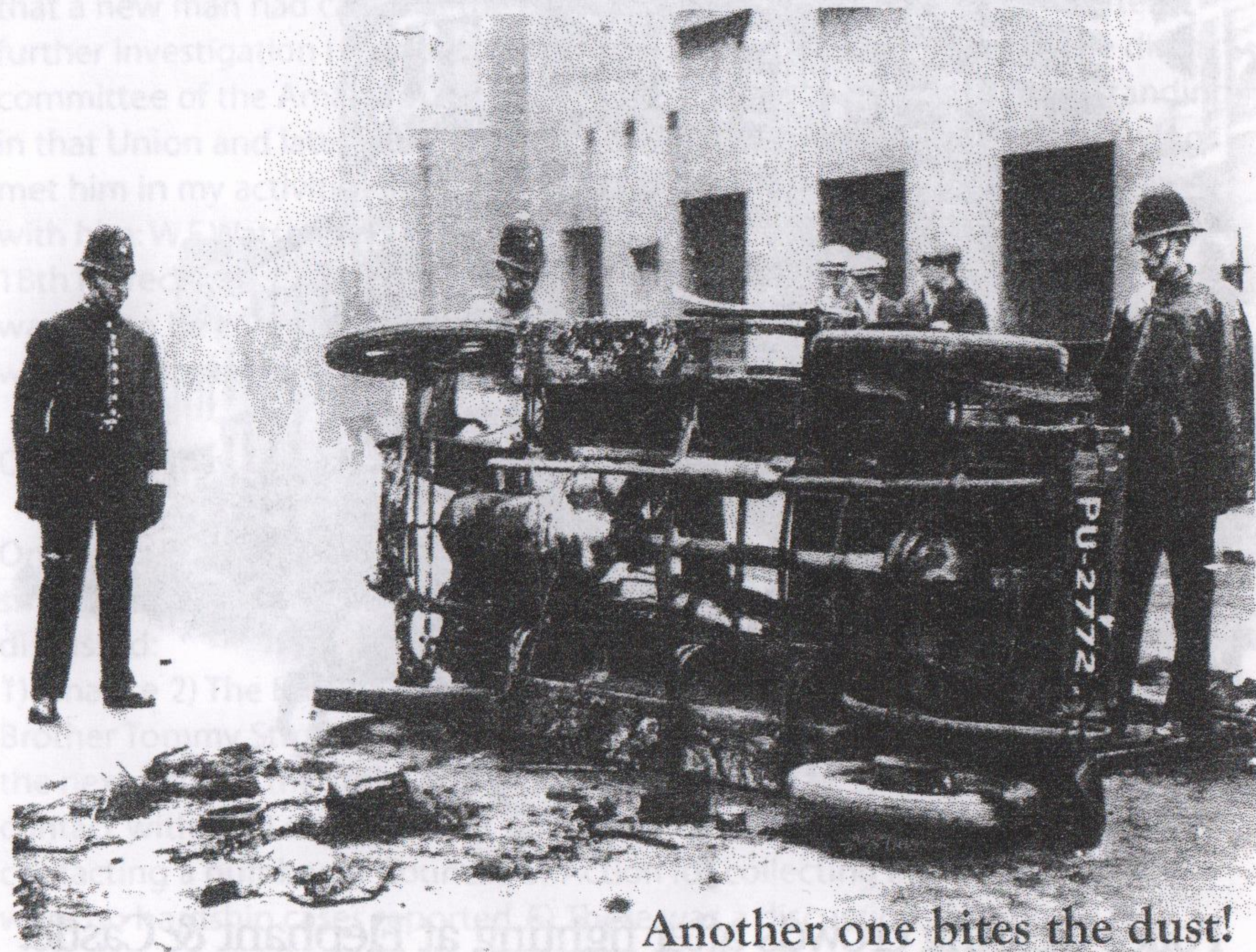
Police clearing crowds after fighting at Elephant & Castle.

them up. In the first place, the buses came through without guards. The strikers came to talk to the drivers and the police started beating them up. A fight started on a small scale. The atmosphere became more tense, as instead of one man going to the bus a dozen or a crowd would [go up]. Then the trams wouldn't be able to move, and the police waded in to move the crowd. Then the buses got guards and barbed wire over the engines to stop people breaking them up. But buses were turned over.

