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## THE GOVERNMENT AND THE GENERAL STRIKE, 1926

The British General Strike of 1926 was one of the turning points of the inter-war years. The defeat which the trade unions suffered at the hands of the Government successfully discredited the idea of widespread industrial action as a method of obtaining the demands of labour. It did much to ensure the relatively quiescent acceptance by labour of the persistent unemployment of the thirties. It removed the threat to the established order which had existed since the turbulence of the immediate post-war years and provided the necessary preliminary to the increasing respectability of trade unions as a pressure group. The definitive history of the general strike has yet to be written, and that the subject remains open to differing emphasis and interpretation is evidenced by the most recent writing on the subject by A. J. P. Taylor and John Saville.<sup>1</sup> The Public Records Act of 1967, by making available a large collection of Cabinet and Departmental papers, has opened up the possibility of a revision of our view of the strike and provided much important additional detail, notably about the Government's role in the events of 1925-26. Of the matters which still exercise the minds of historians of the General Strike, four main questions have been selected for consideration. First of all, there is the intriguing problem of the 1925 industrial crisis when the Government averted an embargo on the movement of coal by granting a subsidy to the coal industry and appointing a Royal Commission to enquire into the future of the industry. Why did the Government adopt this policy? Was it in order to prepare more carefully for any future widespread trade union action? Secondly there is the question of the pre-strike negotiations in 1926: how was the Cabinet divided, and what effect did this have on the final decision to break off negotiations? Thirdly, how efficiently did the Government's emergency organisation function during the strike? And finally, what were the

<sup>1</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 239-249, and Saville's criticism in: *Society for the Study of Labour History, Bulletin No 12*, Spring, 1966, pp. 52-53.

## Government's relations with the private Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies?

The problems of the British coal industry in the inter-war period are comparatively easy to analyse in retrospect. On the supply side, world capacity had increased during the war, and in the British industry, production had been the aim, irrespective of cost. On the demand side, the end of the war saw a crucial deceleration in the rate of growth in demand for coal. Inevitably, this meant serious export losses for the high cost British industry. The colliery companies tried to make themselves more competitive by cost cutting, and as wages were by far the largest single element in costs, this meant that wages had to be reduced. The miners, dissatisfied with the organisation of the industry and with their living standards, were the best organised and most group conscious members of the British trade union movement. They would not accept reductions in their wages without a struggle. This was the background to the industrial troubles of the coal industry in 1925-26.

On June 30 1925, the colliery owners gave a month's notice to end the 1924 agreement, which had been initially of one year's duration after which it was terminable by one month's notice on either side. This agreement had provided the miners with an increase in wages following on the temporary prosperity of the industry when strikes in the United States and the French occupation of the Ruhr interrupted supplies from those areas. By the spring of 1925, with production back to normal in overseas coalfields, the British coal industry was suffering considerable losses. Costs had to be slashed hence the move to negotiate a new wages agreement. The miners refused to accept lower wages. On July 10, the General Council of the TUC met the Executive Committee of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and promised to support them in their fight to maintain "the standard of life of their members". A meeting of the executives of the railway, transport and seamen's unions was fixed for July 25, six days before the owners' notices were due to expire. As the last minute negotiations appeared to be deadlocked, the co-operating trade unions under the overall guidance of the General Council agreed to instruct their members to move no coal from midnight on July 31. Before that hour was reached, however, the Government agreed to do that which it had previously stated it would not do; it appointed a Royal Commission to inquire into the future of the industry, and during the time the Commission would need for its task, which was expected to be about nine months, a subsidy was to be paid by the Government to the coal industry in order that mineworkers' wages should remain unaltered. At the time,

this was considered to be a great victory for the trade union movement.<sup>1</sup> Since then, historians have speculated that the subsidy and the Royal Commission were merely time-wasting devices undertaken because the Government's emergency organisation was not yet prepared to cope with a widespread industrial dispute. This idea has been buttressed by the answer which the Prime Minister of the day later gave to his biographer when asked why the subsidy was granted to the coal industry in 1925. "We were not ready", said Mr Baldwin.<sup>2</sup> The Cabinet papers now available certainly throw light on the condition of the emergency organisation and upon the thinking of the Prime Minister.

The Government had for some time been making preparations for such an emergency. On July 5 1923 Sir John Anderson was reporting to the Cabinet:

"We are clearly of opinion that, if only as a preventive measure, the Government should have ready prepared plans for dealing with emergencies of the kind indicated in the Emergency Powers Act, 1920, i.e., emergencies 'calculated' ... to deprive ... any substantial proportion of the community of the essentials of life'. Effective plans on a sufficiently comprehensive scale do not now exist, those previously adopted having become to a considerable extent obsolete owing to the disappearance of war-time arrangements in the last two or three years. An organisation on the lines indicated below should therefore be established now, to stimulate and assist Departments to prepare such plans."<sup>3</sup>

Barely six months after this report, in February 1924, a Labour Government was seriously contemplating using the emergency orga-

<sup>1</sup> The day on which the final negotiations took place, a Friday, was christened Red Friday in order to differentiate qualitatively from Black Friday, the day on which the other members of the Triple Alliance, namely the railwaymen and the transport workers, withdrew their support from the miners in 1921.

