

NEWARK AND THE GENERAL STRIKE

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THE ORIGINS OF THE STRIKE

After the First World War the mining industry was in a state of crisis and in this it symbolised the British economy in general. British industry never recovered from the disastrous effects of the war and the loss of its monopoly position in the world and its traditional markets. Furthermore, it was in a weak position to attempt a recovery, for two reasons. First, British capital had been exported in search of higher profits rather than be used in modernising industry and increasing productivity at home. Second, in the interests of Britain's banking community, Britain returned to the Gold Standard, revaluing sterling upwards by 10%, thereby making British exports 10% dearer.

To retain their level of profits British mineowners therefore wished to reduce costs by 10%. Mining was already badly paid, and real wages had fallen from 1920; and the mineowners announced that the current agreement with the union would terminate at the end of July, 1925 and that the new agreement would entail wage cuts of from 10 - 25%. The miners rejected this and were supported by the TUC, at least partly because they realised wage cuts would follow in other industries, for as Prime Minister Baldwin had said, "All the workers of this country have got to take reductions in wages to help put industry on its feet."

Although it had not wanted to do so the Conservative Government was forced to concede a subsidy to maintain wage levels for nine months, in the face of united opposition by the TUC. It appointed the Samuel Commission to review the coal industry to report at the end of the nine months. This move was only aimed at gaining time, for the Government began frantic preparations for the expected conflict at the end of the nine months. However, Baldwin was concerned that the conflict be fought on the issue of illegal confrontation with the legitimate government rather than it be seen as Government and mineowners versus the miners. The preparations included propaganda work but also measures for lessening the effectiveness of the strike. The Home Secretary was also encouraging the unofficial Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, which was effectively a strike-breaking body.

While this Government activity was going on, the TUC, partly because its leadership had no real desire to fight, was doing nothing. When the Samuel Commission reported, it recommended the industry be reorganised under private ownership and, more important, that there be immediate wage cuts. The mineowners demanded longer working hours too and the miners repudiated both sets of proposals.

At the end of April, 1926, when the subsidy expired, attempts to settle the dispute were nominally in the hands of the Government and the TUC General Council. However, at the same time, the Government was making ready for the expected confrontation, by passing the Emergency Powers Act, by appointing its Civil Commissioners for the administration of the country and by moving troops into 'sensitive' areas, suggesting that the Government was not interested in a negotiated settlement at all. The miners, by this time, had received the support of a conference of TU executives in their fight against the wage cuts, and the General Council was authorised to give full backing to the miners.

Negotiations between the TUC and the Government eventually broke down on 3rd May, ostensibly over a refusal by printers on the 'Daily Mail' to set the paper, because of the presence of an advertisement for volunteers, the Government using this as an excuse. This incident may even have been engineered by the Government itself. The General Council therefore, apparently somewhat reluctantly, called out a first line of workers in transport, building, gas, electricity, heavy industry and printing. A 'second line' was held in reserve. The miners, it should be noted, had already been locked out by the mineowners on 1st May.

NEWARK IN 1926

In 1926 Newark, with a population of around 17,000, was rather more of a market town than it is in 1976, with more industry based on the produce of the rural area surrounding the town than is now the case. However, since the coming of the railways to Newark in the mid-nineteenth century, heavier industry had developed in the town. Nicholson's Trent Ironworks had been established in 1854; Wakes & Lamb - the engineers - was formed in 1860; Abbotts and Farrars Boilers had begun in 1874 and 1887 respectively and then, in 1900 both Ransomes and Simpsons had set up their engineering works in the town. Newark was not, as it is still not, a large industrial town, but it had not been dependant only on the more traditional industries, such as malting, milling and brewing for some time. *

As a market town however, Newark remained somewhat isolated, as regards its connections with industrial areas. There was probably rather less communication with the recently developed mining industry to the north of the town on the part of the working people of Newark, and probably rather more suspicion and wariness of miners, judging by some of the rumours circulating in Newark during the period of the strike. Trade unionism existed in the town - in 1927 there were 670 members of branches affiliated to the Newark Trades & Labour Council, and in 1926 before the strike there may well have been more. Certainly, branches of the Boilermakers, the Railwaymen, the Engineers, the Printers and of General Workers were established and some of them were to play an important part in the strike in Newark.

