ABERDEEN IN THE GENERAL STRIKE

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FOREWORD

This pamphlet grew out of a short article on the General Strike in Aberdeen that appeared in 'Aberdeen Peoples Press' in May 1976 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Strike. Research for that article made us aware of the limited nature of the local sources of information on the Strike and how it was experienced in Aberdeen. The local newspapers only came out in duplicated-sheets form during the Strike and to the contemporary reader convey little other than the biases of their proprietors and editors — vehemently opposed to the strikers and their cause.

We have therefore sought, in this pamphlet, to redress the balance in some small measure. We have attempted to present, in chapter two, a brief general picture of the impact of the Strike in Aberdeen, in the light of the general development of trade unionism in the city which is sketched in chapter one. The most important part of the pamphlet, however, is taken up by the transcript of interviews that we carried out with five people who were involved, directly or indirectly, with the events of May 1926. (We have edited the interviews slightly for the sake of clarity.)

Unfortunately time has taken its toll of the participants in the Strike of over fifty years ago — the 'veterans' are relatively thin on the ground these days. To those who feel they could have helped us with the research on this pamphlet, but who were not contacted by us — we owe apologies. To Messrs Lennox, McIntosh, Raffan, Small and Styles — we owe our gratitude for their time and their trouble. We must point out that they are in no way responsible for the views and conclusions expressed in chapters one and two.

In the pamphlet we have tried to portray the events as they were experienced by the workers in Aberdeen. Although the people we interviewed were all involved with, or sympathetic towards, the cause of the miners and those who came out in sympathy in 1926, the views they express inevitably reflect their different standpoints and interpretations of the General Strike in Aberdeen.

Whilst we feel that this pamphlet makes a contribution to our historical understanding of the General Strike, we feel that the issues it raised are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago. The central question still concerns the position of the working classes and organised labour in a capitalist society and their potential role in transforming such a social and economic order. Similarly, the passions that were aroused in those days are still very real to many people. As one elderly trade unionist once told us:

"There is one thing that I am grateful for, that I have lived long enough to see the miners get their revenge."

E.K.
A.R.
Chapter 1

THE SETTING

The development of unionism in any one city is affected by two main influences, one industrial, the other political. In Aberdeen the diversity of industries meant that a variety of unions was established by 1900 without any one in particular predominating.

Although the immediate trades which spring to mind when thinking of Aberdeen are fish and granite, in reality the pattern is much more complex. Largely because of its isolation, Aberdeen in the past had to become relatively self-sufficient and thus never experienced the process of industrial concentration which occurred in other parts of Britain; for example, to the jute industry in Dundee, shipbuilding on the Clyde and north-east coast of England, iron and steel production in South Wales. Aberdeen's industries in the nineteenth century and down to the present day encompass such diverse occupations as printing and papermaking, textiles, fishing and its ancillary occupations, granite, the manufacture of agricultural by-products and machinery, shipbuilding and engineering. Aberdeen still is the service centre for the north-east of Scotland, and this role was much exaggerated in former years when transport problems were more of an obstacle. During the inter-war years the commercial side of Aberdeen grew tremendously with the consequent rise in employment among the distributive and transport occupations.

In the early 1880's, trade unions nationally comprised about one fifteenth of the total working population and the proportion was similar in Aberdeen. There were at this time few trade unions in the city, these catered solely for skilled craftsmen and their membership was low. What strength there was lay in granite building, shipbuilding and miscellaneous crafts such as printing, baking, shoemaking and tailoring. By 1884 more variety in the list of unionised trades was evident, such as the Gas Stokers' Society and the Seamen's and Firemen's Society, although both of
these were short-lived. By 1890, 6,951 unionists were represented on the Trades Council, (the 1884 figure was around 2000) and the increase was largely the result of the extension of trade unionism beyond the ranks of skilled craftsmen.

The development of trade unionism in the city was not marked by any degree of militancy. This was due, in part, to the variety of trades. In addition, some of the occupations found in Aberdeen were not organised effectively until a relatively late date, such as fishermen and distributive workers; or were occupations which were notoriously difficult to organise, such as the textile workers. The lack of industrial specialisation led to the lack of union specialisation. The variety of smaller and sometimes rival unions in the formative years possibly meant a reduction in the overall strength of unions in the city, particularly in the years preceding the formation of powerful national unions.

