

When WORKERS ruled Wolverhampton & Bilston:



the **GENERAL STRIKE** of 1926



Published on the 2026 centenary, by
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Work Rights in the UK



The Causes of the General Strike

The General Strike had its roots in the crisis of the coal industry which had been contracting since the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the substitution of oil for coal, particularly for ships. In addition there had been a savagery in the relationship of coalmasters to miners which had made nationalisation of the coal industry an early demand of the mining unions. Demand expanded during the war, but the mines were taken into government control in 1916.

The Miners Federation sought a new deal after the war and was fobbed off with the setting up of the Sankey Commission.

- The first part of its report provided for higher wages and a 7-hour day with a promise of six hours when the industry could afford it. With this the miners called off any action.
- The second half of the report, issued later, was unanimous for public control of the industry, but the members differed widely as to how this should be done.

In August 1920 with wage negotiations deadlocked, the miners invoked the Triple Alliance, but differences between the unions prevented joint action being taken. However, the government took the opportunity to pass the Emergency Powers Act to maintain essential supplies in an emergency.



By this time the slump was beginning to bite and the government returned the mines to private ownership in March 1921. The owners immediately demanded massive cuts in wages of up to £2 a week and announced that all contracts of service were at an end. When the miners refused to accept these terms they were locked out and the stoppage of 1921 began in April. The leaders of the Triple Alliance called off their support when the miners refused a formula that might have cut wages no more than the cost of living. **This day lives on as Black Friday.**

After 10 weeks the miners still rejected the employers' terms, but on July 1st the lock-out ended with the men accepting most of the employers' demands, but the government gave a £10million subsidy to cushion the effects of the wage reductions.

There was strong support for the miners throughout the country, as workers knew that if the largest and best organised section of workers was defeated, the wages of all would come down. It was this feeling of solidarity that dominated everything that followed and led eventually to a General Strike in support of the wages and conditions of miners.



The return to the gold standard in 1925 with an overvalued pound hit the coal industry particularly hard at a time when the Dawes Plan was bringing competition from German coal.

Again the mine owners demanded wage reductions and a return to district wage bargaining instead of national agreements.

This time the railway and transport workers declared that they would embargo the movement of coal if a lock-out occurred. This brought an immediate announcement from Baldwin, the prime minister, that there would be a nine months subsidy for the coal industry while a Royal Commission considered the position. The owners then withdrew their notices. **This was Red Friday!**

But the government, particularly Churchill, was only buying time to prepare for a struggle, and an elaborate Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies was set up, while the unions did nothing.

The Samuel Commission was very different from the Sankey Commission. On the latter there had been an equal number of employers and miners. The Samuel Commission which reported in March 1926, had no workers on it and was packed with representatives of capital. Its main proposal was a cut in wages and it rejected nationalisation. The miners rejected the Commission's findings and appealed to the TUC which by now had been committed to support the miners.

From then until May 3rd, when the General Strike began, the TUC and Labour Party leaders made desperate efforts to avert a General Strike which they did not believe in and which they had no intention of supporting.

From now on, it was the rank and file who took over.

Since 1892, Workers' May Day rallies had taken place in Wolverhampton. In the great pre-strike 1926 **May Day demonstration**, the festive mood was shared by Wolverhampton's communists but this did not prevent arrests taking place. Albert Darke and John James Foster were charged with having worn service uniform 'in such a way as to bring it into contempt'. Darke wore an RAF uniform with a red band.



On the shoulders he wore red badges. Foster was in the uniform of a line regiment and he was similarly decorated.

The case was heard after the strike had ended. Inspector Churchward gave evidence that on 1st May the Labour Party was holding a demonstration from St. James' Square. As the procession moved off Darke joined it with a placard reading '*Don't shoot*'. At 7.45 the same evening, at a Communist Party meeting, Darke was similarly attired and Foster carried a red flag. The two communists were defended by Randle Evans, a noted Labour Party progressive solicitor, who submitted that his clients were wearing uniform in the course of a bona fide military representation forming part of a tableau. They were not there to bring contempt upon the uniform.

The Chairman of the bench of magistrates (consisting of W.H.Pritchard, Sir Charles Marston and Alderman P.Frost) said that the court could not tolerate that H.M uniforms should be used in a contemptuous manner. Albert Darke was fined £6 and given time to pay, and Foster was fined £1.

On that same day, a conference called by the TUC called a general strike in defence of the miners, to begin on 3rd May.

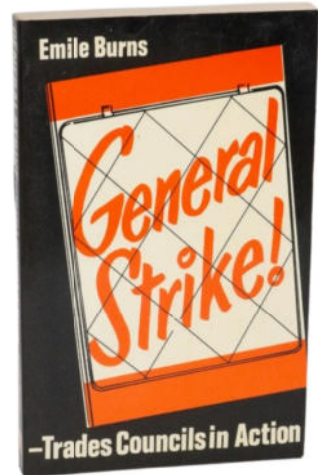
The General Strike in Wolverhampton

There are no surviving trade union sources for the strike in the Black Country, and so Emile Burns' collected reports in his *'The General Strike, May 1926: Trades Councils in Action'* provide much of our information for this area.

From Burns' report for Wolverhampton we learn that no preparations had been made, and a Special Executive Committee of the Trades and Labour Council met only on the first day of the strike (3rd of May) when an Emergency

Committee of three men was appointed to sit continuously with full powers to co-ordinate the activities of the unions involved.

The first wave of workers called out consisted of 3,500 transport workers, and an unspecified number of members of the Typographical Association, NATSOPA, ETU, some AEU and Allied Trades and Building Workers.