There is no evidence, however, of a great deal of militancy amongst the Labour Movement in the town, although a branch of the ILP had existed from early in the century. The Newark Parliamentary Constituency returned the Conservative Marquis of Titchfield as its member to the House of Commons and the Corporation was composed almost entirely of local business men, merchants and industrialists. As a measure of the lack of political consciousness in Newark, one could cite the case of a Borough Council by-election in May 1926 in the North Ward of the town, where a Mr. Oliver Essame (Ind.) was returned unopposed, having been nominated by Conservative, Liberal and Labour. One could also cite the fact that, on the establishment of a WEA branch in Newark in January 1926, it was stressed that the class - in 'Economics' - was non-political.

Newark, then, in 1926, was emphatically not a town with a history of any great political activity as far as its working classes were concerned. On the contrary, support for the Labour Movement was spasmodic and fragmentary and concern at union meetings was often of a parochial character. Newark working people generally seemed to accept the traditional rule of the middle classes in the town and were apparently either cowed by the threat of unemployment or, as adherents of the notion of 'Labour aristocracy', defended the 'status quo'. Yet, for nine days in May 1926 large numbers of working people in Newark were prepared to suffer considerable hardship and threatened loss of employment for the cause of other victimised working people, the mineworkers. What is surprising here is that, given the previous lack of working-class action in Newark, the response to the TUC call should have been so relatively great.

* In order to get an idea of the size of the town imagine Newark without its York Drive, Wolsey Road, Hawtonville and Devon estates, but with far more in the way of yards, courts and streets, such as are found around King Street and Parliament Street, in the centre of the town.

THE ORGANISATION OF LOCAL WORKERS

Some trade unions - Boilermakers, Engineers, Railwaymen, Printers and General Workers among them - were established in Newark and there was also a Trades & Labour Council. The call to strike from the TUC did not affect all of them, but brought out those workers engaged in the transport, fuel, building and newspaper industries. In Newark this affected really only the railwaymen and the printers. Of the two groups the railwaymen appear to have been more effectively organised for two reasons. First, the railwaymen remained 'out' for the duration of the strike - the printers did not - and second, the two rail unions involved in Newark, the National Union of Railwaymen and the Railway Clerks Association, issued three strike bulletins, in an attempt to present an alternative picture of affairs from that appearing in the 'British Gazette' and the 'Newark Advertiser'. It appears that had the strike continued the Amalgamated Engineering Union would have joined them in the production of further issues of the bulletin.

There were, it must be admitted, workers in Newark who did not respond to the TUC call to strike, notably in the building and gas industries. Bricklayers and joiners refused to join the strike and the Corporation Gas Department was reported as stating that it had sufficient coal for two or three months' supply of gas, and that "no trouble with the labour has arisen up to now". It must be stressed however, that the main industries in Newark were not those affected by the first phase of the strike and that therefore where unions in industries like printing and building were disunited it might well look as though the railwaymen were in "splendid isolation", to use the "Advertiser's" phrase.

The Trades and Labour Council met every night during the strike in order to receive bulletins from the TUC and to pass information to the workers in Newark. Unlike many other places Newark did not have a permanent Strike Committee established by its Trades Council and no arrangements were made with the local Co-operative Society to provide the families of strikers with credit facilities for food and other purchases, as happened in some areas. However, the Trades Council did send deputations to Nottingham, thereby attempting to establish communication with strikers in other areas so that events in Newark could follow the pattern of events elsewhere as far as action to strengthen the effectiveness of the strike was concerned.

The response in Newark as regards organising the strike seems not to have been particularly great, and there appears to have been a lack of co-ordination. The printers were allowed to return to work and one feels that the effectiveness of the railwaymen's action was because of the strength of their unions, rather than because of any strategy developed in Newark. The position of a union branch as a member of a trades council was much looser than the position of a branch within a given national union. Thus, the action of branches in areas lacking the tradition of working-class solidarity, such as Newark, would tend therefore to be independent of one another.