In 1924, according to a Scottish Trade Union Congress (S.T.U.C.) survey, 20,000 workers in Aberdeen were unionised out of an occupied population of 74,000 (1921 Census), that is, 27%. In the same year in Dundee, the only city of comparable size to Aberdeen, the figures were 34,000 unionised in a working population of 90,000 (37.7%). Dundee at this time was a city largely dependent upon textiles, with a high proportion of women workers who traditionally have shown a smaller degree of unionisation than men.

The other influence is equally deep-rooted. Aberdeen in the nineteenth century was regarded as a Radical stronghold. This meant that the form of Liberalism known as Radicalism was the dominant political ideology. In the 1880's when many workers, usually those in more heavily industrialised communities, were developing their ideas on Socialism and searching for a means of achieving independent labour representation in Parliament, many of the politically active workers in Aberdeen were clinging to their Radicalism within the confines of the Liberal Party. This was not without some opposition, and in 1884 the progressive section of the Trades Council put forward two 'labour' candidates in the municipal elections; both were elected. By the 1890's, the majority on the Trades Council was sympathetic towards independent Labour ideals and in 1893, an Aberdeen branch of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) was formed out of the old Scottish Trades Council's Labour Party, although it never joined the national I.L.P. From the 1890's onwards there was a small Labour Group on the Town Council, but in general few working class men stood as candidates, the problem being the afternoon meetings of the Council. There was greater Trades Council participation in the School Board and Parish Council, both of which had evening meetings. The majority of voters, however, maintained their traditional allegiance in national politics and returned two Liberal members continuously until the General Election of 1918, significantly the first election which allowed all men over the age of 21 to vote.

Aberdeen's character in the inter-war years then, was essentially moderate, there was no 'Red Donside' (or Deeside!) or history of militant action. Obviously there had been strikes in the past, but a strike in one of Aberdeen's many industries could not hope to have the impact that a strike in a two or three industry city could have.
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August 1884. Aberdeen trade unionists marching in support of Gladstone's Franchise Bill after it had been opposed by the House of Lords.
The aftermath of the General Strike was felt in Aberdeen as elsewhere. In particular, the owners of Aberdeen Newspapers Limited refused to employ union men - a situation still not resolved on the outbreak of the Second World War. The organisation of the Donside paperworkers was shattered and trade-unionism in general weakened. The situation in Aberdeen was much eased by the creation of the Trade Union Organising Committee. The 1926 S.T.U.C. had instructed that organising groups be established throughout Scotland. These were to be made up of representatives of local trade unions and their terms of reference were purely industrial; to strengthen unions already in existence, and to encourage organisation where none existed. The decision was the outcome of a survey conducted the previous year which showed that less than half the workers in Scotland were trade unionists. In the light of subsequent events and the consequent reaffirmation of the industrial objectives of unions the decision becomes almost prophetic. In Aberdeen the first meeting was in November 1926 and about 18 similar groups were established all over Scotland. The Aberdeen group alone survived the inter-war years. A variety of trades was assisted - both in strengthening existing organisations and in canvassing non-unionists. The occupations aided included paperworkers, blacksmiths, employees of private bus companies, public houses, hairdressing establishments and insurance companies, musicians, theatrical employees and cinema workers. There were periodic, reasonably successful house-to-house canvasses and in 1938, the S.T.U.C. was able to report that the Aberdeen T.U.O.C. "has functioned continuously since 1926 and has done exceptionally good work with beneficial results."
Chapter 2

THE GENERAL STRIKE

In 1890 James Leatham of St. Nicholas Street, Aberdeen, a member of the Socialist League, printed and published a ‘penny pamphlet’ entitled ‘The General Strike; or Scaring the Capitalists’. It was a scenario of how, by means of a general strike, a social, economic and political revolution might be brought about in Britain. Some 30 years later, the anarchist Alexander Berkman proclaimed a similar faith:

“The strength of labour is not on the field of battle. It is in the shop, in the mine and the factory. There lies its power that no army can defeat, no human agency conquer...the social revolution can take place only by means of the General Strike. You can shoot people to death, but you can’t shoot them to work...the General Strike is the only possibility of social revolution.”

Maybe, but it didn’t happen like that 50 years ago — the General Strike in Britain of May 1926. What did happen and, more particularly, what happened in Aberdeen?