<sup>2</sup> G. M. Young, *Stanley Baldwin* (1952), p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> PRO Cab. 27/259, CP 314(23), p. 1. The war-time arrangements were closely linked with the powers which the Government possessed under the Defence of the Realm Acts which were still in operation during the crisis year of 1919. This meant for example, that the Government were able to call on army transport drivers and to use local officials of the central government agencies, like the Food Officers in the emergency organisation which functioned during the railway strike of 1919. Interestingly the French Government requested information as to the measures contemplated by the British Government for the maintenance of essential public services and the preservation of order in the event of a general strike, in a note from the French Chargé d'Affaires dated April 15, 1920. A memorandum on the Government's emergency organisation was drawn up but apparently never sent. PRO, Cab. 27/82.

nisation during a strike of dock workers.<sup>1</sup> J. C. Wedgwood, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, was actually appointed to the post of Chief Civil Commissioner and he had some forthright if slightly confused, views about the Supply and Transport Organisation. He embodied these in a memorandum given to the Labour Government's Emergency Committee on February 15, 1924.

"It would be well, now that a Labour Government is in power, if the whole system of dealing with these emergencies could be recast. There has been an almost melodramatic air of secrecy about the whole business, as though a revolution were being combated, rather than a straightforward effort made to keep the essential services going. The 86 Chairmen in charge of recruiting may be admirable. The only three I know are prominent Conservatives unconnected with the local authorities . . .

It might be better to reply [sic] more upon the Local Authorities and upon the open statement of what the Government requires and what it means to secure in the case of emergency. A great deal of the hostility to the work that has to be done comes from suspicion created by the secrecy with which the organisation is carried on. If there is in this country a body of citizens who are opposed to the steps which any Government would have to take under these circumstances, it is better to face them openly. If that policy were carried out the response to the demand for recruits for the essential services would bring forward better and more numerous material, while the Fascist atmosphere would be effectively dispelled.

I therefore propose to work out, in collaboration with the Civil Commissioners, a plan more appropriate to a Labour Government . . ."

So far as is known, he did not, and indeed the rapid settlement of the dispute, which obviated the need to use the emergency organisation, together with the short period of office of this Government, probably explains his failure to do so. With the coal crisis of 1925, however, the organisation again became a matter of Government concern.

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 27/259, EC (24) 1, p. 3. This was, of course, a very significant action. The idea of a Labour Government using the powers of the State to coerce the trade unions was one of the first clear indications that a Labour Government was not going to be "obstructed" by its supporters outside Parliament. "The Government must govern" has been heard on many occasions since. See also J. Symons, *The General Strike* (1957), p. 24, and R. W. Lyman, *The First Labour Government 1924* (1957), pp. 219-222. PRO, Cab. 27/259 EC (24), Conclusions 2-8.

The Home Secretary had reported to the Cabinet on the preparedness of the emergency organisation on July 14, 1925. Sir William Joynson Hicks pointed out that the Cabinet Supply and Transport Committee, which the Anderson Report had recommended should supervise the whole emergency arrangements, had met from time to time and that the nucleus of an organisation existed. A "completely ready organisation" could not be maintained. The Home Secretary then went on to give more details about the readiness of the organisation under various headings, viz.: Emergency Regulations, Food, Transport, Coal, Electric Power, Communications, Intelligence and Publicity, Personnel of Headquarters Nucleus Staff and Scotland. In the light of what was to happen his observations under Food, Transport and Communications are probably the most significant. He pointed out that although all the divisional food officers had been visited or contacted "within the last six weeks", vacancies still existed in some areas. It was hoped to complete the transport arrangements "before the end of July" and so far as communications were concerned, the General Post Office was still "laying plans". This report was not discussed by the Cabinet until July 23, barely a week before the colliery owners' notices were due to run out.<sup>1</sup>

The above report suggests that the emergency organisation was in a sufficient state of readiness to deal with an embargo on the movement of coal: the qualifications which the Home Secretary made about the state of readiness of the Emergency Organisation were minor ones. Most of the Government plans were well laid; all that was needed was volunteers to help put the plans into action. It is interesting therefore to examine the Prime Minister's summary of the situation at the Cabinet meeting of July 30. He began by pointing out that a lock out was inevitable. Moreover there would be financial support for the miners from other trade unions: the railwaymen had decided not to handle coal. This latter contingency meant that the Railway Companies would be bound to dismiss those of their workmen who complied with their union's decision and that would mean a railway strike on top of the coal dispute.

"The transport workers would probably strike in sympathy. The attitude of the seamen's union was uncertain. On a review of the financial effects of previous coal strikes it was shown that the cost and the loss of revenue would amount to a large sum. The effect on the trade and industry of the country was shown to be of the gravest character."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 24/174, CP 356(25).

<sup>2</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/50, 42/25.

The Prime Minister went on to emphasise that although an emergency organisation, designed to maintain essential services, was in readiness, there would be a delay before it could become fully operational because volunteers had to be recruited to man it. Although he was sure that these would be obtained, the cost and damage to the financial and trading position of the country should a dispute take place "must be very serious".

This was a pessimistic statement and was clearly designed to persuade the Cabinet that anything was preferable to a stoppage in the coal industry with its possibilities of escalation. In this it succeeded because the Cabinet, although only by a majority, voted in favour of the subsidy and the Royal Commission as an alternative to a national strike. Was this merely a time-gaining postponement on the part of the Government? Certainly there was that element present. Indeed it was inevitable that the time would be so used because those members of the Government in favour of taking a hard line with labour would make certain that lack of preparation would never be repeated as an excuse for inaction. The Government began at once to fill out their scheme to combat a possible general strike should the Royal Commission fail to provide a settlement. At a meeting of the Cabinet on August 5 1925, less than one week after Red Friday, the hope was expressed that a "more effective scheme be drawn up than at present exists for maintaining vital national services in the event of a strike". Moreover the Cabinet agreed that the Prime Minister be allowed to hint, if he thought fit, that the Government intended to "make more elaborate arrangements than at present exist for maintaining essential national services during a strike".<sup>1</sup> The following day, in a statement to the House of Commons, the Prime Minister gave the hint. He pointed out that there were three reasons why it had been necessary to avoid a dispute. Firstly, the depressed state of trade, which a prolonged dispute would exacerbate; secondly, the detrimental effect such a dispute would have upon workers in all industries; and thirdly, the fact that no one had had the time to think out the consequences of such action. More significantly he warned that if, at some time in the future, the community, with the Government behind it, should have to protect itself against coercion by a minority, it would not hesitate to do so.<sup>2</sup> Further underlining the direction of Government thinking, a Cabinet meeting, one week after Mr Baldwin's Commons statement, discussed the Supply and Transport Organisation "and great stress was laid on the importance of utilising the next few months to bring this organisation up to the highest possible point of efficiency". The