The Emergency Committee consisted of representatives of each affected union. It first met the next day, **Tuesday 4th May**, and was faced with the question of interpreting the general circular sent by the TUC while waiting for instructions from the individual unions to cease work. The Committee was divided in its opinions as to its function, some thinking that it had the power to call all men out. The majority view, however, was that the job of the local Emergency Committee was to carry out the wishes of the TUC and obtain concerted action locally on that basis. But this presented problems, since different unions were sending different instructions to their branches, this being most evident in the building trades.

The Central Emergency Committee met every afternoon in the Labour Rooms.

A separate strike committee was formed of the railway groups (there were important railway shops in Wolverhampton) which met daily at North Road Club, with a sub-Emergency Committee meeting in the Labour Rooms consisting of four Trades Council representatives, a representative of each of the building trades and the North Road joint committee.

To overcome the lack of reliable information, lines of communication were established south to Birmingham, north to Manchester and beyond, and west through Shrewsbury to North Wales. Volunteer dispatch riders were appointed to act for the TUC in every town between Dudley and Oswestry, receiving reports each day from each strike committee, sending out official information from the TUC, supplying them with speakers where necessary and forwarding information to London to the General Council.



General Strike, Wolverhampton May 1926

A local bulletin of 500 each issue was published for six days from the **5th May**. Open-air meetings were arranged every day at the Market Place, with a good supply of local speakers assisted by the miners from Cannock. There were national speakers at the

weekend. A meeting on **Sunday 9th May**, packed the Theatre Royal with 2,500 people with an overflow meeting of 1,100 at the Co-op Hall. Even with these two halls packed, thousands were unable to obtain admission.

As in the rest of the West Midlands, there were differences of opinion as to whether car workers were included under transport and therefore among those called on to strike.

In Wolverhampton this matter was settled when the Vehicle Builders received definite instructions to withdraw their labour. The other unions involved then acted on the principle laid down by the TUC, that where one section of labour was called out in a given factory then all should strike. Thus the important car industry was closed down.

All building workers, except those engaged in housing, hospitals or sanitation, were ordered to strike. This caused dissatisfaction in Wolverhampton where the whole of the industry was determined to stand by the miners'. The Strike Committee therefore had the greatest difficulty in keeping within the TUC instructions and on **Saturday 8th May**, a meeting of building workers instructed local officials to send a telegram demanding the withdrawal of all building trade workers.

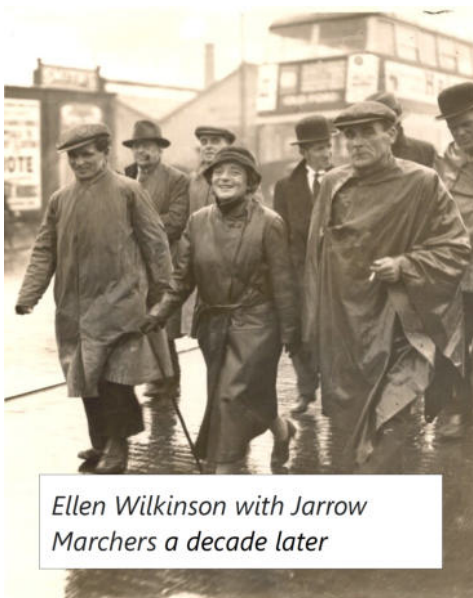
The town's 23 Mega Watt power supply from the Commercial Road Power Station, received a great deal of attention. The TUC requested that local arrangements be made to supply houses, hospitals, bakeries, etc., but the management refused to negotiate with a deputation and instructions were eventually received to withdraw all men from the power station.



From figures provided by the manager of the labour exchange on Monday 10th May, it is estimated that 35,000 workers took part in the General Strike in Wolverhampton.

In the TUC Library there are reports from Wolverhampton and Walsall and also a report of Ellen Wilkinson and J.F.Horrabin of their tour through the Midlands. The latter report gives valuable testimony of the position in

Wolverhampton towards the end of the strike. It states that there was a ready and unanimous response to the call in every occupation.



Public opinion was strongly in favour of the strikers. Not a tram or bus was running. Some attempts had been made by the local Council and Chief Constable to intimidate tramway and busmen, without success. Three Midland Red buses had tried to run, but were withdrawn by inducements. The typographical men had been persuaded to go back by the editor of the local paper, *Express & Star*. Police and strikers were on good terms. Food was supplied by road and there were no shortages.

In Wolverhampton, Wilkinson and Horrabin had addressed two open-air meetings on the Market Patch of 6,000 each. The figures they give for the indoor Sunday meetings are 4,900 at the Royal Theatre and 2,000 at the Co-op Hall.

In the area between the Black Country and the Cannock coalfield they had addressed an open-air meeting of 2,000 at New Invention.

In Bilston 1,500 had listened in Oatmeal Square.

Their general observation was that they had been immensely struck by the complete stoppage and the peacefulness of the workers in every town through which they had passed. The response was 'magnificent' everywhere.

The Home Office report for 6th May stated that in Wolverhampton journalists were on strike in sympathy with the printers. The *Express & Star* was publishing a foolscap sheet with volunteers.

About 2,500 men had come out at the Sunbeam works.

There had been some interference with working railwaymen who were being given police protection.

