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The British General Strike (1926) - III

Lead: Wracked by internal divisions, in spring 1926 the labor movement in Britain called the only General Strike in England's history.

Tag: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: In the early part of the century, unions representing thousands of British industrial workers were locked in a running debate on the way labor should deal with management. Should unions work within the system or assault it from the outside -- confrontation or cooperation? The leaders of the Trades

Union Congress, an umbrella group representing many unions and the members of the British Labor Party were in favor of cooperation. Most were socialist in their outlook, but they advocated gradual reform of society. Among rank and file workers however, there were Communists and radicals who considered their leaders wimpish and wished to remake society along Marxist lines. They looked for confrontation. In May 1926 coal miners gave them their chance.

Working under the earth in deplorable conditions with little job security, the miners had crafted one of Britain's most powerful and radical labor unions. After a bitter strike over wages, they had reached an agreement

with management in 1924, but the agreement broke down. Falling prices due to competition from German mines newly revived after World War I caused the mine owners to seek a new contract. A strike was narrowly averted through intervention by the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. On "Red Friday, July 31, 1925" Baldwin called a halt to the coming strike, ordered a nine-month government subsidy to the mines which kept wages and profits level, and appointed a Royal Commission to look into the dispute. The Commission ruled out further government subsidies and suggested that the mines be reorganized to insure profitability. This was a nice way of saying that some workers would be

fired and the rest would get a pay cut. A strike was inevitable, but would the rest of the unions support it? Next time: The strike fails or does it?

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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