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/50, 43/25.

<sup>2</sup> 187 HC Deb., 5 s., c. 1612.

Prime Minister's attitude, as shown in both Cabinet and Commons, illustrates his eagerness to postpone the crisis. The Joynson Hicks report makes clear that the emergency organisation was in a state of sufficient readiness to have gone into action on July 31. Moreover, the Ministry of Transport, Mr Wilfred Ashley, in a memorandum dated August 6 1925, believed that his section of the emergency organisation had been ready on the previous weekend, so far as it could be, but he wanted permission to contact Road Officers in advance. If the attitude of the Prime Minister was not governed by the condition of the Government's emergency organisation then perhaps it can be explained by the simple hope that if postponed, the crisis might not reoccur; the Royal Commission might provide a solution acceptable to all parties especially if the temperature could be kept down; trade union solidarity might be dissolved by time.<sup>1</sup>

In his biography of Sir John Anderson, J. W. Wheeler-Bennett claims that when Mr Baldwin said "We were not ready" he meant that the plans had been drawn up by the civil servants responsible but that they "required governmental action ... to make them operative." The idea that the Government's Emergency Organisation was unprepared in 1925, hence the subsidy and the Royal Commission, has received widespread support, notably in the autobiographies of the Earl of Scarborough and Lord Winterton and among historians such as Mr J. Symons and Mr Alan Bullock.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that the time between July 31 1925 and April 30 1926 was used by the Government to examine, lubricate and tighten up the emergency machinery. But that is not the same as to say that that was the reason for the granting of the subsidy and the appointing of the Royal Commission. Joynson Hicks made it clear in his report to the Cabinet on July 23 that the major problem would be that of obtaining volunteers. Whatever preparations were made, this problem would remain as volunteers could not be asked for in advance of the declaration of a State of Emergency. Mr Baldwin's wish to avoid troubles, which was such a feature of his character, seems much more likely.<sup>3</sup>

As we have already seen, the Government wasted no time in setting into motion the streamlining of their emergency organisation. Historians have long known, certainly since the publication of George

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/50, 45/25.

<sup>2</sup> J. W. Wheeler-Bennett, John Anderson, Viscount Waverley (1962), p. 102. Earl of Scarborough, "Maintaining Supplies in a General Strike", in: *English Review*, Vol. 43, March 1926. Rt. Hon. Earl Winterton, *Orders of the Day* (1953), p. 136. J. Symons, *op. cit.*, p. 20. A. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, Vol. I (1960), p. 279.

<sup>3</sup> See also C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940* (1955), pp. 289-290.

Glasgow's book, *General Strikes and Road Transport*,<sup>1</sup> that the Government did concern itself to make quite sure that it would possess a well lubricated emergency machine should Red Friday be repeated. It is a commonplace among historians of the period to juxtapose these activities with the lack of preparation on the trade union side. Without amending this familiar picture the Cabinet papers do record in a dramatic way the almost feverish nature of the Government activities. By October 1925, each of the eleven areas into which the country was divided had its own headquarters together with a staff of eight. Arrangements had been made for the Civil Commissioners to spend some time in their respective districts. Staff meetings had been held. Moreover in the eighty-two sub areas, four-fifths of the personnel had been appointed with the remaining one fifth in the pipeline. There was no shortage of motor vehicles and petrol stocks were good. Indeed the only problem which the Supply and Transport Organisation seemed at all perplexed about in the autumn of 1925 concerned the timing of the issue of the circular to Local Authorities informing them in outline of the Government arrangements and their role in them.<sup>2</sup> Fortnightly conferences of officials from those Government Departments chiefly involved in the emergency arrangements had been going on since before Christmas. The Chief Civil Commissioner was receiving regular reports from his Chief Assistants. Almost all the Road Officers and Chairmen of Haulage Committees had been appointed. The Divisional Food Officers were busy determining the best routes for food transport during an emergency, and volunteers from various technical institutions had already been allocated to fill five per cent. of the key positions in London's power stations. Schemes had been worked out for the security of explosives and arms. A return of the stocks of wheat, flour, meat, bacon and ham, butter, cheese, canned foods, canned milk, jam, sugar and tea in each division as on January 30 1926 was expected the following month. By February 1926, the Home Secretary was reporting to the Cabinet that "little remained to be done before the actual occurrence of an emergency."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Glasgow, *General Strikes and Road Transport* (1926). Glasgow was a well known journalist who was author of the Foreign Affairs section of the *Contemporary Review* 1923-1925 and wrote on diplomatic and foreign questions for the *Observer* and the *Manchester Guardian*. He died in 1958.