With the layout of the Elephant and Castle with the pub in the middle and at least six roads running in: New Kent Road, St. George's, London Road, Newington Causeway, Walworth Road and Newington Butts, it was a central focus. That's why things centred on the Elephant, because of the many bus routes that came through. The police wanted to make it into a battleground.

You could just say there was a crowd; men on strike might have their families with them, people would go to the crowd just to see if there were any fights. We couldn't do anything, you couldn't control a crowd unless you had a big organisation, and we hadn't.

A lot of dock workers lived in Southwark. We had no direct contact with the docks - dockers were organised in Bermondsey. But we got reports. There was



Another one bites the dust!

no delegation between them. In some areas they had combined committees. A special brigade of the Army took goods from the docks to the distribution point in Hyde Park - they went via Tooley Street. In some areas Councils of Action were blocking the roads. Travel permits were issued by the TUC, although we had the power to do it. The stopping of lorries would be merely spontaneous action.

STRIKE NEWS

At the executive meeting of the Council of Action on Friday, the fifth day of the strike, there was a general review of conditions and organisation. We arranged to obtain the Sunday Worker if it was published. A deputation of workers from a food depot in Stamford Street was received they wanted to know if they should come out. We had 600 copies of the strike news printed, and the police came round wanting information about its production.

My brother that was a TUC driver gave a report about his experiences on the road between Liverpool and London. He said London was very heated, everywhere else seemed to be quieter. he had a TUC permit on the car, he was met cheering crowds wherever he went. We arranged with the Communist Party to hold a Meeting at their usual street meeting place, on the corner of East Street and Flint Street.

When I got home that evening to Beckett House, someone knocked on the door. It was one of the strikers. He said the Tory Party were having a meeting on the estate to get control of the strikers. The speaker was having an effect on the crowd. I picked up a copy of the Royal Commission Report on the Mines. When I got to the meeting, I attracted the speaker's attention. I opened the report and demanded the speaker to read this section. As I handed the report to him, I withdrew my finger from the page. The speaker had a closed copy and couldn't start reading. I immediately shouted "*the speaker closed the report because he didn't want to read that section.*" That was the quickest about-turn to a meeting I've ever seen. It caused him to close the meeting altogether and I took over.

We kept in contact with the London Trades Council. We were never able to get to a meeting. What we did was kept a runner to get to them and a runner to get to Eccleston Square to bring us the *British Worker*. The strike bulletin was of local news and anecdotes given to Dick Beech who was doing all the collecting of information. Some of the members had radio receivers and reported to us. It was radio that gave us the statement by Lloyd George. I didn't have a receiver - the people who had them had to be real masters. We issued three editions of our bulletin before Tommy Strudwick was arrested. On the second day we planned it. On the third day, the first issue came round and then there was a

lapse of a day. Then there was another one, followed by a lapse of a day, and then the third.

On Sunday I decided to get copies of the *Sunday Worker*. It was printed in a little print works in Swinton Street. I peddled up on my bike and got as many *Sunday Workers* as I could carry I came down Walworth Road. Sunday was market day in East Lane. I tried to get through the crowd. As soon as they saw a paper they were rushing me. I only got 200 yards down the street. I went back to the works and got another bundle. This time I came down Darwin Street to East Street. On the corner of East Street, the Communist Party always had a meeting. They were waiting for these papers. The *Sunday Worker* was a left wing paper - they must have printed with arrangements with the print union.

THE MOOD OF THE PEOPLE WAS SOLID

Going to the Elephant and Castle became a habit. You could get information there you couldn't get anywhere else, because everyone was talking. We had no lawyer to defend people arrested in these fights. In cases like that you handed it over to the legal section of the TUC.

The mood of the people was solid. There were little arguments, but on the whole people were stronger after a week, because on the first day it was something new. More people came out - there must have been a gradual increase from the Monday. This was the effect of discussion between neighbours and workers. What would you do if you came home and your wife said: "George, they're calling you a blackleg."