The First World War had gradually weakened Britain’s international position. Export markets had been lost and the City’s role as the world’s banker had been undermined. The staple industries of coal, iron, steel, ship-building and textiles had been over-extended during the war and were too large for post-war needs. Although the transition to peace-time conditions created something of an economic boom, by 1921 unemployment had risen to over 2 million. It never fell below the 1¼ million during the three years prior to the General Strike.

The coal industry, as Britain’s largest industry, suffered particularly. Even before the war Britain’s position as the leading world supplier of coal was threatened by the growth of the German and American industries. The growth in the demand for coal slowed as oil was introduced for ships and heating. The outbreak of war, with the accompanying restrictions of exports and loss of markets, added to the problems of the industry. The problems were compounded by the organisation of the British
coal industry in private hands. By 1925 there were still some 1400 separate firms in business. Production methods were technically backwards compared with Europe due to the small size of the firms, the owners’ reluctance to invest, and their traditional reliance on cheap labour.

By 1925 the economic position of the industry was critical. In the last quarter of the year 73% of coal raised was sold at a loss. The industry was kept going by various subsidies from the government. Without this all the coalfields of Britain, except those of Eastern England, would have been worked at a loss.

Faced with such a crisis, and confronted by the miners’ refusal to accept wage cuts as a way out of the crisis, the government decided to give the mining industry a subsidy for nine months. During that time a Royal Commission would be established to seek a solution to the difficulties of the coal industry.

This decision, reached on July 31st 1925 (“Red Friday”), was hailed as a victory by the workers. In fact, the government was merely buying time through this apparent concession in order to prepare its defences against a mass withdrawal of labour. Baldwin, the Prime Minister, later explained his decision to grant a subsidy with the words: “We were not ready."

In the following months preparations to break any widespread strike activity by the government and by allegedly private and volunteer bodies such as the ‘Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies’ began. The trade unions did little — an early sign of the trade union leaders’ hesitation to face the challenge of the government and the coal owners. The miners, however, had no illusions that their troubles were at an end. They realised that what happened in May 1926 when the subsidy ran out would depend on their determination and strength. They spent the intervening months building up their spirit of unity and resistance; and by May 1926 they were in a mood of back-to-the-wall militancy: “Not a penny off the pay, not a second on the day.”

On May 1st 1926 the armistice between the coal owners and the miners was due to end with the expiry of the subsidy. Faced by the coal owners who refused to negotiate with the unions except on the basis of a reduction of wages and who threatened a lock-out of the miners; and confronted by a miners’ union equally committed to resist the cuts, the General Council of the T.U.C. was forced, very much against its will, to declare, on May 1st, a General Strike to commence the following Monday, May 3rd.

From the start the government sought to portray the strike as a threat to democracy and all that was good about British society (the capitalist order). They sought to scare the trade union movement with the enormity of what it had taken on, and rally the support of the professional and middle classes. The issue of the miners was thus concealed from the public eye. The ‘Press and Journal’ of May 4th 1926 proclaimed:

No one who approached the question with calm and dispassionate mind...can fail to rally to the government’s assistance, and to do his or her utmost to secure that
this menace to liberty and prosperity will be summarily resisted and swiftly crush-
ed...

...there never has been such an exhibition of madness, tactlessness, and wanton sub-
version of constitutional liberties as this act of intimidation by the T.U.C.... It
seems that working men, in forming the T.U.C., have fashioned a Frankenstein
monster that may shatter their livelihood.

A lorry loaded with food supplies waiting for a travel permit at the
Trades Hall, Belmont Street during the strike.

In Aberdeen, as elsewhere, the response of organised labour to the strike call was
almost unanimous. Furthermore, the strikers quickly organised themselves to cope
with the many activities associated with the strike. Pickets were established at Bridge
of Dee and other exits from the city to discourage transport from crossing the picket
line unless in possession of trade union permits. By May 10th "The Scottish Worker"³, the official organ of the S.T.U.C. during the strike was able to report of Aberdeen:

The railwaymen solid; no trains running... The trams are out solid... The men have come out of the electrical station except salaried officials, who are keeping the power going. They are being fed and are sleeping inside. The local bakers have agreed tonight to stop their supplies. The docks are out solidly. There have been a few baton charges when the trams came out. As long as they keep the trams off the streets everything is quite quiet... 60 tons of fish have been sent south on our permits by Trade Union drivers. The traders are swarming round the Trades Hall asking for permits.

A petrol boat arrived and has been unloaded by students under police protection.

...The Horse and Motormen also solid.

