

1919: The 40-hours strike



The 40 Hours strike led by the Clyde Workers' Committee was the most radical strike seen on Clydeside in terms of both its tactics and its demands.

The objectives of the strike were overtly political; they were to secure a reduction of weekly working hours to 40 in order that discharged soldiers could find employment, and to stop the re-emergence of an unemployed reserve, thereby maintaining the strength of labour against capital.

See also [*a history of Red Clydeside, 1915-1920*](#)

The leaders of the Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC) had rejected a nationally negotiated 47-hour week agreement that had been reached between the engineering employers and officials from the engineering and shipbuilding trade unions. The CWC had also gained widespread support amongst workers and other important trade union bodies within the Clydeside area for their demands for a 40-hour working week.

Initially Clydeside employers were unconcerned about the strike, the feeling being that the strike was the result of an internecine dispute between official and unofficial trade union leaders and that this was little to do with them. Both the government and trade union officials were also initially unconcerned, feeling that without official support the strike would quickly peter out.

These positions were to change dramatically four days into the strike. By 30 January 1919, 40,000 workers in the engineering and shipbuilding industries in Clydeside were out on strike. In addition electricity supply workers in Glasgow had also gone on strike in sympathy, as had 36,000 miners in the Lanarkshire and Stirlingshire coalfields. It was reported that during the first week of the strike not a single trade in the Clydeside area was left unaffected by strike action. The rapid spread of the strike was attributed to the large-scale deployment of flying pickets by the CWC, largely made up of discharged servicemen.

On 29 January 1919, after a rally of strikers in Glasgow and a march to George Square, a deputation from the CWC managed to secure a meeting with the Lord Provost of Glasgow. At this meeting the strike leaders requested that the Lord Provost ask the Council to compel employers to grant workers a 40-hour week. The Lord Provost was unable or unwilling to give the deputation a reply to their question without consulting colleagues, and asked them to return on 31 January when he assured them he would be able give them a reply.

The battle of George Square (Bloody Friday) 1919

On Friday 31 January 1919 upwards of 60,000 demonstrators gathered in George Square in support of the 40-hours strike and to hear the Lord Provost's reply to the workers' request for a 40-hour week. Whilst the deputation was in the building the police mounted a vicious and unprovoked attack on the demonstrators, felling unarmed men and women with their batons. The demonstrators, with the ex-servicemen to the fore, quickly retaliated with fists, iron railings and broken bottles, and forced the police into a retreat.

On hearing the noise from the square the strike leaders, who were meeting with the Lord Provost, rushed outside to restore order. One of the leaders, David Kirkwood, was felled to the ground by a police baton, and along with William Gallacher was arrested by the police.

After the initial confrontation between the demonstrators and the police in George Square, further fighting continued in and around the city centre streets for many hours afterwards. The Townhead area of the city and Glasgow Green, where many of the demonstrators had regrouped after the initial police charge, were the scenes of running battles between police and demonstrators.

In the immediate aftermath of 'Bloody Friday', as it became known, other leaders of the Clyde Workers' Committee were also arrested, including Emanuel Shinwell, Harry Hopkins and George Edbury.

Government concerns about industrial militancy and revolutionary political activity in Glasgow reached new heights after the events of 31 January 1919. Fears within government of a workers' revolution in Glasgow led to the deployment of troops and tanks in the city.

An estimated 10,000 English troops in total were sent to Glasgow in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of George Square. This was in spite of a full battalion of Scottish soldiers being stationed at Maryhill barracks in Glasgow at the time. No Scottish troops were deployed, with the government fearing that fellow Scots, soldiers or otherwise, would go over to the workers side if a revolutionary situation developed in Glasgow.

On 10 February 1919 the 40-hours strike was called off by the Joint Strike Committee. Whilst not achieving their stated aim of a 40-hour working week, the striking workers from the engineering and shipbuilding industries did return to work having at least negotiated an agreement that guaranteed them a 47-hour working week; 10 hours less than they were working prior to the strike.