

Reflections on the General Strike

By J. R. CAMPBELL.

THE late General Strike was one of the greatest mass strikes arising out of a question of wages, in the history of any highly developed industrial country. Its importance for the working class movement of the world cannot possibly be exaggerated. It merits study in all its details, in order that we may draw valuable lessons for the future from the experience gained by the workers in it. It is, therefore, surprising that so little discussion has been entered upon as to the lessons it holds for the working class.

Not an Accident.

Surely the first thing we have to get clear is that the strike was not an accident, but the result of the whole previous development of the class struggle in Great Britain. It is necessary to emphasise this when we find Mr. MacDonald writing as if it were merely the bungling of Mr. Baldwin which had brought on the General Strike.

“Had the Government taken the matter in hand not later than when the lock-out notices were posted up, it was the simplest thing in the world to have avoided the General Strike.”—(“Socialist Review,” June, 1926.)

What a beautiful explanation! Mr. Baldwin is not so clever as Mr. MacDonald, hence the General Strike.

The General Strike originated on the question of miners' wages and hours. Is it the simplest thing in the world to get the miners to accept a reduction in wages or a lengthening of hours? Mr. MacDonald knows that it is not. Would it have been the simplest thing in the world to have induced the other workers not to support the miners? Mr. MacDonald answers himself when he says later in the same article:

“After the conduct of the Government it was perfectly evident that had no General Strike been declared industry would have been almost as much paralysed by unauthorised strikes.”

Perhaps it would have been the easiest thing in the world for Mr. Baldwin to have prevented the strike by making a concession. Mr. Baldwin is, however, the representative of the British capitalist class struggling desperately with a situation of economic decline. The growing competition of America, the industrialisation of its own colonies, the loss of financial predominance, the backwardness of its technique, the chronic unemployment, the collapse of the heavy industries, have confronted British capitalism with a crisis for which it sees only one solution—"the wages of all workers must come down."

It is impossible for British capitalism to avoid a struggle to secure this object. If it had made any concessions in April, 1926, it would merely have done so in order to attack the workers later on. But it had spent nine months in making preparations for a struggle in April, 1926. It knew that the Labour movement had made no counter-preparations. It knew that the leaders of the Labour movement were prepared to retreat. In these circumstances the capitalist attack, leading logically to the General Strike, was inevitable.

Choice of Weapons ?

"Granted that the crisis and the lock-out of the miners were there," cry a number of critics, "was it not a mistake to use the weapon of the General Strike? Should not Labour have used some other weapon?"

It is one of the peculiar delusions current in the British Labour movement that the working class in its struggle against capitalism has a variety of "weapons" at its disposal, that it is perfectly free to choose any one of a number of "paths" to its emancipation. Thus Mr. Clynes explains that he never really believed in the weapon of the General Strike and the workers ought to learn to use the Parliamentary weapon. (It's a pity that the Labour Party in Parliament cannot learn to use it.) Mr. Norman Angell asks, "Shall Britain tread the Moscow road?" The general ignorance of Marxism and the existence of an eclectic literary Socialism have both helped to spread this confusion widely throughout the British Labour movement. The fact that we are in a class struggle, in which we have to adapt our tactics to those of the enemy; in which we have no varied choice of weapons, but have to use those which history has placed in our hands, never seems to have occurred to our imaginative pathfinders.

No doubt if Mr. Clynes could have arranged a dissolution of Parliament for the 1st of April on the issue of present wages versus reduced wages, the workers might have endeavoured to use the Parliamentary weapon first, but in the absence of such an opportunity it is imbecile to put as an alternative to the General Strike, the use of the Parliamentary weapon, especially when we

cannot use that weapon unless the employing class puts it in our hands.

The other weapons which might have been used as an alternative to the General Strike such as financial assistance (Mr. MacDonald) or the embargo (Mr. Brailsford), were not adopted because both of them envisage a long struggle whereas the aim of the workers was to shorten the struggle by bringing the maximum of force to bear at once and so secure a speedy victory.

The Strike Inevitable.

A moment's reflection on the recent experiences of the British workers and one realises that, given the workers' will to fight, an attempt at bringing off a General Strike was inevitable.

The British workers of recent years have passed through the three following experiences.