LOCAL EFFECTS OF THE STRIKE

According to the "Newark Advertiser" of 5th May, Newark "presented normal scenes yesterday except the stations were deserted and that small knots of 'sympathy strikers' composed of railwaymen and printers, congregated at various places". The exceptions mentioned here would seem fairly considerable, particularly for a town like Newark, not renowned for its demonstrations of working-class solidarity, but even allowing for the bias there may be in the expression, it must be admitted that the first few days of the General Strike in Newark did not witness a complete dislocation of the town's economic life. Work in industries not directly involved in the strike did continue - what else would it do?

However, in the longer term things looked less promising for a number of local firms. Ransomes admitted that they might have to close some departments

after three weeks - and this on the day after the strike had begun! Worthington-Simpsons reported no trouble at present but that it was impossible to say how long that would last. Cafferatas were unable to take delivery of or despatch goods because of the paralysis of the railways and predicted being able to continue for only ten days. On the other hand, Farrars, Nicholsons, Ransome & Marles, Abbotts and Ruston & Hornsby all insisted there was little or no effect on their factories and business was as usual. A week later, however, Cafferatas were anticipating some shutting down, Nicholsons had introduced a shorter working week and Mumby's admitted a falling off of orders. Even the "Advertiser" was prepared to make the admission that "in consequence of lack of material and the difficulties of transport many local firms might probably have had to close part of their works". "This," it goes on, "was averted by the sudden collapse of the strike."

In two spheres of its economic life, - its railways and its newspapers, Newark was keenly affected by the strike. The "Advertiser" reported on the 5th May that "practically the whole staff have ceased work at the LNER station," and that the LMS station "presented a deserted appearance yesterday" as "most clerks, all platform staff, signalmen, drivers and firemen were absent from duty". The first striking feature of these reports is the scale of the response of the railwaymen, but it is also interesting to note the range of railway employees in Newark, far greater than is now the case, particularly for freight, was much more important in 1926 than it is now and so reports in the "Advertiser" about individual trains reaching, leaving or passing through Newark represent a much smaller proportion of the railway timetables than they would do now.

The effective closure of railway services was therefore a considerable threat to Newark's economic life, particularly the longer the strike continued. The 'Advertiser', had to admit in reviewing the events of the strike in Newark on May 19th. after it had been called off by the TUC, that "The trouble chiefly centred in the matter of transport, caused by the sudden stoppage of the railways". The supply of goods and raw materials was then much more susceptible to a railway strike, as were postal services, which had to be substantially cut in Newark. There were, for example, no daytime mail collections made, and certain varieties of post were subject to heavy delays. An appeal was made to the public to restrict its use of postal services. There was only one general delivery too and this at a time when postal collection and delivery services were far more frequent than they now are.

The response of the railwaymen was, then, as near as one can say, complete; that of the builders and gasworkers, according to the 'Advertiser', nil. Between the two extremes was the reaction of the printers of the two newspapers, the 'Advertiser' and the 'Herald'. According to the editorial of the 'Herald' on the 15th May, "the majority of printers in the town obeyed the illegal call, and on Tuesday absented themselves from work". On the Monday of the following week, the 10th, the 'Herald's' printers returned to work. The effect of their action was that there was no 'Newark Herald' published on the 8th May.

The 'majority of printers' referred to in the 'Herald's' editorial did not include the printers employed by the 'Advertiser'. On the morning of the 4th May a crowd of printers had assembled outside the 'Advertiser' offices, presumably as pickets to persuade the 'Advertiser' printers to join the strike. A meeting was held on Chantry Park, when the 'Advertiser' printers had arrived, but they refused to join the strike and the paper appeared the following day, the 5th, though it was a smaller edition in both length and size. Why it was smaller is uncertain. Perhaps the time lost at the meeting prevented the setting-up of all the type, perhaps some of the 'Advertiser' printers struck or perhaps the management of the 'Advertiser' decided to conserve its stocks of newsprint, in case of a prolonged strike.

The matter did not end here, however, for having remained at work to see the 'Advertiser' printed, the men then 'struck' and reported for strike pay, which not unnaturally they were refused. The 'Advertiser' itself then attempted to utilise

the incident to illustrate the lack of justice in the striking printers' attitude. There also appeared in the 'Advertiser' of the 12th May an apologia by one of the 'Advertiser' printers, a certain Robert Stansall, attempting to justify their action.