The printing trades were also reported to be out, and strike committees were formed and described as running smoothly. W.J. Michael, the treasurer of the Aberdeen branch of the Blacksmith’s Union and an executive member of the Trades Council, was later to describe these days:

I have never in all my experience witnessed such solidarity as was shown by all the local trade unionists, including the engineering and shipbuilding men. I was a member of the Council of Action we set up, meeting every morning to discuss and agree the action to be taken day by day.⁴

Throughout the strike the T.U.C. leaders insisted it was merely a legitimate form of industrial action over the specific issue of the miners. The 'Scottish Worker' printed lists of "DON'TS FOR STRIKERS": they included warnings against encouraging "inflammatory propagandists; they may be in the enemy's pay", strikers were not to "countenance rioting or illegal action of any kind", nor were they to obstruct "the police in the exercise of their lawful duties", or "express their views in unnecessarily provocative language." The Aberdeen edition of the 'British Worker', a duplicated strike bulletin published daily (5000 copies) by the Strike Committee at the Trades Hall at 47 Belmont Street, urged the strikers "to help maintain order and rigidly refrain from demonstration," stressing that "only instructions of the committee to be acted upon."

Violence did, in fact, break out in Aberdeen on a number of occasions. The 'Press and Journal' which, like the 'Evening Express', came out as a duplicated sheet during the strike reported in the forenoon of May 6th some corporation buses manned by students but without police escort were captured by strikers and driven back to depot. Two students being mauled.
The same afternoon students took out more buses and trams with police aboard and were not molested. Two trams had their windows shattered later in the day, however, near Back Wynd. The crowd was dispersed by means of a police baton charge. Batons were also drawn in Castle Street when there were several casualties and arrests.

Outside the facade at St. Nicholas Church. Shortly after this photograph was taken a police baton charge took place.

On May 7th there were more baton charges at the Links Tramway Depot, following a march by the tramway men to confront "volunteers" who were manning the vehicles. The "P & J" warned its readers:

All law-abiding citizens, especially women and children, are advised to keep out of street crowds, as there is a danger of being hit by batons in a police charge.
The anger of workers in Aberdeen was directed primarily against the volunteers who sought to break the strike by seeking to maintain what they considered to be essential services. Almost 3000 enrolled in Aberdeen — recruited, according to the ‘P&J’:

...from all classes — professional and businessmen, men of leisure and people who had dropped out of the industrial world through various causes.

Of these about 300 were students — a fact still remembered by many old trade unionists, and which perhaps goes some way towards explaining the animosity shown towards students by many older workers. The government forces in Aberdeen were also supported by about 600 Special Constables.

Away from Aberdeen negotiations to end the strike had begun almost as soon as it had started. Sir Herbert Samuel, chairman of the Royal Commission which had recommended reduced rates of pay for miners in March 1926, returned from holiday to hold secret talks with the T.U.C. leaders. When the miners rejected his proposed basis for resuming negotiations between government, the coal owners and the strikers (the proposals did not rule out the possibility of wage reductions) the General Council of the T.U.C. decided “that in the circumstances they were not justified in continuing the sacrifice and risks of the sympathetic strike”. The General Strike was called off on May 12th without the General Council gaining any new terms from the miners or guarantees against victimisation of those who supported them.

May 12th, 1926 was a Wednesday. It was not until the following Monday, May 17th, that the bulk of the strikers in Aberdeen returned to work. Many old trade unionists still remember to this day the sense of betrayal they felt at the time.

W.J. Michael was later to describe an incident that illustrated the lack of enthusiasm for the strike displayed by the trade union leaders. After observing that throughout the strike “there were no instructions nor correspondence from our Head Office: a clear indication of our General Secretary’s attitude”, he recollected how

The day the T.U.C. called the strike off, our Branch Secretary, W.J. Cameron, gave me a small cheque that had come from Glasgow to pay very small benefit. When I went up to the Clydesdale to cash it, I was met by a very sarcastic bank employee saying, “Didn’t you hear on the radio that you were well and truly beaten and the strike is off?” Then he added: “We have a telegram from your Head Office in Glasgow to cancel payment of the cheque.” Lorimer was totally opposed to the strike.5

In fact, in Britain as a whole the number of strikers actually increased by 100,000 within 24 hours of the nominal end. The anger of the workers cannot have been helped by the victimisation of active trade unionists by the employers on their return to work and the crowing of the mass media. The ‘P & J’ of May 17th:

the breakdown of the general strike has cleared the industrial air. In future there will be less speechifying, ranting and boasting; there will be more work and an immeasurably truer sense of economic, political and national values.