<sup>2</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/51, 47/25, 50/25, 52/25, 53/25; Cab. 27/259, ST (24)7, 10, 11, 12, CP 390 (25), CP 416 (25), CP 427 (25), CP 439 (25), CP 441 (25), CP 457 (25), CP 463 (25). The Cabinet wondered whether the Ministry of Health circulars to local authorities should be held back until after the November municipal elections.

<sup>3</sup> PRO CP 81 (26). The report actually states that "new lists of volunteers had been obtained from Technical Institutions etc.". There do not appear to be any further details.



The Cabinet conclusions do provide the historian with some additional material with regard to the pre-strike negotiations following the publication of the Report of the Royal Commission in March 1926. The attitude of the Government towards this report was crucial. Both the owners and miners had records second to none of obstinate adherence to pre-conceived positions. It was clear to all but the most naive that both would extract from the report those parts which they liked and ignore the rest. The Government could either adopt a similar policy, in which case a breakdown of negotiations would be certain, or give a lead, as the *Times* for example hoped, by accepting everything in the report.<sup>1</sup> The first of these policies was advocated at a meeting of the Cabinet on March 17. Some members of the Government disliked the recommendation made by the Royal Commission that coal royalties should be nationalised. They only agreed to waive their opposition on the condition that should the owners and miners not agree on the report, then the question of royalties nationalisation should be reconsidered. Those members of the Cabinet who urged that the Government should, from the first, "strike the note of agreement" were defeated.<sup>2</sup> When the Prime Minister made his statement concerning the Government's attitude to the report, on March 24, he pointed out that there were items which the Government did not like. However, the Government was willing to accept these, provided that the owners and miners also accepted the report as a whole. There was little possibility of that. By April 14, the Cabinet were convinced that the best chance of averting a strike lay in the activities of the "Trades Union Council".<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks and several meetings later, a strike appeared the more likely of the various options. The Cabinet were informed that the Supply and Transport Organisation was fully staffed save for two local food officers and several railway representatives on the voluntary service committees. "After considerable discussion" the Cabinet articulated a plan of action to be put into effect at zero hour which it was thought might be midnight on Friday, April 30. The plan stretched over twenty points and established what portion of the emergency organisation would be required should only a coal stoppage take place; listed certain administrative instructions which were to be issued to civil commissioners, local authorities and customs inspectors; laid down the proceedings for declaring a state of emergency. The plan also stipulated the time at which the Publicity Organisation under the

<sup>1</sup> *Times*, March 18 1926.

<sup>2</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 11/26, 12/26, 13/26.

<sup>3</sup> The Trades Union Congress. This was very perceptive of the Cabinet and provides an illustration of the way in which suggestions of rank and file militancy can be diluted by institutionalisation. PRO, Cab. 23/52, 15/26.

Assistant Chief Civil Commissioner, should begin to function together with the time at which the Board of Trade *Daily Bulletin* should appear. It was noted that Hyde Park would have to be taken over and used as a distribution centre for milk the price of which would have to be increased. No movement of troops was to take place before the strike and once a stoppage had begun, troops were to be moved, "as unobtrusively as possible to Scotland, one battalion, to South Wales, one battalion, and to Lancashire, two battalions". Should the movements take place, a statement to the press should be issued "making clear that the troops were intended for protection purposes only and not for taking sides in a strike". Preparations for additional troop movements to those outlined above were to be made and the possibility of cancelling the scheduled naval exercises was not ruled out. Finally it was noted that a Preservation of Public Order Act had been drafted and that the Emergency Regulations made no provision in regard to the prevention of peaceful picketing. The Cabinet discussed these plans on Wednesday, April 28. Two days later, the members of the Cabinet agreed that zero hour should be midnight that night.<sup>1</sup>

With the coming of the May Day weekend, therefore, the Government was prepared to meet either a coal industry stoppage or a more widespread sympathetic strike, prepared that is, as far as they could be. They had an organisation which would require volunteer workers to activate it; and of course their plans might have to be changed at any moment should action by the trade unions upset their calculations or render the Government organisation redundant. The Government may have considered it necessary to prepare for the worst or to make a show of strength; the TUC negotiating committee had far from given up hope that a settlement could be found. The negotiations continued throughout Saturday and Sunday, May 1 and 2. Historians have been able to construct a quite convincing account of these late night negotiations from the reminiscences of those who took part in them and from contemporary comment.<sup>2</sup> The Cabinet papers provide us with some detail about these meetings without really necessitating any basic re-interpretation. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the Cabinet papers comprise the conclusions of Cabinet discussions

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 19/26, 20/26. At the meeting of April 30, it was agreed that the Home Secretary should warn the Minister of Transport of the risk of sabotage "(e.g., by dropping a spanner or other instrument in some delicate part of machinery) by electrical workers immediately before leaving work, which might dislocate the Government's emergency arrangements."

<sup>2</sup> See W. H. Crook, *The General Strike* (Chapel Hill, 1931), pp. 361-364; C. L. Mowat, *op.cit.*, pp. 304-310; A. Bullock, *op.cit.*, pp. 308-315.

and are in no sense verbatim accounts.<sup>1</sup> There remains room for some speculation as to the precise division of the Cabinet between those in favour of precipitating a strike and those who hoped to avoid one. Nevertheless it seems certain that the leading "hawks" included Birkenhead, Churchill, Joynson Hicks and probably Chamberlain.