The strike affected Newark in other ways apart from the industrial action, however, but nevertheless causing inconvenience, though in some cases illustrating a more light-hearted response. The May Fair Show, due to be held on Sconce Hills on the 14th & 15th May was abandoned at a meeting of the organisers on the 4th May. The Newark Working Men's Club transferred the tickets sold for the "Derby Prize Distribution" to the "Stewards Cup Prize Distribution" on July 27th. Traffic congestion increased on the roads. But at the same time as these inconveniences, of different levels of seriousness, were being experienced, an item in the Local and District News section of the 'Advertiser' ran as follows, "The Strike - you cannot strike anything better than one of the Palace Cafe's special luncheons at 2/- or special suppers at 1/6. Try them!" Similarly the 'Advertiser's' editorial of the 5th May, although it contained two items on the strike had others on 'The Betting Tax', 'Welcoming the Bishop', 'The Newark Cripples' (a local charity) and two on the behaviour of flies.

In general the composition of the newspapers was largely as it normally was, minus a few advertisements and it appears that the effects of the strike in Newark never grew above the inconvenience level for most of the general Newark public. What would have been the effect had the strike continued and had the railwaymen been joined by other workers in the second line can only be surmised, but there are certainly signs that industry in Newark would have begun to experience considerable dislocation, not only because of the cumulative effect of the railway closure, but also because of the extension of the strike to other industries.

LOCAL ANTI-STRIKE MEASURES

We have already seen, in the section on the general background to the strike, that the government did not waste the nine month breathing space that they had won for themselves by granting a temporary subsidy to the mining industry. Plans were made on both an official and unofficial level to ensure that the desired confrontation with the trade union movement would result in the latter's defeat.

On the official level, the apparatus, first set up in 1919 after the railway strike, of establishing a system of local administration under the direct control of central government was activated. The country was divided into ten divisions, each to be controlled by a Civil Commissioner with a staff of senior civil servants seconded from Whitehall; one of the most important members of this staff would be the Divisional Food Officer who would have full powers under the Emergency Powers Act. Newark found itself in the North Midlands Division under the Civil Commissioner Captain H Douglas-King who operated from 28a Regent Street, Nottingham. Below Divisional level there were eight districts each with its own Volunteer Services Committee, and transport, coal, postage, haulage, food and finance officers. Newark supplied its Deputy Mayor, H.E. Branston, the prominent malster, as chairman for the district USC. It is interesting to note that on April 23rd a secret meeting in Nottingham of USC chairmen, presided over by the Civil Commissioner, revealed that detailed plans had been made to deal with the coming conflict, even down to the wording of posters - and this was over a week before the General Council of the TUC called the strike.

But the government could not, all this while, be openly preparing for battle, and so it was that the Home Secretary stimulated the formation of the unofficial 'Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies' in the autumn of 1925. This body drew up lists of volunteers prepared to help break the strike and also secretly trained lorry drivers and telegraph operators. But the OMS was apparently slow to get off the ground in Newark. Even in January there is mention

in the press of meetings of the Southwell branch and in March it was announced that a county committee to cover all Nottinghamshire except Nottingham and Newark had been set up and 590 members were already registered, a large proportion of these being included in the first four or executive classes. But as the 'Newark Herald' said as late as April 24th, "Newark is one of the few towns unorganised under the OMS." That the local response was less than enthusiastic is indicated by the fact that three public meetings at the Town Hall were needed before a local branch could be formally set up. At each one Captain Martin outlined the supposedly non-political aims of the OMS but finally on April 31st with the Mayor in the chair the branch was formed. It was sad that after all this effort the local branch existed for only three days, for on May 3rd after the proclamation by the government of emergency powers the Notts. OMS dissolved itself and handed over all its personnel to the government. Now the Volunteer Services Committees could reveal themselves and, under the control of the Civil Commissioner, recruit and direct volunteers. In the North Midlands Division as a whole 20,000 recruits were enrolled but only 700 were actually used in any way; a similar pattern emerged in Newark where about 1000 signed on but very few were called upon save some motorcycle messengers and special constables. In the light of the chaos caused by these amateurs 'playing at workers' rationally, this is hardly surprising. The Civil Commissioner and his committees, including the USC were mainly concerned at this stage with maintaining supplies of food and coal; in fact it seems that Newark didn't suffer from shortages of either at this stage.