The miners stayed out for a further six months before returning to work: they had to accept longer hours and lower wage rates, and many of them remained permanently unemployed. They suffered a total defeat.

Were the strikers betrayed by their leaders as is so often alleged? The labour movement was betrayed, but not by villainous leaders. It was the political philosophy of their leaders that betrayed them. The members of the General Council of the T.U.C. believed that their challenge to the government was wrong. They were scared of a social revolution and didn’t want one.6 So whilst they would have
preferred an honourable settlement, they were ready to settle for unconditional surrender. Moreover, the trade union leaders would never allow themselves to believe they could win the struggle — so their anxiety to stop the drain on union funds grew with every day of the strike. But they also had another fear — the response of their rank and file members who, with every day of the strike, grew in power at the expense of the control of the trade union bureaucrats.

The General Strike of 1926 can be viewed as a defeat for the Labour Movement, but it was a victory for their leaders. Opposed to any form of militancy that challenged property relations — the failure of the General Strike enabled them to argue with new strength for the alternative policy of accommodation with the government and the employers, the acceptance of capitalism as the permanent order of British society, and the role of trade unions as docile partners in the administration of this order. The strike was also a victory for the political leaders of the Labour Movement — henceforth they could argue that the road to salvation lay not in direct economic and social action but along the path of parliamentary politics.

Today, with the Labour government desperately bolstering up an ailing capitalist economy with state funds made available by cut-backs in welfare and social services, supported by key trade union leaders, we are reaping the consequences of the trends that were highlighted just over fifty years ago.
Chapter 3

RECOLLECTIONS
OF THE STRIKE

Archie Lennox was in his early 20’s at the time of the strike. A boiler maker by trade, he was an early member of the I.L.P. He was later to become involved in the National Minority Movement and joined the Communist Party in the 1930’s. He is still a member of the Communist Party, “although not very active these days”.

A circular came out from the Trades Council to the Number 1 Branch of the Boilermakers Society, and they asked that representation be increased and as many come along as possible to assist. I allowed my name to go forward and duly reported to Belmont Street. We carried out instructions that were given out between 9.00 and 10.00 in the morning, the big laugh in the mornings was to hear who had been making requests for transport permits. Here we were all the fish traders and firms trying to claim priority for the transport of their goods south. Very few concessions were made, except for the hospitals and places. But it was as if the devil had turned the employers crawling to the workers.

Tom Brown was Chairman of the Trades Council at that time—he was a full time organiser for the Shop Assistants Union. Belmont Street was the centre. It just seemed to be full of people all the time. We never got any specific instructions. We were asked to report anything that was important from the point of view of maintaining morale. At that particular time I worked at Inverurie Loco Works—so I knew nothing about my place of work—but I can speak for the rest of what we termed the ‘black squad’, the ship-builders and engineers—they were all out to a man.

There was a case of one or two in—as far as the railways were concerned. There was someone down about Waterloo Goods and there were some others about the Joint Station. But there were absolutely no trains running. Of course exception was taken to these guys and I remember seeing an incident. The blacklegs didn’t
seek to come out at the Joint Station, they came up the line to Schoolhill — that was the first station along the line. They were confronted there, and there was a melee. There was a prosecution arising out of that. I wasn’t involved in that — I just heard about it after.

The activity against the strike amounted to getting the trams running. So one of the first main incidents was when the trams came down Union Street between the Church yard and Woolworth’s main shop. And it so happened that at that time that there were two or three loads of coal passing up — they were passing up under permit because they were going to the Royal Infirmary. Well, that coincidence created the situation: because they just helped themselves to coal and they battered the trams. The glass was broken and everything. The trams were brought to a standstill and the police came on to go and there was wholesale baton charges. There were hundreds involved. They had assembled in the Castlegate in those days, and up Union Street, and of course when something like that happened — it was just like a wave — a human wave, that went up and down Union Street. There were really hundreds there. And once the police were on the go — I can remember the screams. Women and children getting knocked over with their prams. People were escaping down the steps to Correction Wynd and wherever they could get out.

Another day we had heard about blacklegs at the Kings Cross Tram depot. There was a tramway man with a cornet — and we walked up Union Street — hundreds of us. Somewhere about Waverley Place we took the lesser known streets and got in right opposite the tram depot. We confronted those who were trying to take the trams out. And quite a bit of a punch up took place there. They never got out of the depot and that was them finished.