The Cabinet met at noon on Sunday May 2 and received a report from the Prime Minister on the Saturday negotiations. Shortly before the end of these, Sir Horace Wilson had had a conversation with the Trades Union representatives and the first of the two well known formulas had been drawn up, viz.:

"The Prime Minister has satisfied himself, as a result of the conversations he has had with the representatives of the T.U.C. that, if negotiations are continued (it being understood that the notices cease to be operative) the representatives of the T.U.C. are confident that a settlement can be reached on the lines of the Report within a fortnight. Sir Horace Wilson had received an assurance that this formula was intended to mean that, if negotiations were continued, in the view of the T.U.C. representatives, the Miners' representatives would agree to negotiate on the basis of the Report of the Royal Commission, recognising that this meant accepting a reduction in wages."

This latter statement appears to suggest that should the miners adhere to their position that wages should not be reduced, thus ruling out the Royal Commission Report as a basis for settlement, they might forfeit TUC support and this, in spite of the plans for a sympathetic strike already drawn up. This was the position which the TUC representatives wished to discuss with the Executive Committee of the MFGB. But by the Saturday night, as is well known, the miners' executive had returned to their respective districts. The negotiations hung fire until these men could be brought back to London.

But if the miners, when they did get back, were unlikely to care for the "Wilson formula" then the discussions in Cabinet which followed the Prime Minister's report on that Sunday afternoon showed that the Cabinet did not like it either. It was felt that the formula was

<sup>1</sup> It is possible to obtain a glimpse of the views of particular ministers in the memoranda which some of them addressed to the Cabinet and which usually appear in the form of Cabinet papers. For example, Lord Percy, the President of the Board of Education, set out his views on the coal crisis in such a document dated May 3, 1926. PRO, CP 183/26. Unfortunately there are insufficient of these personal statements.

“too vague and indefinite, and gave no assurance that the proposed negotiations were likely to lead to a successful issue; and that taken in conjunction with the menace of a general strike, it would be regarded by public opinion as a yielding by the Government to threats . . .

It was assumed that in any event the complete withdrawal of the threat of a general strike was *sine qua non* to any resumption of negotiations involving a subsidy.”<sup>1</sup>

Suggestions were also made that should a general strike occur, then legislation might be introduced to remove the immunity of strike funds and to make picketing illegal. Then came the long and tedious wait, and as one Minister later described it, “we kicked our heels for hours”.<sup>2</sup> The Cabinet adjourned first until 4 p.m., then till 5 p.m., finally reassembling at 6.45 p.m.

In the meantime, further discussions had been held and steps taken which could only harden the Cabinet’s attitude. The Postmaster General knew of the telegrams calling for a stoppage of work which had been sent to the railwaymen, transport workers, railway clerks and iron and steel workers and this, after it was alleged that the Trades Union Council (as the Cabinet Conclusions wrongly designate the TUC representatives throughout) had informed the Prime Minister and his colleagues that they had as yet passed no formal resolution in favour of a general strike. This was a splendid example of the mutual mistrust and lack of communication between the two sides. The General Council’s plan for a general strike in support of the miners was not drawn up until April 30 and not voted on by the meeting of trade union executives until May 1, *after* the Government had set in motion its own emergency organisation. The actual declaration of a state of emergency did not appear until the evening newspapers on May 1. Moreover the general strike was not due to begin until midnight on Monday May 3; the General Council could not see why negotiations should not continue in the meantime. The Cabinet however chose to consider the despatch of the telegrams from the headquarters of the various unions concerned to their branches calling upon the members to strike if a settlement had not been reached by midnight on May 3 to be a “new factor” with sinister implications.<sup>3</sup>

The direction in which the Cabinet was moving shows itself again in the task which it undertook during the time on the Sunday when it was awaiting the report of the TUC’s negotiating committee. A

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 21/26.

<sup>2</sup> L. S. Amery, *My Political Life*, Vol. II (1953), pp. 483-484.

<sup>3</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 21/26.

statement was prepared "which might be communicated before, at or after an interview with the Trades Union Council dealing first with the need for acceptance of the Royal Commission's Report, including an adjustment of wages or hours of work, and secondly, with the information that had come to hand as to the orders given by certain Unions for a general strike". It was agreed to communicate this document to the trade unionists if, after the 9 p.m. interview, it was deemed desirable.<sup>1</sup> Did this mean that the Cabinet had now decided that the general strike threat must be withdrawn if negotiations were to continue?

The Cabinet re-assembled at 9.30 p.m. and the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for India, and the Minister of Labour,<sup>2</sup> who had been in conference with the trade union representatives for half an hour, presented a progress report.

"After considerable discussion the representatives of the Trade Union Council Committee had been asked what was the uttermost point to which they could go, and Lord Birkenhead had written down the following words of their reply:-

'We will urge the miners to authorise us to enter upon a discussion with the understanding that they and we accept the Report as a basis of settlement and we approach it with the knowledge that it may involve some reduction in wages.'

The union men tried to reassure the Government with regard to the calling of the strike. "No irrevocable step" had been taken; all would be withdrawn at once if the conversations resulted in a resumption of negotiations. "The representatives of the Trades Union Council Committee had withdrawn to sound the miners' representatives as to whether they would accept the formula quoted above but the Government representatives were quite uncommitted." What happened next is best told in the words of the Cabinet conclusions.

"A discussion by the Cabinet followed in regard to the position, mainly on the question of whether the document drawn up at the previous meeting of the Cabinet should now be recommunicated to the Trades Union Council Committee . . . Shortly after, authentic information was received to the effect that certain employees [sic] in the office of the *Daily Mail* had declined to

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 22/26.

<sup>2</sup> Respectively, Mr Stanley Baldwin, Lord Birkenhead, and Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland.

print a leading article, and that the *Daily Mail* would not be published on the morrow.