Again partly under the auspices of the USC, Special Constables were recruited in astonishing numbers, over 700 from Ransome & Marles; but to what purpose is not clear, although there were rumours of strikes from Mansfield and/or Nottingham marching on Newark. In any event very few Specials were actually called out. Troops were seen passing through Newark by train but it was hastily denied that they were heading for the Notts. coalfields.

The official structure of the Civil Commissioner and his staff and the Volunteer Services Committee were never seriously tested in Newark; whether they would have stood the test if the strike had continued and the second line of the engineers had come out, is extremely doubtful.

LOCAL PRESS COVERAGE

The calling-out of the printers had the effect of preventing the issue of the national daily newspapers. Assuming the experience of the 'Herald' was not unique it also caused a stoppage amongst some provincial newspapers, but many, it seems, like the 'Advertiser', continued to appear, including the 'Stamford Mercury', the 'Worksop Guardian', the 'Lincolnshire Standard', the 'Grantham Journal' and the 'Retford Times'. Thus, although the Government had control of BBC radio broadcasts and although it issued an official paper, the 'British Gazette', local newspapers had an important role in disseminating information about the strike particularly in areas where the 'British Gazette' - the Government's own newspaper - was not distributed, as appears to have been the case in Newark. It is impossible to estimate the exact effect of newspapers on public opinion, but there can be little doubt that the pro-Government stance of both Newark's papers had considerable influence on the way in which the strike was viewed by the people of Newark. This must have been especially true where there was little in the way of alternative interpretation of events. In Newark there is no record of the 'British Worker', the TUC's paper, reaching the town, but the Newark railway unions issued three strike bulletins. Copies of the Nottingham Joint Advisory Dispute Committee daily bulletin may have reached Newark, as may copies of the Lincoln local Labour weekly paper. However, it seems most likely that the privately owned Newark local papers, and the 'Advertiser' especially on the non-appearance of the 'Herald' on the 8th May, enjoyed a virtual monopoly.

Not surprisingly, both Newark's papers adopted a very strong pro-Government, anti-strike stance. The 'Herald' in its editorial of the 5th May, thought that the collapse of the strike nationally "should teach a lesson to the sober-

mindful Trades Unionists not to be hoodwinked and bludgeoned in the future into precipitous action which on calm reflection is found to be unconstitutional and illegal." The 'Advertiser' was far more extreme in its condemnation of the strike. Dozens of articles appeared in its pages, lifted verbatim from the 'British Gazette', and it was quite prepared to use all the innuendo and smearing of miners' leaders, and suggestions of subservience to Moscow, with which we, of a later generation, have become all too familiar. Thus, according to the 'Advertiser', the general strike was "unpatriotic and ill-conceived", and the paper urged all lovers of their country and their fellows to stand by the Government. In its reporting of the strike the 'Advertiser' seems to have done its best to represent the effects in Newark as minimal and to exaggerate the efficiency of the volunteer and Government organisations. However, there is no reason to doubt that feeling in Newark did not run high, for one feels that had there been incidents the 'Advertiser' in particular would have attempted to make political capital out of them.

It is only after the strike was over that one begins to see a greater divergence in attitude shown by the two papers. The 'Advertiser' remained strident in its condemnation of the strike - its editorial of June 2nd was still talking of "Pinovieff's strike", suggesting that the English working class had been "duped into strike by Russians". The 'Herald', on the other hand, began to express sympathy for the miners and on the 26th June its editorial criticised the Government on its attitude to the coal strike.