Another incident, coming along Belmont Street. There was a bus — the earliest type of bus, the original single deckers. There were so many people in the street that it was making slow progress. Two or three of us ran up Belmont Street and we got aboard this bus. It was easy enough to do because it was going so slow. It was a student that was driving it, as far as we understood. We went right through and said ‘get him out’. He hung on to the wheel. The wheel was turned round and it was driven into Back Wynd. He applied his brakes — there was an absolute mass of people. So he went sailing out through the driver’s door into a sea of hands. I remember one feller shouting “I’ll take it to the Beach, I’ll take it to the Beach”.

The police in those days — the plain clothes police — if they spotted you they put a chalk mark on your back. So there was one lad who was picked up after. He got a month in jail, so I reckon I was pretty close.

There was another incident. We had heard that an attempt was being made to take beer out of the goods shed at Guild Street. So we headed there. And the big Shore Porters’ horses were confronted just at the gate. The police were in attendance, and they turned back. It seemed too good to be true — but time elapsed and we dispersed, but later on we saw them emerging from the South Market Street gate where the wagons used to come out by the harbour. They got round the length of Regent Bridge and they were crossing the bridge, so we stopped them there. The
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bridge was fine and narrow and they turned back. So once they had turned back—we reckoned they were going back to the yard, but they had kept to the quay side. There was a big Inspector -- we called him “The Highlander” -- but the horses by this time were prancing and that because we were running in front of them and the police had their batons drawn, and we were keeping just a safe distance in front all the time. However they did get along the foot Marrischal Street -- I think it’s Regent Lane -- into the Shore Porters’ premises, and the beer was put in. They did manage to get through -- but it was never distributed until the strike was finished.

There was a negative side to it, up to a point, and that was Scottish Horse and Motorman’s Association. Bob MacIntyre was the organiser of that union. There was a lot of good lads in them, but he set about organising in a way that was extraordinary. Right away he got the Belmont Cinema — the cinema in Belmont Street— and he booked it up for his members and their wives and families for a matinee. They were not breaking any strike but.... However, he did say that he had pickets on all the approaches to the town, and that if everybody was as well organised as they were -- there was just a wee bit of criticism over that, but I don’t think it was entirely justified.

I was 24 at this time. I’d been married for two years.... It was quite a shock to realise it was over. People were coming out of their houses, that had wirelesses, and shouting from their windows — as the men were going along the street in bunches -- “Get back to your work, the strike’s finished.” There was a sort of sigh of relief on the one hand and a sort of consternation on the other, because there had been no word of any negotiations or any agreements or anything of the kind. So we just had to wait for the printers to get back and the papers came out and we could get some information. When I went back to work I was on four days a week — so my wages at that time were £2.12.6d for a full week and I was down to four days. It was like that for a year until we went back to five and a half days.

There were quite a few who were not taken back -- there was victimisation. As far as the transport boys were concerned there was Jim Archibald and Doug Browett. Now Doug was just a tram cleaner at the time, but actually he had come to Aberdeen as a tutor for the National Council of Labour Colleges. I used to attend his classes. After everything fell flat and there was no money available he got a job on the trams. He didn’t get back for more than a year. Jim Archibald was chairman of the branch — he didn’t get back to work for over a year.

An interesting thing. When I first got to know the Trades Council about this time there were a number of very able men who seemed to be outstanding men as far as being able to stand up and speak and speak very authoritatively. The amazing thing was a number of them were insurance collectors. The point was they were victimised in their jobs, and they became insurance collectors.

I became a member of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) early on when I was about 18. My mother was one of the founder members of the Co-operative Guild in Aberdeen...She was politically interested because she was associated with the Co-operative movement...The most active men all came up through the I.L.P. There
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was Joseph Duncan and Johnny Thom, Sandy Robertson. Sandy Robertson became
organiser of the trawlers. My wife had got very interested in the women’s section
of the Unemployed Workers Movement. We lived down by the shipyards. I left
the I.L.P. around about 1924. I joined the Communist Party around 1930 — but I joined
the National Minority Movement before that.
There was a terrible apathy around Aberdeen after the strike. People didn’t ex-
pect the sell-out. There was a number of people called to strike for the first time
in their lives, that in itself was a significant enough thing. No doubt to get back to
work after 9 days was a relief. But to be sold out as it was, was a bit frustrating to
say the least. It amounted to quite a lot of workers becoming unorganised. The
blacksmiths went very very low. The papermakers went very very flat. Eventually
the T.U.C. sent to the trade councils an instruction to set up organising com-
mittees to revive the unions. The first activity that took place would have been in
1927 and 1928 when you would have got a member of the Scottish T.U.C. General
Council coming up and having propaganda meetings. They began to revive things a bit
that way... It came as a terrible shock to be sold down the river.