Arthur MacManus, was

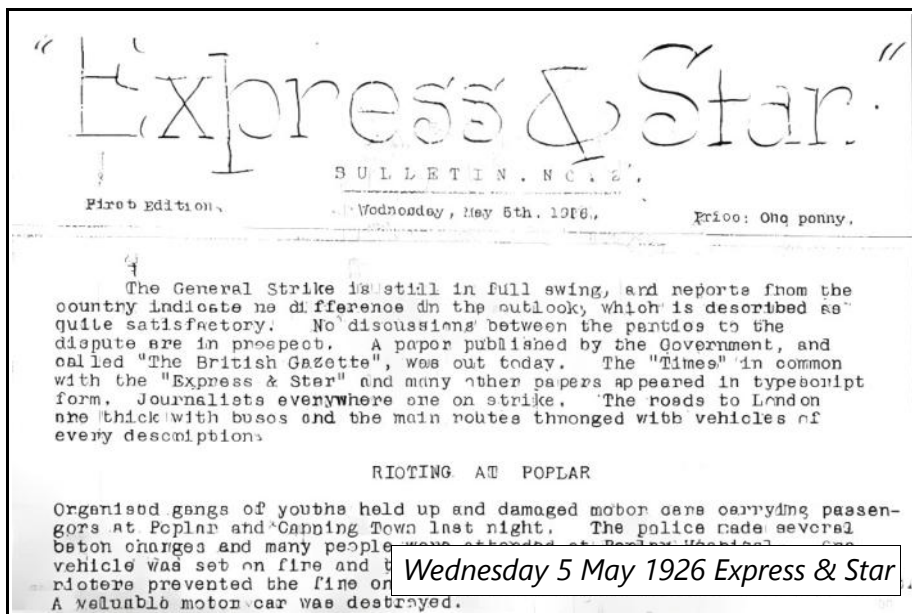
expected to hold a Communist meeting in the town on Saturday, but the police would not allow him to speak. He was one of twelve Communist Party officials recently released from a six month prison sentence after refusing an **offer to walk free if he renounced the Party** for seditious libel and incitement to mutiny following the forged Zinoviev letter.



On **Wednesday 5th May** there was a report from the Engineering Employers' Federation stating that AEU members in Birmingham and Coventry were out.

The Home Office report for **Friday 7th May** stated that in Wolverhampton more engineers were out and that 400 police specials had been enrolled, with more coming forward. The electrical workers might come out, but in that case the power station would be run by volunteers.

Turning to the local press, the *Express & Star* ran a badly produced, duplicated 1d sheet on 4th, 5th and 6th May.



The first reported hopefully that arrangements were being made for charabancs and buses to be run in certain districts under police protection and that it was hoped to run a skeleton GWR train service from Wolverhampton to Birmingham.

A Communist meeting of about 800 had assembled at the Market Place and had been immediately dispersed by the police.

The bulletin reported pickets at the garage of C.F. James in Sweetman Street and a stopping of one of his charabancs in Stafford Street, police arriving in time to prevent a disturbance.

By **Friday 7th May**, the *Express & Star* was producing a two-page printed sheet with more local news. Wolverhampton tramways were still firm.

The Star Engineering works at Bushbury and Frederick Street were closed although only 50 per cent of the men were trade unionists.

The Sunbeam and Moorfield Road works were at a standstill.

Guy Motors had 500 to 600 men out and 200 men in.

At A.J.Stevens (AJS) 50 to 60 AEU members were out, but the firm was carrying on.

THE BRITISH WORKER
OFFICIAL STRIKE NEWS BULLETIN
Published by The General Council of the Trades Union Congress

No. 1. FRIDAY EVENING, MAY 7, 1926. PRICE ONE PENNY

TO OUR READERS
You will at once ask when you go this issue: Why is it only half the size it was before? The reason is that the Council has stopped its supply of paper.
At the time and in a half there are copies belonging to me. The Council refuses to let us have them.
We are, therefore, compelled to cut down our circulation. Tomorrow, if Mr. Dalton still declines to allow the Workers' cause to be defamed by the General Council's newspaper, we may not be able to appear at all in our present form.
— See *Trades Unionist*, 23.4.1926.
To give the cause of labor, even the very grave risk of meeting all the good men has been done by the General Council's daily effort to induce to believe in an untrue account.
The action is provocative. It is bound to be widely resented. The type and the circulation of the paper will be restricted, but we can do that. Mr. Dalton has added another measure of responsibility to those which already weigh upon him.
When the workers learn the reasons and that they are being told the

The General Council does not challenge the Constitution. It is not seeking to substitute un-constitutional government, Nor is it desirous of undermining our Parliamentary institutions. The sole aim of the Council is to secure for the miners a decent standard of life. The Council is engaged in an Industrial dispute. There is no Constitutional crisis.

WHERE WE STAND
It is being persistently stated that Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, Mr. Herbert Smith, Mr. Arthur Cook, and other Trade Union leaders have been engaged in an attempt to reopen negotiations with a view to ending the General Stoppage.
The General Council wish it to be clearly understood that there is no truth in this assertion.
No official or unofficial overtures have been made

FAILURE OF THE O.M.S.
Truth About Situation at Newcastle-on-Tyne
APPEAL TO UNIONS
— The Organisation for Maintaining Supplies at Newcastle-on-Tyne has broken down completely, and the authorities have appointed for the aid of the miners, "appointed Mr. Croxall, one of the Tyne and Wear M.P.s, in the House of Commons on Thursday night. He has tried a Government representative and the miners are now represented in the House of Commons, and received a denial of Mr. Croxall's statement.
The British Worker is able to publish the following account of the Tyne and Wear situation, as given by the "Workers' Chronicle" a paper published on Friday morning by the Newcastle Trades Council, Assembly, 16.1.1926.
statement, Mr. Croxall, M.P., of the Tyne and Wear M.P.s, in the House of Commons at Newcastle, and reported to the trade union to have been one.
"With reference to the Government Council in the House of Commons, says the Workers' Chronicle, "Has Mr. Croxall, M.P., had in contact with the Strike Committee, the fact that these negotiations were held with

On **Saturday 8th May**, the *Express & Star* printed four pages. An advertisement from Beattie's, the large department store in the town, showed that they at least had prepared for the General Strike.