Firstly, the experience of Black Friday, the isolation and defeat of the miners. That experience surely demonstrates that in a period of capitalist decline the isolated struggle of the workers in one industry usually leads to defeat and that the defeat of one section soon leads to the attack and defeat of all other sections in turn.

The second experience was that of the Labour Government and demonstrated that a merely reformist parliamentary policy could not lead to good results for the workers.

The third; the experience of Red Friday; the defence of the miners' standards as the result of a threat of an embargo leading to a General Strike.

After these experiences there was no alternative before the leaders on May Day except either openly to betray the movement and thereby speedily discredit themselves or to resort to the form of action that the whole previous experiences of the Labour movement had popularised amongst the masses. The development of the Labour movement had made the strike inevitable.

Is the General Strike Useless?

In view of these facts what can we say of Mr. MacDonald's assertions that the General Strike is a weapon which cannot be wielded for industrial purposes (June "Socialist Review"); that it cannot be wielded for political purposes except with arms in the hand ("Forward," May 22nd), and that, as it is directed against the "Community," the community (i.e., the capitalist State) is bound to defend itself ("Answers").

Here you have the same old "choice of weapons" fallacy.

Why has the British working class, which formerly was held up to the workers of Europe as the example of a working class which knew how to live at peace with its employers, begun to manifest signs of unrest and to engage in mass strikes? **Because, Mr. MacDonald, of the decline of British capitalism, leading to a fundamental change in the economic conditions under which the workers live, which in turn results in a new outlook and the adoption of new methods of class defence.** Is the working class entitled to defend its standards of life? If it cannot do so effectively by sectional strikes, is it not entitled to do so by mass strikes? If in using mass strikes it comes up against the State, that simply demonstrates that the working class in its struggle for self-preservation is bound to come into conflict more and more with the capitalist State. That does not prove, as Mr. MacDonald seems to think, that the workers should not use the weapon of the General Strike because it brings them up against the State. The workers have no other weapon. In defending their standards in a period of capitalist decline, the workers must come up against the State which is the bulwark of capitalism, its laws embodying the capitalists' rules of the game.

The alternatives before the workers at the moment clearly are :

1. To submit to wage reductions.
2. To avoid challenging the State by sticking to the sectional strike weapon. This means defeat and wage reductions.
3. To mobilise all forces in a mass strike. This is a challenge to the State. It is also the only way of self-preservation.

The only way in which the Labour movement can avoid challenging the State in modern capitalism is to submit to progressive reductions in wages all along the line.

An Alternative Government.

If the working class is entitled to defend itself, if it can only defend itself by the General Strike, if it cannot have a General Strike without coming up against the State, then it is equally true to say that it cannot successfully carry through a General Strike without laying the foundation of an alternative Government. The struggle for wages at a certain stage becomes a struggle for power.

The suppression of the press, the granting and withdrawing of food permits, the setting up of Workers' Defence Corps, the building of a transport service under union control as undertaken in the late General Strike were all necessary to the success of the

mass movement. They were equally an attempt to strip the capitalist State of some of its functions. There is no need to shiver at this. The path of working class defence leads to the confrontation of the Labour movement and the State and their struggle for mastery. It can only end by the victory of the working class over the State and the setting up of a Workers' State based on the organs of the working class movement. **That is the path indicated not by "Moscow" but by the whole development of the class struggle in Great Britain.**

Intermediate Possibilities.

Does this mean that because the General Strike brings the workers up against the State that it is a useless weapon unless the workers are prepared beforehand to develop it into an armed revolution? One of the excuses that we have heard since the calling off of the last strike was that the General Council was confronted with a revolutionary situation and having no mandate for a revolution they called the strike off.

"Much more serious was the failure to think out the question whether the General Strike is an appropriate weapon unless one intends in the event of success to attempt revolutionary action."—(Mr. Brailsford, "New Leader," May 21st, 1926).

"What then of the General Council? In view of their avowed attitude it is idle to reproach them for not having carried through a successful revolution."—"Lansbury's," May 22nd, 1926).

While realising the political character of every General Strike we consider it is a mistake to reason in this formal fashion: either an acceptance of a reduction in wages or the entrance into a General Strike which will only be successful if it is developed to a victorious revolution. The Right-wing will be pleased to see the question put in that fashion. They know that the workers in their present frame of mind are more prepared to take the first alternative than the second.

