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The British General Strike (1926) - I

Lead: British Labor could not make up its mind. As during most of the modern era, conservative and radical impulses struggled in the General Strike of 1926.

Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The industrial revolution first began in Britain of the 1700s. Driven by the marvelous power of steam, textile and iron production, mining, and transportation were transformed and then helped drag a sometimes reluctant society into the modern age. The growing wealth of the lower and middle classes

fueled the first mass economy. Well-made and inexpensive consumer goods were available for the first time in history to wide segments of society and to a world hungry for all sorts of high-quality manufactured items. By 1825, the phrase "Britain supplies the world" was no exaggeration.

At the same time the changes made by the new wealth and industrial progress brought tensions long brewing in British society to the surface. For the first 100 years, many working class Britons who had come from the countryside to fill the great industrial cities of Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester and those of Scotland and work in the giant new factories were mostly content with their new found fortune. This was, after all, the

1800s, the Age of Classical Liberalism, with its belief in the value of hard work, free trade, the market economy, and private property.

The entrepreneur was societies' hero. If a man such as James Watt, the perfecter of the steam engine, risked his money and through work, talent, and a little luck made a fortune and if, in the process, he put people to work, most people admired him. His profits might be astronomical and he might require his workers, including women and children, to labor for pennies in pitiful conditions, but most of his workers were reluctant to risk their jobs by demanding too much. There were attempts such as the Chartist Movement in the 1830s and 1840s to improve working conditions, but changes

were very slow in coming. Labor unions tried to get off the ground, but laws were passed suppressing them. It was not until late in the century, with more and more people being made eligible to vote, that workers began to exercise their growing political and economic muscle. Even then British Labor was divided between those who wished to assault the industrial system and those who wished to work within it. Next time: Labor and the General Strike of 1926.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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