This information, coupled with the evidence of specific instructions directing members of certain Trades Unions in several of the most vital industries and services of the country to carry out a General Strike on Tuesday next, was felt to introduce a new factor in the situation, and it was agreed that negotiations could not be continued without a repudiation by the Trades Union Council Committee of the actions referred to and an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the instructions for a general strike. The document approved at the previous meeting was accordingly re-drafted to meet the new situation . . .<sup>1</sup>

This was the letter which the Prime Minister handed to the trade union representatives in the early hours of Monday May 3.

Even without verbatim accounts, the course of these final negotiations is not difficult to chart. During Sunday May 2, those members of the Cabinet who felt that the time had arrived to be firm in the face of the threat of a general strike, gained the upper hand. So much so that, even before the telephone call telling of the trouble at the *Daily Mail*, a document had been drawn up terminating the negotiations until the general strike was called off. The *Daily Mail* affair was the last straw and was used by more militant Cabinet members to demonstrate to the moderates or faint hearted that the struggle had already begun. The TUC meantime hoped right up to the last minute for a settlement which the miners would accept. In a sense the Government's action postponed, for nine days, a tortuous dilemma upon which the TUC were impaled. Their whole policy of support for the miners was based upon the belief, with history as the justification, that pressure could be exerted upon the Government who would then intervene in the dispute and engineer a settlement which the miners would accept. No actual general strike would be needed. However, when the Government refused to give way to threats and chose instead to oppose the strike as a threat to the constitution, the TUC were cornered. They could either retreat and be humiliated or stand and fight for which they were totally unprepared. A short general strike, called off as soon as it could decently be done, was a kind of ironic compromise. The contradictions of the General Council's policy were pinpointed soon after the strike in a Ministry of Labour memorandum. "And yet there is something unsatisfactory about it. Why, for instance, is it necessary to animadvert on the miners' attitude after

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 23/26.

the strike began as one of the reasons for their action? It was equally the miners' attitude before the strike began. If their policy was so clear cut, why was it not stated more definitely exactly why the strike was being called? Why – as Mr. Lansbury afterwards complained in his journal – was there no definite statement as to 'the length to which the strike would be pushed or upon the precise terms on which it would be called off'? Finally why did the Council, before they called the strike off, not make more certain that the Samuel terms would be agreed to by the Government? And why when they met the Prime Minister was their attempt to impose any conditions with regard to return to work so very half-hearted?" The answer to all the questions raised by Mr MacMillan of course was that the General Council had not thought out all the implications, hence the hasty papering which was placed over each crack as it appeared.<sup>1</sup>

The strike did not really last long enough to give the Government's long maturing emergency organisation a thorough examination. It appears to have functioned well enough. The Supply and Transport Committee of the Cabinet was virtually the Government's Strike Committee and met every day during the nine days. The Home Secretary was usually in the chair and regular attenders before the strike were the Ministries of Transport and Labour, Secretaries of State for War and Scotland, President of the Board of Trade, Postmaster General and representatives of other departments. It is not without significance that during the strike, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for India, Lord Birkenhead, and the Minister of Health, Mr Neville Chamberlain, three of the more strong minded Cabinet members, attended the meetings of this committee although they had not usually done so before nor did they after the strike. The Prime Minister was not a member of the Committee.

The two major problems which exercised the collective mind of the Cabinet during the strike period were not connected with the emergency organisation as such but concerned the public order, and how best to maintain it, admittedly with special reference to those engaged in essential services, and second, the question of what legislation might be brought in to curb the strike activities of trade unions.

By May 7, the Cabinet appeared quite satisfied with the way things were going but felt that more protection was required for those who

<sup>1</sup> Confidential Papers on the General Strike 1926. A memorandum by C. W. K. MacMillan, p. 44. PRO, Lab. 27 No 9.

were working "in view of the intimidation already carried out and threatened". This was the "first essential in the present situation, and that, with a view to any possible developments, the forces available for this purpose should be expanded on a considerable scale".<sup>1</sup> The Cabinet went on to set down the principles which it was felt should guide the extensions of protection envisaged. On the whole, these were manifestations of sound common sense. For example, regular troops were to be used only as a last resort and should, as far as possible, be kept away from the disturbed areas until the moment for their use had arrived. The regular police should be used whenever possible as the "first line", augmented by special constables. It was at this meeting that it was decided to form what became the Civil Constabulary Reserve. Neither reservists of the regular armed forces nor members of the Territorial Army were to be called out. The Secretary of State for War was to be authorised to instruct General Officers Commanding that they might use "tear" gas "in any case where a situation became so serious as to involve the alternative between that course and the use of firearms".

Did this policy of increasing protection lead to more energetic police action? Certainly the Northumberland and Durham General Council Joint Strike Committee seem to have thought so. It believed that the authorities were attempting to break down the effectiveness of pickets by the use of force. Historians know virtually nothing about instructions to the police nor the way such instructions were interpreted and in consequence cannot answer this question. Certainly in the area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, police activity seems to have increased over the weekend of May 8/9 but its relationship with the Cabinet discussions of May 7 could be purely coincidental.<sup>2</sup>

So far as legislation was concerned, a Cabinet committee consisting of the Lord Chancellor, the Secretary of State for India, and the Attorney-General, had been meeting to decide whether Government powers might be strengthened by new legislation. The result was the *Illegal Strikes Bill, 1926*. There were only four provisions. The first aimed at making it unlawful to support strikes with any object other than the maintenance or improvement of conditions of labour in the industry or branch of industry in which the strikers were engaged.

<sup>1</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 25/26. Cab. 27/260 ST (24) 15.