It stated that the strike had been threatening for months and that the store had ample stocks to meet all demands for three months.

In Wolverhampton, the paper reported the continued total absence of trams and buses, but otherwise the town was normal. Bushbury parish church had given over its Institute to the strikers (mainly railwaymen) and these men had decided to march in a body to church on Sunday.

AEU men had stopped work at Clyno, but this car firm was carrying on.

A short service of prayer for industrial peace was being said at St. Peter's church in the town centre every day at 12.30pm.

The Grand Theatre would be closed the following week because the company, which was to have produced '*The Jazz Marriage*', had '*transport difficulties*'.

In Willenhall most factories were on a three-day week because of shortage of fuel.

On **Monday 10th May**, another four-page issue of the *Express & Star* appeared. There had been no peace moves over the weekend and the position remained the same. Many Black Country works were still managing to keep open.

At Harper Sons and Beans three works with 2,500 men had to be closed at Dudley, Tipton and Smethwick because finished cars could not be dispatched; 3,700 men had signed on at Dudley Labour Exchange since the strike began.

Joseph Ball, a miner of Cross Street, Dudley, was given one month's hard labour for allegedly assaulting two police officers and committing an offence against the Emergency Powers Act. He incited a rowdy crowd, shouting '*Come on lads, let's have a go! We're not frightened of you!*' The crowd rushed the police who

drew their staves. Several women said, 'Cheer up, lad!' when the sentence was passed.

Sunbeam and Star were still at a standstill. At A.J.Stevens it was said, 'there is a sort of ebb and flow at our works, but we are still able to carry on. About 800 are on duty and 600 still on strike.'

Two hundred men were on strike at Henry Meadows, leaving 38 at work.

This issue of the *Express & Star* found space for a remarkable Red scare story: a Paris paper had published a letter from its German correspondent stating that *the General Strike in Britain had been planned in secret many months before in Moscow!*

The *Express & Star* voiced the opinions of the employers and much of its reportage was mendacious or misleading.

An example is the paper's report of 10th May that at Guy Motors a secret ballot in the presence of two trade union officials had given a 75 per cent vote in favour of a return to work. This issue also reported that at Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss the men were returning to work. The next day the paper reported that 87



USED BY OVER 100 MUNICIPALITIES.

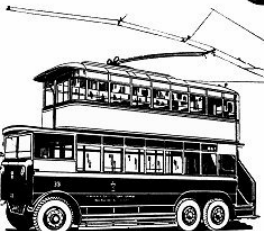
Ashborne	Keighley	Plymouth
Ashton-under-Lyne	Lytham St. Anne's Boro' T'ways	Reading
Burton-on-Trent	Leeds	Rochdale
Birmingham	Lincoln	Rio de Janeiro Tramway
Birkenhead	Liverpool	Rotherham
Barrow	Leicester	Sheffield
Blackpool	Leigh	Stafford
Cole	Manchester	Salford
Coleva Bay	Morecambe	Southampton
Edinburgh	Norwich	Stoke-on-Trent
Great Yarmouth	Newcastle	Wolverhampton
Huddersfield	Nottingham	Walsall
Hull	Notts and Derby Tramway	West Ham
Hastings Tramways	Oldham	West Bromwich
Hong-Kong	Portsmouth	

ALSO:—

War Office
 Indian Office
 Navy, Army and Air Force
 African and Eastern Trade Corporation
 Rubery Owen & Co., Ltd.
 Chivers & Sons
 J. Lucas, Ltd.



GUY 25-cwt. Van.



GUY Six-Wheeled Trolley Bus.

Harrods, Ltd.
 Wm. Whiteley, Ltd.
 John Barkers, Ltd.
 Lyons
 United Dairies
 Huntley & Palmers,
 etc., etc.

GUY MOTORS Ltd. Wolverhampton.

men had reported for work at Guy's while between 500 and 600 men were 'affected' by the strike and 250 had been 'outside' (picketing) when the firm opened.

Guy, the managing director, admitted that the meeting at which the ballot had been taken was 'not largely attended' due to the fact that pickets had told workers that no meeting was being held.

Guy was a particularly active employer in attempting to break the strike. Even this amended version of the Guy story is likely to be only an approximation to the truth and the facts of the so-called 'return the work' at Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss are now never likely to be known.

Another clear example of misleading reporting was an item in the 12th May issue headed '*How men were going back to work before the good news came*'. Here the whole country was scoured for news of men returning to work before the end of the strike, but all that could be found was such items as '*Birmingham-12-minute train service to Dudley*' or '*Stoke-on-Trent-A number of tramway and omnibus employees have returned, but the response is extremely limited*'.

Nevertheless, the press is cowardly as well as venal; while the capitalist system is under attack the endless direct strictures on workers are suspended. But when profits and property are once more secure, editors again thunder against the wickedness and criminality of striking workers. This was so in 1842 when Chartists controlled the Black Country in the general strike of August that year, and so it was with the *Express & Star* in 1926.

The 12th May editorial spoke only of '*unbounded relief*' at the ending of the strike. But the following day it was, '*The Law Victorious*' and, '*Did the TUC ever consider the legality of their*

action?... It can hardly be imagined in any way a victory for the unions.... The forces of law have triumphed as they always will in Britain.' Much more of this sort was to follow in the days and weeks ahead.