During the strike and in the days immediately following it, however, the Newark papers made little attempt to present the economic issues leading up to the strike. The emphasis in their articles was overwhelmingly concentrated on the 'constitutional issue of a threat to the legitimate elected Government by the Trade Union Movement inspired, according to them, by political extremists - "Communists and Leninites" as the 'Advertiser' put it. Much was made of the rule of law and the ideas of "laissez-faire" capitalism were so unchallengeable that, as far as the 'Advertiser' was concerned, the coal industry must become profitable or go to the wall. In all this the papers represented the prevailing attitudes of the ruling class, united on fundamental issues - defending the economy and middle-class political supremacy - but able to express differences of opinion in times of less danger - favouring either Conservative or Liberal policies. In Newark, as in the country at large, it is astonishing that in the face of the one-sided presentation of the nature of events by the press, that the workers involved in the strike had sufficient resolve to maintain their action.

AFTERMATH

The 'Newark Advertiser' claimed that the calling off of the General Strike was "received with great thankfulness" - crowds clustered around to hear confirmation of the good news. The Palace apparently hung out flags. This should not surprise us for it was the case in most areas that the initial reaction was one of celebration - supporters of both factions were confident that the ending of the strike meant that their side had emerged victorious. The mood of disbelief, disillusionment and demoralisation that set in amongst trade unionists when details of their leaders' surrender were known must also have been felt in Newark. But that this bitterness merged with a desire to resist is shown by the fact that on the day after the strike ended there were 100,000 more out on strike than there had been the previous day. The Nottingham papers on May 14th reported that the Transport and General Workers Union had instructed its members locally to stay out and that the railway strike was continuing with pickets still on duty. But at Grantham the 1000 workers at Ruston & Hornby's out on strike, returned to work on the 13th.

The return to work was not, in many cases, that straightforward. Employers took the opportunity to attempt to smash trade unionism; there was widespread victimisation with activists being refused re-employment and jobs being conditional on leaving the union. Nowhere was this victimisation more

harshly imposed than by the railway companies, and the 'Newark Herald' of May 15th quoted the ominous statement that men were to return to work on the railways as there was work for them.

Those on the government and employers' side were openly jubilant but varied in the degree to which they wished to press home their advantage. The dominant mood amongst them, in Newark at least, was one of self-satisfaction and mutual congratulation. Thus at the Town Council meeting of May 31st a vote of thanks to Alderman Branston for the way in which he had carried out the organisation to provide essential services during the General Strike was proposed by Alderman Patrick (himself a striker, interestingly enough) and carried unanimously. Press comment in the aftermath again combined self-satisfaction and menace. Thus the 'Advertiser' editorialised, "Once more loyal and patriotic Newark was ready for any emergency. Happily, there was good temper and an absence of provocation preserved so that the need of supplementing the ordinary police force did not arise."

But while the General Strike was over, the mining dispute continued. The miners felt betrayed by the TUC General Council, refused to return to work and continued the fight for seven months until starved into submission in November. This had twin effects on Newark. Miners from the Notts. coalfield were obviously involved, and sympathy for them must have still been running high in the town. In June collections were held for the miners' wives and children distress fund at Worthington-Simpsons, the Market Place and local churches. That the miners needed financial support is shown both by their appeals to the local Boards of Guardians for the raising of the level of poor relief and by the revelation that the Notts miners had only enough for half a weeks strike pay. Significantly the Notts miners were the first to return to work; indeed by early June work had resumed at both the Blidworth and the new pit at Ollerton. But there were shortages of coal in Newark; on May 29th a public notice by the Borough ordered that there could be no coal for household purposes unless a permit was obtained and even then limited to under 28lb a week.

It can be assumed that the general consequences of the strike for the Newark Labour Movement reflected those felt nationally; a feeling of confidence stemming from a realisation of their industrial power and the development of local initiatives (as in the Newark railwaymen's Strike Bulletins) combined with a sense of betrayal and disillusionment. Overall the defeat was a setback for the whole trade union movement; no union succeeded in making any major impact on the general direction of government economic policy for the rest of the inter-war period.

While it is true, as the 'Advertiser' suggested, that "As Newark is not a colliery area, or a large industrial centre the full effects of the stoppage were not felt, nor was there that feeling of tension that existed in other parts of the country more closely in contact with the trouble", the existence of such widespread sympathy action was without precedent in Newark's working-class history. To that extent, the response to the strike in Newark must be seen as a considerable success with genuine positive achievements.