<sup>2</sup> See C. R. Flynn, *An Account of the Proceedings of the Northumberland and Durham General Council Joint Strike Committee (1926)*, pp. 12-16. This is a fairly rare document, a copy of which can be seen in the Brynmor Jones Library, the University of Hull. See also *The General Strike in the North East*, History Group of the Communist Party, Pamphlet No 22 (1961), pp. 12-14.



This Bill would overrule all previous legislation and provide the High Court with power, on the suit of the Attorney-General,<sup>1</sup> to prevent the funds of trade unions or Co-operatives from being used in such a strike. No one refusing to take part in a sympathetic or general strike could be deprived of trade union membership or any benefits to which they had proper entitlement. The final provision defined the meaning of the word strike. The Bill was to come into effect on May 10.<sup>2</sup>

By that date, of course, the Government were fully aware of the discussions which were going on around the person of Sir Herbert Samuel with the aim of finding a settlement. It is hardly surprising therefore that having sounded opinion both inside and outside the Cabinet, it was decided to postpone further consideration of the Bill which was then quietly dropped.

The Baldwin administration, in the industrial problems of 1925-26, looked upon themselves as neutrals, standing between the contending parties and representing the British people as a whole. Moreover part of their electioneering programme in 1925 had included the application of the principle of co-partnership in industry in the hope that workers and management would begin to see their interests as identical. It was in this spirit that Baldwin made his famous "peace in our time" speech during a debate on a private member's bill to abolish the trade unions' political levy to the Labour Party in March 1925. Moreover the idea of Government neutrality was buttressed by the crisis of 1925 which ended with the granting of the subsidy and the setting up of the Royal Commission. Of course the Government were not strictly objective. They could coerce the miners, because the miners' only weapon was the strike and this could be used by the Government as a threat to good order and therefore a bar to negotiations. They could have done more than attempt to bully the coal owners, but would not do so out of fear of the consequences, not least of the wrath of their own supporters. When the bullying failed, they sat back helpless, though still protesting neutrality. But if the Government's attitude undoubtedly favoured the employers' side, they certainly wished to represent themselves as above the battle; especially was this true in their relations with the private strike breaking body, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, OMS.

<sup>1</sup> The Attorney General was Sir Douglas Hogg who was created Viscount Hailsham in 1928.

<sup>2</sup> PRO, Cab. 23/52, 27/26, 28/26. But of course there was one piece of punitive legislation passed after the General Strike, the Trades Disputes and Trades Union Act, 17 & 18 Geo. 5, ch. 22 1927. Not surprisingly it was a fairly moderate measure.

The Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies was formed in the autumn of 1925. Its aim was to provide a group of volunteers, trained in various tasks, which could be used by the Government to help keep essential services running during a large scale industrial dispute. Historians have not been especially well informed about the OMS. Little has been written about its composition or its activities although the former has been presumed to be largely middle class and the latter the enrolling of volunteers during the period October 1925 to May 1926, volunteers who then aided the Government emergency organisation during the strike. It is known that the national President of the OMS was Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, a former Viceroy of India, and that its Council included several public men who had at one time or another held civil or military appointments of importance; including Lord Jellicoe, Lord Falkland, Lord Ranfurly, Sir Rennell Rodd, Sir Alexander Duff and Sir Francis Lloyd. Unfortunately none of these gentlemen appear to have left any reminiscences of the time they served with the OMS. Similarly little information on OMS activities in the regions has been unearthed, although in north eastern England, it is known that a local secretary (another ex-army officer) was appointed and a number of private meetings, with admission by ticket only, were held. These meetings were attended by local business and industrial people and volunteers were presumably enrolled, although the OMS does not appear to have been very successful in that area.<sup>1</sup> The interesting Home Office file on which the following account is largely based does much to clarify the relationship between that organisation and the Government.

The formation of the OMS was greeted, at least by the Home Secretary, with a certain amount of public verbal approbation.<sup>2</sup> Practical Government assistance however was not forthcoming, a grievance which a representative of the OMS raised with a member of the Home Office staff at a meeting on November 20 1925. Moreover the Government had issued no instructions to the officers of their own emergency organisation in the provinces as to what their attitude was to the OMS. Hence some were co-operating with it, others were not. The Home Office was sympathetic but refused to be drawn into a hasty

<sup>1</sup> The Dillon Papers, Box L to O (1926). A collection of correspondence between the Marquis of Londonderry and his Agent, Mr Malcolm Dillon, located in the Durham County Record Office. Newcastle Journal, January 7 1926.

<sup>2</sup> The Home Secretary set out his views in a letter sent to "a correspondent who consulted him about the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies". Times, October 1 1925. Of course it is probable that the OMS received unofficial encouragement from individual Government members. After all, both OMS and Cabinet leaders belonged to the same clubs.

decision. The Government were not eager even to have meetings with the OMS but obviously the relationship between the two had to be strictly demarcated, in order to eliminate the kind of conflict which occurred in North Wales.<sup>1</sup> The local OMS representative, a Captain Gough, called upon the vice-chairman of the Government's volunteer service committee at Wrexham and told him that he was being helped by borough officials and that he, Gough, knew of no other organisation and that it might be taken that the OMS "was supreme". Gough further told Evans, the VSC vice-chairman, that his car was being provided by the Government and that his volunteers would be protected if necessary. Evans retailed this episode to his Chairman who complained to the Government; was their emergency organisation the dominant body or not?

The Government of course were quite clear about all this. In any emergency, the Government must have total control of any organisation designed to maintain essential services. There could be no rivals. This policy was firmly laid down at a meeting between representatives of the Government and the OMS on December 7, 1925. The Government representatives, who included the Chief Civil Commissioner, Sir William Mitchell Thomson, his assistant, Mr J. C. C. Davidson and a small galaxy from the Home Office, including Sir John Anderson, emphasised that should an emergency occur, then OMS activities would cease. The OMS were also persuaded to amend their recruiting cards so that the pledge of enrollment was not made to the OMS. The Government were quite willing to accept any volunteers which the OMS could provide; but once accepted they would be under complete Government control.