John Styles was a young teenager at the time of the strike, and had just started work
as a message boy with the ‘Home and Colonial’. I lived in Constitution Street. The largest corporation depot for trams at that time
was at the bottom of Constitution St. There were a variety of types (driving trams
during the strike) — predominantly student types — they were very different from
the student types now — they all came from an upper middle class or what have you.
Quite a number of them volunteered to drive and conduct the trams. Naturally they
were viewed as blacks and for this purpose of trying to stop them — the incident I’ve
got the most recollection of was all the drivers and conductors — there must have
been 70 or 80 of them — all marched down en bloc, down Constitution Street — to
stop the students from taking the trams out. But lo and behold they just got to the
bridge on Constitution St. when up comes a whole row of police. They were still
about 40 yards apart. The lads kept on going. The police were coming up from
the beach. Unabashed, they kept on going until they were no more than 10 yards
distance from each other, when the inspector called for the batons to be drawn. So
there you have the situation, in which you have a real confrontation. I can’t help
visualising it — I should hate to visualise what would have happened if you had an
exactly similar incident now. The ordinary common or garden working bloke to-
day has a very different attitude as far as the police are concerned — at that time everybody was sort of frightened of them. Anyhow, I suppose they got within 7 or 8 yards of each other, batons drawn, when the lads suddenly decided that discretion was the better part of valour. The whole lot at one time turned round back up Constitution St. Except for a few — the harder cases. One or two of them really got stuck into the police.

As a matter of fact I stayed at the top of Constitution Street. My grandmother who I stayed with in what we called the 'sanks' which was about 10 feet below street level and as this lot came up onto Park St. with about half-a-dozen police trying to arrest them and this little lad was away like a shot round the corner and came into our door and actually came down our stairs — and my grandmother stuck him in the coal cellar next door. He got scot free. They hadn't a clue where he'd got to.

Also there were the incidents when the trams actually did come up — a number of times a couple of the lads were waiting in Constitution Street for the trams — actually jumping aboard the trams and pulling the students off.

Of course, needless to say, at that time we were definitely anti-student. This was probably one of the reasons my grandmother did what she did.

As I say, I don't think it would happen now — batons or no batons they would probably get stuck in.

Q. Did people think they were somehow 'threatening society' in some way, making a revolution in any way?

Well, there were one or two quite militants, you know. In the sense that they knew where they were going and what it might possibly lead to. There were quite a few characters.

Q. What did people feel when the strike was called off?

From a great many there was a sigh of relief. It had got to the stage where even the militants were starting to be frightened — in the sense of beginning to see what it could actually have ended as. They felt they had maybe bitten off more than they could chew. Psychologically, you see, at that time, I would say that the powers-that-be had the whip hand — in the psychological aspect — the fear of the beak and the bench — the fear of the policeman — the fear of anything along those lines. I shudder to think what would have happened in this day and age if the same confrontation had been made. I'm quite sure they'd have a right go, as against what actually happened.

There was a feeling of some relief, particularly amongst the females. Because it was open, it was seen — the lads at the trams pulling these lads off, there were scuffles — they were not only pulling the drivers out but getting involved with the police themselves. Arrests were innumerable.

Q. Was there the feeling that it had been a waste of time?

I would say that to the ordinary working bloke and his missus, unless they were very interested in politics, the predominant feeling would have been 'thank goodness it's all over with'.
Q. What about the feeling towards the miners?

I've recollections of singing miners, bands, -- the old cloth cap going round, you know. But there was a tremendous amount of sympathy for the miners. To a certain extent there was a feeling that we had let them down.

Q. Were you aware, at that age, of what it was about?

I suppose to a certain extent I did, because for some reason or another -- you know the Castlegate used to be the great debating centre -- and on a Friday night and particularly on a Saturday night there would be one or two meetings and afterwards you get all these discussions taking place -- and I used to find myself quite interested in that sort of thing. Predominantly politics of course. This was why, as I say, even at the time it was happening, my own thinking was -- well, it was the capitalists against the poor working class.

