

Volume 3

Number 164

British General Strike (1926) - II

Lead: In 1926, the British labor movement called the only general work stoppage in that nation's history.

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

Content: As the 1900s drew to a close, industrial workers in Britain had begun to band themselves together into mass trade unions. Shipbuilding laborers, transportation workers, printers, and a host of other trades organized themselves to protect their interests, improve working conditions, and increase wages. Military needs during World War I had gradually

increased the wages of factory workers and when peace broke out these workers resisted attempts by government and business leaders to roll back to prewar levels their hard won gains.

Two political organizations struggled with how labor should pursue its goals. Should it work within the system or assault it from the outside? The Trades Union Congress was an umbrella group that attempted to organize and present a united front for the many unions that comprised its membership. The British Labor Party sought to elect Members of Parliament who would agitate for workers' interests at Westminster. After World War I, Labor gradually began to

replace the Liberals as the main opposing party in Parliament and for a short time in the early 1920s actually formed a Labor government with Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister. In 1924 a General Election brought to power the Conservatives who under Stanley Baldwin had little sympathy for labor unions. The stage was set for a collision of government, industry, and labor in the General Strike of 1926.

The catalyst for the strike was a dispute between mine owners and the members of one of the most powerful unions, the Miner's Federation of Great Britain. During World War I the government had taken control of the mines to insure the delivery of coal

to vital war industries, but after the war, falling coal prices had forced down wages and profits. After a bitter strike, miners and owners reached an agreement in 1924 but it soon fell apart. The possibility of a sympathetic national strike by all unions began to become a real possibility, but was temporarily averted in 1925 when Baldwin intervened with a nine-month cooling-off period. Next time: Lockout and the General Strike.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Haigh, R.H., et.al. *The Guardian Book of the General Strike*. London, UK: Wildwood House, 1988.

Laybourn, Keith. *The General Strike of 1926*. Manchester, UK: Manchester, UK, 1993.

Phillips, G.A. *The General Strike: The Politics of Industrial Conflict*. London, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976.