The General Strike of 1926 is the most important event in the history of the trade union movement in Britain.

Employers had wanted and provoked the strike in order to curb the power of the trades unions and to bring all wages down.

The right-wing Labour leaders feared the strike, had tried to avoid it and wanted it brought to an end at the earliest possible moment before it got 'out of hand'.

To hundreds of thousands of workers, however, the strike came as a revelation. It showed with the starkest clarity that society only existed through the labour of working people.

During the strike Trades Councils exercised powers of decision and control normally carried out by employers and police. Thus the strike taught lessons of democracy and workers' control.

It was also a magnificent example of workers' solidarity and comradeship, contrasting with the selfishness of capitalism.

Above all, in a society of mass poverty, deprivation and high unemployment a successful conclusion to the strike held the promise of fundamental changes in society. Most strikers realised therefore, however dimly, that the project on which they were engaged was of great significance.

Hence the *Nine Days* had an atmosphere of gaiety, solidarity, determination, militancy, and mass participation which is rarely captured by strike reporting.

Some observers, however, did begin to catch this atmosphere. Ellen Wilkinson wrote graphically in Lansbury's *Labour Weekly* of 22nd May of her experiences in the Midlands:

'We got to Coventry that night to find the town in the hands of the local Soviet. We spoke to one of the biggest open-air crowds I have ever seen. The engineers were very disgruntled at not being called out.... Wolverhampton, not on our list, demanded a meeting and in one hour we got a large crowd to listen despite pouring rain. They and Walsall were in the same position as Coventry...'

Much of this mass participation went unrecorded, but it is quite certain that almost every urban area saw meetings and demonstrations, perhaps larger than these places had ever seen before and certainly larger than anything since the Reform Bill or Chartist times in the nineteenth century. Immediately before the strike, there had been the mass demonstrations of May Day.

The following weekend again saw massive meetings. Then there were the demonstrations of the weekend following. Throughout the strike, the hunger for news and desire for mass communication was such that enormous meetings could be held during the day. Often these were Communist meetings which the police promptly broke up.

The solidarity of the strike made mass picketing possible and overwhelming public sympathy was manifest at crucial moments. In view of the particular efforts that were made to break the strike at what was considered to be its weakest point, namely transport, this atmosphere of solidarity might be illustrated by detailing the determined efforts made in Wolverhampton to get buses back on the road.

On **Monday 10th May**, it was decided to attempt to run ten buses manned by volunteers.

At 6.30pm when the attempt was to be made, a crowd, estimated by the *Express & Star* at 1,000 assembled at the Cleveland Street depot. Police, including mounted specials, cleared a way for the volunteers and it seems that some of the buses got away.

At 9pm the crowds 'still numbered several hundreds'.

At 7.50am the next day, the first bus, manned by three men in plain clothes and one uniformed policeman, set out. It was later claimed that ten buses were running.



All that day 'strikers in Queen Square thronged the pavements as densely as if waiting for a royal procession'.

On Wednesday, the *Express & Star* returned to the events of the previous day. 'The first day of the volunteer bus service will be long remembered,' it reported. The story went on to tell of huge

crowds in Princes Square during Tuesday night and photographs confirmed the enormous numbers who protested against this attempt to break the strike.

The transport workers of Wolverhampton remained firm until the end.

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THE BRITISH WORKER

OFFICIAL STRIKE NEWS BULLETIN

Published by The General Council of the Trades Union Congress

No. 8.

WEDNESDAY EVENING, MAY 12, 1926.

PRICE ONE PENNY

STRIKE TERMINATED TO-DAY

Trades Union Congress General Council Satisfied That Miners Will
Now Get a Fair Deal

HOW PEACE CAME

Telegrams Already Sent to All Unions Concerned to Instruct
Their Branches at Once: Miners Call Delegate Conference

The General Strike is over.

The General Council of the Trades Union Congress proclaimed this to-day, having reached the conclusion, as a result of a number of conversations with Sir Herbert Samuel, that a satisfactory basis of settlement in the mining industry can now be formulated. The official announcement was issued by Mr. Arthur Pugh, after the General Council had been received this morning by Mr. Baldwin and a number of his Cabinet colleagues.

Telegrams of instruction have already been sent to all affiliated bodies.

The Miners' Federation Executive will report fully to a conference to be convened next Friday.

The negotiations which led to the termination of the general strike were facilitated by the intervention of Sir Herbert Samuel, the Chairman of the Coal Commission.

Sir Herbert returned specially from Italy, where he was

whole-hearted co-operation between all parties concerned, should result in a more equitable and durable relationship than has hitherto existed in the Coal Mining Industry.

The Movement came out in order to ensure a fair deal for the Miners. They are satisfied that that can now be achieved.

The following letters have been exchanged between Sir Herbert Samuel and the General Council of the Trades Union Congress:—

May 12th, 1926.

Dear Mr. Pugh,

As the outcome of the conversations which I have had with your Committee, I attach a memorandum embodying the conclusions that have been reached.

I have made it clear to your Committee from the outset that I have been acting entirely on my own initiative, have received no authority from the Government, and can give no assurance on their behalf.

I am of opinion that the proposals embodied in the Memorandum are suitable for adoption, and are likely to promote a settlement of the differences in the Coal Industry.

I shall strongly recommend their acceptance by the Government when the negotiations are renewed.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) HERBERT SAMUEL

CONTINUED ON PAGE FOUR

T.U.C. ORDER

In order to resume negotiations, the General Council decided to terminate the General Strike to-day.