The total number of volunteers which the OMS were able to hand over to the Government on May 3 was about 100,000. According to a geographical breakdown of 85,000 of these, most lived in the south and east of England. The City of Westminster provided the highest number of volunteers, 7,734, whereas Leeds provided only 400 and Manchester and Liverpool did not appear on the list at all. Most of the volunteers had no special skills, but it was claimed that the total included 1,322 lorry drivers, trained in OMS "schools", 144 omnibus drivers, 1,345 car drivers, and 351 mechanics. The OMS also specially trained 250 Ford van drivers for the GPO and provided 1,194 skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled engineers for the Electricity Commission. The numbers handed over also included 640 railway personnel, 116 workers for the inland waterways and 91 tramwaymen.

<sup>1</sup> PRO, HO 45/12336. For a similar difficulty in Bradford see PRO, Cab. 27/260 ST (24) 14.

With the coming to an end of the dispute, the OMS began to think about the future. Should the organisation be maintained, and if so, in what form? One of the suggestions made by the OMS in a letter to the Home Secretary on May 11 was that the OMS should maintain a file of all the offers of help received by the Government and keep it up to date in the future. This suggestion was repeated twice in the next fortnight. On June 18, Sir G. Makgill of the OMS suggested to the Home Office that perhaps Chambers of Commerce might keep the lists. Whoever maintained them, they would require the names of all those who had registered with the Government's volunteer service committees. The Government were adamant. Its attitude is succinctly set out in a memorandum of unknown origin but initialled by Sir John Anderson and dated May 17 1926. After setting down what the OMS proposed to do, for which they would require funds which they would aim to get from a public appeal, the memorandum made some telling points. It was "undesirable" that a public appeal for funds should be made since, as the Home Secretary approved an earlier appeal it would be taken for granted that he approved this one and that would be difficult to reconcile with the Prime Minister's appeal for unity and tolerance. "Large sections of the community regard O.M.S. as a strike breaking organisation financed by employers' associations." Moreover although the OMS was helpful, the assistance it gave to the Government was of "comparatively small importance". The OMS provided only a small proportion of the total volunteers and very few were actually used. There were more volunteers than there were jobs. Furthermore, the strike leaders used the OMS to attack the Government organisation, often calling the latter OMS.<sup>1</sup> This may have deterred some people from offering help. The memorandum concluded that the continuation of the OMS had advantages but that on balance these were outweighed by the disadvantages.

These conclusions were reflected by a meeting of the Government Supply and Transport Committee held on June 1 1926, and it was left to the Home Secretary to communicate them to Lord Hardinge which he did on June 30. He pointed out that the experience of the general strike showed that there was no need for recruiting machinery in normal times for labourers and special constables. What was required were lists of key men, train drivers and railwaymen generally, electricity workers, motor drivers. There were always sufficient volunteers for railway work and the Electricity Commissioners had their own list. This only left the motor drivers "on which the O.M.S. would hardly

<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true. The OMS and the Government's emergency organisation tended to be looked upon as one and the same by the strikers. OMS was a conveniently short collective term of contempt.

think it worth their time concentrating their attention." A file-closing letter indeed!

In the industrial crisis of 1925, the message of the Cabinet papers seems clear. The Prime Minister was determined to avoid an open conflict with the unions. This explains the gloomy picture he painted before the Cabinet on July 30. The actual emergency organisation remained virtually the same in 1926 as it had been in the previous summer. The main alteration was that all the areas into which the country had been divided had by 1926 a permanent standing, headquarters organisation. Moreover the emergency organisation could be geared with a specific emergency in view. But these factors apart, the Government were as ready as they were likely to be. To Mr Baldwin, however, the most likely way of swaying Cabinet opinion was to suggest unreadiness. In 1925 he successfully bought time; why did he fail in 1926? Naturally the militants, both in the Cabinet and in the Conservative Party, looked upon 1925 as a dangerous precedent; the Government capitulating before threats. The hard liners in the Cabinet, who by implication appear to have been Birkenhead, Chamberlain, Churchill and Joynson Hicks,<sup>1</sup> were unlikely to allow a repetition. There could be no excuses about the emergency organisation, and with the negotiations becoming protracted and with the threat of a general strike hanging over them, as it had been ever since the end of the war, the incident at the *Daily Mail* provided them with the opportunity to fight. Ironically, at the same time as the Government eliminated compromise from the list of possibles, it appears that the TUC negotiating committee were coming round to view their position as somewhat exposed. Few of them had much faith in the general strike; it would either result in a catastrophic failure or else in a success which led into an even darker tunnel. If the formulas which were drawn up during the weekend negotiations are any indication of the direction in which the TUC negotiators were moving then it appears unlikely that a general strike would have been the outcome. Both formulas stipulated that the miners would have to accept lower wages; the miners would never have agreed to that until defeated in a strike. Would this have provided the TUC with an escape route? The precipitate action by the Government delayed for nine days, a decision which might well have been reached on May 3.

<sup>1</sup> See for example Viscount Templewood, *Nine Troubled Years* (1954), p. 31. As we have noted above, these three only attended the Supply and Transport Committee regularly during the strike. It was Churchill who wanted to form a Defence Force as in 1921, but he failed to gain sufficient support. PRO, Cab. 27/260, May 3, 1926.