The *British Worker* published a reply to the broadcast by Lloyd George.

Then, on Monday May 10th, at the office, the executive committee received reports from the committees. The Area was still solid. Later in the day, [after] the report that the Archbishop of Canterbury had made a statement we were concerned as to how the workers would take it. (See Note 3) A meeting at the Communist Party hall in Browning Street (used throughout the General Strike for us to test the feeling of the strikers) showed that all was well.

On Tuesday May 11th there was depression in the committee at the news of the judgment against the National Sailors and Firemen's Union, and the report from the London Trades Council that the General Council of the TUC would meet the Government at 10 Downing Street.

Wednesday, May 12th. Confusion at the Council of Action's office. Angry discussion between the committee men. "We have been sold down the river... Is this the 'line of J.H. Thomas, Henderson and Clynes?'" "Will we get our jobs on Monday?" "Will the shop stewards and the shop floor leaders be victimised?"

I myself was victimised, and did not get a job for six months. I was "blackbooked" in the industry because of my trade union activities in setting up shop committees, even after I had finished as London Organiser in 1961.

THIS WAS THE END OF THE FIRST UNITED STRIKE OF THE BRITISH WORKERS. IT PROVED TO THE INDUSTRIAL AND POLITICAL LEADERS THAT THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT CANNOT BE DESTROYED BY THE BRUTE FORCE OF THE EMPLOYERS.

NOTES

1) Strikers were initially called out on strike in waves, so that not all workers were out straight away. Large numbers of people wanted to join the strike but were ordered by the TUC & the unions to continue working, the idea being they would join later if the strike dragged on - the TUC General Council of course hoped (and made sure) this would never happen.

2) W F Watson: A leading activist in the militant shop stewards movement during World War 1. In 1918-19 he was at the heart of the syndicalist London Workers Committee, an attempt to co-ordinate workers committees in different industries, along the lines of the Clyde Workers Committee. He wrote a column in Sylvia Pankhurst's *Workers Dreadnought*, which served as an unofficial organ for the Workers Committees 1917-19. Watson was jailed for sedition (for a speech encouraging soldiers not to fight against the Russian Revolution) after the LWC office was raided in March 1919, but on his release it emerged he had given information to Special Branch in return for cash - though he claimed he'd fed them useles info and used the money for righteous causes. The arguments this scandal caused led to the LWC's collapse. Watson had dropped out of politics shortly after. He was widely distrusted but must have been a capable organiser, & not entirely suspect, if as Stanley Hutchins says he was allowed to carry on working in the Council of Action's office. More information on Watson and the London Workers Committee, see Barbara Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst*.

3) Archbishop's Speech: On May 7, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a statement suggesting the dispute should be settled by negotiation, "in a spirit of co-operation and fellowship" - effectively a return to the pre-Strike status quo, ie end the Strike, continue the mining subsidy, and the mine-owners to withdraw their wage-cuts. In the event the Government ignored the speech, feeling they had the upper hand anyway (and just to make sure the speech had no influence they leaned heavily on the BBC not to publicise it).



A soldier guards a bus on its round during the General Strike.

Published by
Past Tense Publications,
producing glimpses of London Radical History
(among other stuff!)
c/o 56 a Info Shop,
56 Crampton St, London, SE17.

Past Tense is a publishing project associated with the South London Radical History Group, a self-organised, anti-hierarchical open forum. We organise talks and discussions, invite guest speakers and take occasional trips to other parts of the metropolis. History is a living stream, not a closed book, and involves the struggles and issues of our own lives, as much as the movements and events of the past. Our discussions have ranged from the past to the present and the future; we link our experiences with others across the years.

We are constantly looking for speakers to come and talk at our meetings, so if you have an interesting subject you can talk about, or a historical walk you can lead, get in touch. We're based in South London, but not stuck there!

If you want to join the mailing list, want more info, or to come and speak, get in touch.

To contact South London Radical History Group
email: mudlark@macunlimited.net