Telegrams of instructions were sent to the Executive Committee of affiliated unions, who will communicate with the branches of their organisations, in accordance with their usual practice. Members before acting must wait definite instructions from their own Executive Councils.

taking a short vacation, to ascertain whether his services could be utilised towards resolving the differences between the parties.

A number of informal conversations took place between him and representatives of the General Council, as a result of which the General Council reached the conclusion that a satisfactory basis of settlement could be formulated.

The Memorandum and the correspondence which is published in this issue indicate, in the view of the General Council, the lines along which negotiations can proceed to effect a solution to the many problems which the situation in the Coal Mining Industry has given rise.

The proposals, if approached and operated in a spirit of

On the **last day of the strike**, the *Express & Star* reported the Wolverhampton situation little changed.

Strikers were still coming out-for instance, 129 at EEC, and other works were closing 'because of lack of transport'.

At Bilston lorries leaving goods stations still had to have police guards.

As in other parts of the country, the first reaction of some to the call-off of the strike was a feeling of elation, for they supposed they must have won. But disillusion was swift and was followed by the struggle for a return to work.

In Wolverhampton the Emergency Committee met on the afternoon of **Wednesday 12th May** and had posters displayed in front of the Labour Rooms advising men not to return to work until instructions to that effect came from the unions.

This caution was well justified.

The railways, Guy Motors, the ECC and Midland Red buses were requiring men to *'sign documents which would take away the whole of the rights which their fathers and forefathers had fought so dearly for, and it is quite evident that the employers of this country were prepared to use this crisis as a method of breaking down trade union bargaining'*. Some employers would take men back *'only as work became available'*.

Apart from the railways, it is not known to what extent victimisation occurred in the Black Country.

The General Strike in Bilston - masses of workers demonstrated, although we only have the reports of the *Express & Star* to go by. *'Bilston tramway and railway workers gathered in fairly large numbers on Monday 10th when attempts were made to remove supplies from the railway depot to various factories. A number of volunteer lorry drivers, including several undergraduates in plus fours evidently enjoyed the experience. There was no attempt at molestation'*.

Evaluating the strike, Postgate, Wilkinson and Horrabin classified areas into four classes.

- **Class I** was towns where response was near to 100 per cent.
- **Class II** was where the strike was wholly effective but with weaknesses in some sections.
- **Class III** was towns with serious weaknesses.
- **Class IV** towns where the strike broke down.

Of the Midland towns, Birmingham, Kidderminster, Lichfield, Stafford, Stoke, Worcester and Wolverhampton were Class I.

In Class II were Coventry, Shrewsbury, Smethwick, Stourbridge, Walsall and Wednesbury.

No Midland towns were in the other two classes.

The Wolverhampton Emergency Committee summed up the strike as follows: '*... **the trade union movement is indeed to be congratulated upon the splendid stand made on behalf of their more unfortunate brethren, the miners, and with very little exception, the whole of the workers stood solid and were prepared to fight to the bitter end, so that when the news came through on Wednesday 12th May, that the strike was over, it came as a shock, as the situation then looked as though it would last indefinitely.***'

On Sunday **19th May**, Wolverhampton Trades Council held a meeting at the Market Place.

The *Wolverhampton Chronicle* informs us that there was a crowd of 300, '*but this increased after the first half hour*'. Allport, the chairman of the Trades Council, said they met, '*to offer thanks for the solidarity of the working class*'. Dan Davies, the local election agent of the Labour Party, said that '*if the strike had lasted another week we would have entered another era of the struggle*'.

This latter statement is highly significant. The day before the strike ended the TUC had called out the second wave of workers, all the engineering and shipbuilding workers not already affected. This call was just beginning to take effect in the Black Country.

The solidarity of the strike from start to finish suggests that this unique chapter in working-class history would have ended very differently had the strike continued.

The employers and government wreaked their revenge on working people who had had the temerity to mount a general strike.

The TUC General Council had called off the strike without any consultation with the miners, who refused to accept the mine owners' terms, and continued on strike until November, when they were literally starved back to work. The number of miners in Wolverhampton at this time was less than 100 (although more elsewhere in the Black Country e.g. Dudley 1,500) so the main efforts of the Trades Council in these months was succour and solidarity with Cannock miners as well as those in the Black Country.

Victimisation in other industries occurred notably on the railways and from this time it became very difficult for active trade unionists to find employment in the key engineering trade.

The government passed the draconic Trades Disputes Act of 1927. This made any future general strike illegal, also any sympathetic or secondary action which could be construed as intending to coerce the government. Blacklegs expelled from their unions could seek claims for damages from the unions. Mass picketing was forbidden.

Civil servants were confined to those trade unions catering solely for state employees and these unions were forbidden to have any political objectives or affiliate to the TUC or Labour Party. In yet another attempt to cripple the finances of the Labour Party, trade unionists had to 'contract in' to pay the political levy instead of 'contracting out'.

This act stood until the post-war Labour Government repealed it.

This text featured extracts from: ***History of Wolverhampton, Bilston and District Trades Union Council 1865-1990*** by Dr George Barnsby.

Report by Wolverhampton TUC, printed in *Trades Councils in Action 1926* by Walter Citrine, which was an analysis of the work done across Britain of trades councils running their towns during the General Strike.

Wolverhampton Organisation - As Emergency Committee; see detailed report below.

Arrangements with Co-op - holding meeting in Co-op. Hall.

Publicity - **local bulletin** issued from Wednesday 5th May, for six days; 500 each issue.

Position on 12th May - No weakening whatever.

Report of Wolverhampton Emergency Committee.