There is no need to put the question in this way. The workers can still gain results in a struggle for partial demands under capitalism, provided the struggle is well prepared not only in the extent of the technical preparation of the workers' forces, but also by a systematic campaign of publicity amongst the intermediate sections of the population plus a systematic campaign against the capitalist State. **The State is an instrument of capitalism but it is an instrument which can only be manipulated by the aid of the hundreds of thousands of workers in the forces which it has**

at its disposal. That is its essential weakness. Too little attention has been paid in the past to propoganda amongst the professional classes whom the State relies upon as its auxiliaries. Yet the standard of this section of the population is dependent upon that of the workers.

The possibilities of compromise will narrow as time goes on. It is impossible to extract the same concessions twice by exercise of the same force and bluff. This was the mistake of the Lefts in the General Council in 1926. They expected the bluff of Red Friday to succeed twice.

Better Next Time.

In every successive mass movement the workers must be prepared to go further than in the last, to endure longer, to put forward greater efforts. Not only must the efforts to build the workers' organisations go on unceasingly, but alongside those efforts must go on a ceaseless effort to disintegrate the forces of the enemy.

For while it is possible to conceive the late strike having ended in a victory if the General Council had been more steady, while it is foolish to rule out all possibility of compromise in the future, sooner or later the Labour Movement and the capitalist class will have to fight to a finish. A parliamentary victory for Labour might alter slightly the conditions in which this struggle takes place. It could not prevent it happening. It cannot do away with the necessity of mass action by the working class.

Theory and Practice.

The old pre-war reformist attitude to the General Strike must give way to an attitude which takes into account the new conditions.

In the "Forward" of May 22nd, there are extracts from an article by Jaurès on the General Strike. Jaurès considers:

1. That a General Strike for a limited economic end might succeed if "public opinion" had been convinced of the justice and practicability of the strikers' demands. (MacDonald does not agree with above.)
2. As a demonstration against the slowness of capitalist reforms.
3. As a demonstration against an act of capitalist injustice (restriction of universal suffrage).

He considers that it is useless as a means of revolution. It stops production but cannot re-organise society as the State machine is in the hands of the capitalists.

The whole outlook of Jaurès is that of a Socialist thinker liv-

ing in the pre-war era of European capitalist expansion when the workers' conditions were steadily improving. It was easy for him in those circumstances to deal with the General Strike as the panacea of people who were getting impatient with the slow process of building a parliamentary majority and to gently hint to the capitalist class that perhaps these people would get their way in the Labour movement if the capitalists did not throw a few crumbs at the workers.

What analogy, however, is there between a state of affairs when the standard of the working class is rising and when the General Strike is advocated as an alternative to the slowness of building up a legal majority plus the prevailing parliamentary corruption, to the state of affairs when capitalism is attacking the workers and the workers have only the alternatives of surrender or the use of the General Strike? What relation is there between Jaurès' picture of the State waiting passively until the workers at the end of their resources go back to work baffled and the picture of the workers' Strike Committees assuming powers which reveal them as the germs of an alternative government, preparing to defend themselves against a State going all out to win?

Surely this reveals that while a passive General Strike as a means of revolution is doomed to defeat, a General Strike leading up to the struggle for power is quite a different thing.

Our Party's Task.

Those things will have to be explained to the workers in the most detailed way. Not only is there a glaring weakness in the leadership of our Labour movement but the understanding of the rank and file lags behind the events themselves. The courage and solidarity of the workers in the strike were beyond all praise, but courage and solidarity are no substitute for revolutionary understanding. Without revolutionary understanding courage and solidarity are in vain. Revolutionary understanding does not drop from the heavens. It is not the product of one's isolated experiences in the class struggle. It can only come from a revolutionary party acting as the carrier of the revolutionary philosophy of Marxism based upon a scientific analysis of capitalist development and upon the experience of generations of working class struggle.

To raise the understanding of the workers to the level of their courage, to re-fashion the Labour movement in accordance with its new tasks, to give it a clear-sighted leadership, such tasks require the creation of a mass Communist Party. Without such a party the Right-wing, blinding the workers to the realities of the struggle, will go on preparing fresh defeats for the workers. Mass struggles in the future are inevitable. The only question is—will the workers be prepared?