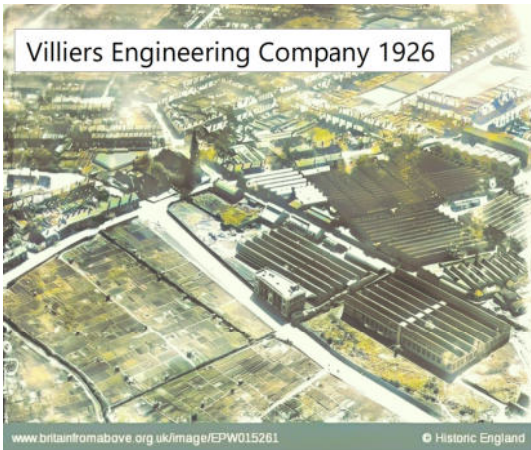
On **Monday 3rd May**, a Special Executive Committee of the Trades and Labour Council was held to consider the Coal Crisis, and an Emergency Committee of three was appointed, with full powers to co-ordinate the activities of the Unions involved, and such Committee to sit continually during the day.

The first call was made to the Transport men numbering about 3,500; the Typographical Association, N.A.T.S.O.P.A., E.T.U. and some members of the A.E.U. and Allied Trades and Building Trade Workers.

An **Emergency Committee** was set up immediately consisting of a representative from each of the Unions so affected.

The first meeting was held on Tuesday 4th May, at 2.30pm, and the first problem the Committee had to face was interpreting the general circular sent down by the Trades Union Congress, together with the waiting of instructions from Unions to cease work.

An impression existed among some members of the Emergency Committee that they, the Emergency Committee, had full power to call out all workers, irrespective of official instructions, but we think the Sub-Emergency Committee was quite right in taking the point of view that their duty was not to give instructions to cease work, but that they should only carry out the wishes of the



General Council, and endeavour to obtain concerted action in the bringing out of men, but even this was very difficult owing to each Union sending down different circular letters to their branches, this being most evident in the Building trades.

The Central Emergency Committee met every afternoon at the Labour Rooms, and a Strike Committee was formed of the railway groups, which met at North Road Club daily with a Sub-Emergency Committee meeting in the Labour Rooms each morning at 11 o'clock, consisting of the four appointed by the Trades Council, with a representative each of the Building Trades and of the North Road Joint Committee.

The next problem was that of communication, and the lack of reliable information, and we fixed up a communicating line between Wolverhampton and Birmingham to Stafford, Stone, and Manchester to the North, and Wellington and Shrewsbury for Chester and North Wales.

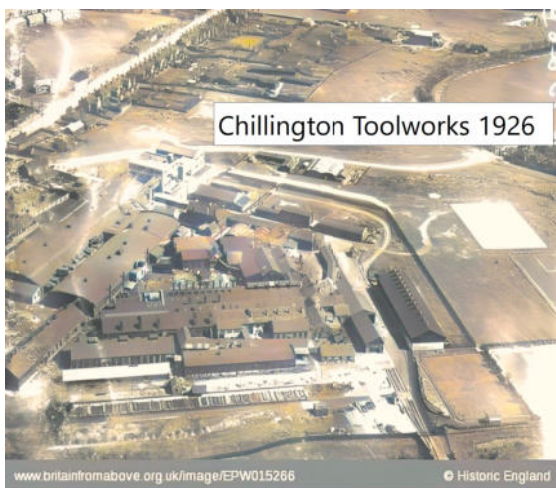
Despatch riders were fixed up with willing volunteers, and one member was appointed by the Sub-Emergency Committee to act on behalf of the T.U.C. for all the towns between Dudley and

Oswestry, receiving a report each day from each Strike Committee, sending out official information from the T.U.C., supplying them with speakers where necessary, and forwarding information to London to the General Council.

As there were no newspapers, your Committee decided to issue their own **Strike Bulletin**, which commenced on Wednesday 5th May, and published every day until the General Strike was called off, and, judging by the great demand made for the copies, the publication must have served a very useful purpose.

Open-air meetings were arranged every day at the Market Place with a good supply of local speakers, assisted by the Miners' representatives from Cannock, and during the week-end we were favoured by the visit of several national speakers. Sunday evening over 2,500 people attended the Theatre Royal. An overflow meeting was held at the Co-operative Hall, with 1,100 people in attendance, but even with those two halls packed, thousands were unable to obtain admission.

Engineers - The first instructions sent down to your Committee re Engineers were very vague, and there existed much difference of opinion between the members of your Committee as to whether they applied to the Motor industry, but eventually the Vehicle Builders received definite instructions for the withdrawal of their men.



Other Unions involved then acted in accordance with the principle which had been laid down by the General Council that if any Executive Committee of any Union had given instructions to withdraw any men in any particular factory, all other Unions were to come out as well, so your Committee very quickly succeeded in arriving at a policy which caused a complete stoppage of the Motor industry in this town.

The Building Trade had many complications. Instructions were received by some of the Unions that all Building Trade workers should cease unless engaged upon Housing, Hospital, and Sanitation.

This caused a great deal of dissatisfaction in the Building trade.

The whole of the workers were determined to stand by the miners, and it was with the utmost difficulty that your Committee was able to keep within instructions laid down by the T.U.C.

A meeting of the Building Trade workers, held on

Saturday 8th May, instructed local officials to send a telegram asking for withdrawal of all men in the Building industry.

Your Committee also sent a deputation to the Mayor and the Town Clerk on the attitude of the mounted police, led by the Chief Constable, in their endeavour to protect a private charabanc plying for hire over the routes of the Transport



Committee. Your deputation pointed out that it was illegal, and succeeded in obtaining the withdrawal of the private charabanc. They also dealt with many other serious complaints, but got very little satisfaction from the Mayor.

The question of the Power Station at Commercial Road also received a great deal of attention. The T.U.C. had wired asking your Strike Committee to try and come to some arrangements with the Electrical Engineer only to supply such services as house, street, and shop lighting, social services, etc., power for the production of food, bakeries, domestic purposes, and laundries, but the management refused to agree to the request of the deputation, and later, instructions were received from the T.U.C. **to withdraw all men from the Power Stations.**

On Monday 10th May, it was estimated by the Manager of the local Labour Exchange that **35,000 workers had ceased work in Wolverhampton**, and the Trades Union movement are indeed to be congratulated upon the splendid stand made on behalf of their more unfortunate brethren, the miners, and with very little exception, the whole of the workers stood solid and were prepared to fight to the bitter end, so that when the news came through on **Wednesday 12th May, that the Strike was over**, it came as a shock, as the situation then looked as though it would last indefinitely.

Your Emergency Committee met the same afternoon and had posters displayed in front of the Labour Rooms advising the men not to return to work until instructions to that effect came from their Branch officials.

It is just as well we took this precaution, because we found that in the Railway Department, Guy Motor Works, the E.C.C., and the Red Bus Section of the Transport Workers, these men were

required to sign documents which would take away the whole of the rights which their fathers and forefathers had fought so dearly for, and it is quite evident that the employers of this country were prepared to use this crisis as a method of breaking down Trade Union bargaining.

Your Emergency Committee thinks that the time is opportune for a strong campaign to be put forward with a view to strengthening Trade Unionism.

They have found in this struggle, as in previous struggles, that the "nonner" as well as the Union man, answers the call made to him, and we think that every effort should be made at once to get all back into the Unions.

A century later....

Trade unions continue to use strike action as a last resort to defend and win improvements to workers' pay and their terms and conditions.

Working days lost due to strikes in the UK since 1900



Source: House of Commons Library, ONS



Industrial unrest peaked again in the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite government attacks on trade unions for the last 45 years, we are still here, and continue to shape the future of Britain, organising workers to make a better future for themselves, their families and for the young who will be future workers.



The nearest thing to another general strike took place in 2011, when 2.6 million workers took part in a strike in defence of pensions.



2023 strikers' march in Wolverhampton.



PROTECT THE RIGHT TO STRIKE

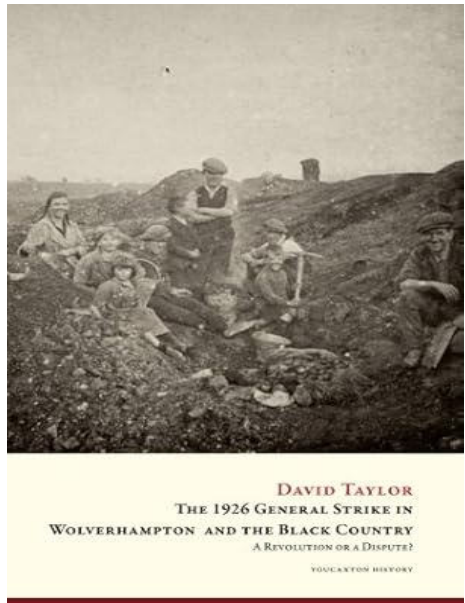
Come and support striking
Teachers, Lecturers
Train Drivers & Civil Servants
NEU-UCU-ASLEF-PCS

We now await the new **Employment Rights Bill** which will restore some rights taken away over the last 45 years of anti-union legislation.

Further reading <https://www.amazon.co.uk/General-Strike-Wolverhampton-Black-Country/dp/1911175998/>

The 1926 General Strike in Wolverhampton and the Black Country: a Revolution or a Dispute? by David Taylor

In May 1926 Britain experienced a General Strike that lasted nine days. Why it occurred and what happened have been the subject of very polarised accounts, reflecting the different interpretations of the different groups of people involved as well as the differing viewpoints of the observers. Trade unionists, miners, the T.U.C., the Conservative government, Marxists and Communists, moderates, economists



and, of course, historians of all shades of opinion, have all highlighted different aspects of this conflict. Wolverhampton and the Black Country have been little involved in this debate, mainly because the most dramatic events took place elsewhere. However, all the issues of the General Strike were reflected in Wolverhampton and the Black Country and in such a way as to allow all the different opinions of the protagonists to be more clearly discerned. The general strike is variably interpretable, because it really did mean different things to different people and this book explores these different points of view within the context of Wolverhampton and the Black Country.

National museums, libraries, archives, community groups, and individuals across the UK are marking the centenary of the 1926 General Strike.

Visit the General Strike 100 website
<https://generalstrike100.com/>



Our local history series:



WB&DTUC

Unique history of the trade union movement in Wolverhampton and Bilston, 1865-1990, by the region's premier historian.

The final years of Bilston's Elisabeth, the last of the great blast furnaces to grace the skyline of the Black Country.



BILSTON STEEL



1926

When Workers ruled Wolverhampton & Bilston; the 1926 General Strike.

1913-1915

Archive of the *Wolverhampton Worker*, published monthly with a 17,000 circulation by our trades council; unique slice of local working class history, 1913-15.



TINPLATE

Unknown history of Wolverhampton Tinsplate trade unionists. Five Wolverhampton tinsplate workers were transported in 1819, before the Tolpuddle Martyrs, for the crime of forming a trade union.

Research, which we commissioned on the local links to those who profited from the local manufacture of ironware used in plantations and to enslave.



Agricultural Tools



An Overview

Research, which we commissioned on the Wolverhampton and Black Country links to those who profited from enslavement and who were compensated after abolition.