This was very obvious even though you weren't politically minded. It was so obvious. People didn't see it in these class terms.

Of course you have to realise that the ordinary working class person at that time was poor -- really poor -- it was the days of going to the pawn shop with a suit -- or rather taking it out at the weekend and putting it back in on a Monday so that you'd have a couple of coppers. It was really tough -- life in general -- it was really hard. No question whatsoever...kids of my own age came out simply cos it was a bit of a lark and something completely and utterly different from anything that had happened before -- a bit of a thrill and excitement, you know. Until their old man and old lady got hold of them, clipped them behind the ear and took them back to their work again. Young message boys and stuff like that.

I was in the "Home and Colonial" -- at a branch in Justice St, as a message boy. Needless to say I had to go -- even though it was just packing in work and watching all the fun and games that were going on.

Q. Do you remember any of the labour leaders in Aberdeen at that time?

Oh well, such types as Fraser Macintosh -- he was I.L.P. -- these miners came up -- as I say -- either in the form of a choir or a band or simply just walking along in a bloc -- you had these types such as Fraser who used to welcome them and do what they could for them -- in the sense of not being frightened to show that they were actually in sympathy to the extent of actually helping them. Fraser Macintosh was a councillor for many years.
Bernard Small was 25 at the time of the strike, working as a postman. After the strike he became an active trade unionist. A champion of many causes, he was imprisoned when he was in his 60's following his participation in a C.N.D. anti-Polaris demonstration. He has maintained a scrap book of his many newspaper articles and letters to the press.

Here are some of my memories. In the year of 1926 I was non-political. I had been brought up in a completely non-political home. But the general strike opened my eyes politically. I was educated the hard way – when I saw what was happening.

I began to see what you call the wealthy class, the ruling class, take off the glove and put on the mailed fist. They started to show their aggression. Because the working class had started to fight against them.

I was a postman, a hard worked postie. I worked like a slave. As a postman I went around delivering in different parts. Young men were what we called ‘reliefs’ which meant that one week you were delivering along Queen’s Road, the West End, Rubislaw Den North – beautiful houses in those days, flunkeys and gardeners. So I would be there. And the next week I would be down in East North Street – it was terrible. It was just a jumble of poor, downtrodden streets and people were so poor. The poverty was written on their faces. Thin faces and ragged people. This was 1926, and at that time the unemployed were getting, I think, 15 shillings a week for a grown man and two shillings for a child. These are facts that you can check up. But that was the position. So I can assure you that the unemployed really suffered. And the result was that everywhere there were people round the back singing with cracked, wavery voices trying to beg coins. Beggars were prolific in those days. Beggars and tramps abounded.

People always envied me – being in the post office I had a steady job. By God you had a steady job – I worked from 14 to 60 and never had one single day off unless I was actually sick or on holiday.

Anyway – we slogged along, and as we slogged along everybody seemed to be unemployed.

Well, the next thing I remember was seeing on all the doors “No Hands Wanted”. They called people ‘hands’, not persons. “No vacancies”. Everywhere. It was as prolific as “No Parking” is now...

The next thing is – the bus and the trains went on strike. The newspapers stopped. The boys out on the street sold a kind of typographed pamphlet for a penny. People scrambled to get it.

Anyway, the trains stopped running and the mail didn’t come in. We were dependent on the mail coming in. We went down to the station at 6.00 a.m. and there was nothing for us – just a handful of local stuff. We waited for an hour or two doing nothing... Our hours were completely disjointed for a couple of weeks. The trains were being run by blacklegs and by inspectors and anyone who could drive a train. The same went on on the buses. The buses were being driven by students.
I think there were trams then... they soon learnt how to drive a tram. Now the strikers and many people who were politically alert resented all this. They had fights on the buses. Students supported the blacklegs. Today the student is not like that, but that's how he was. The students were 100% for the ruling class. And the next thing - they put a policeman on every bus. He stood on the platform to support the conductor, and throw off anybody who tried to do anything.

...and the next thing is, every now and then groups of men collected, shouting and protesting and that. And the next thing that I saw was the bobbies, baton charging. I had never seen that before - policemen with their batons battering people on the head. They didn't want people to accumulate. The police were really brutal, during the time of the strike. Nobody cared a damn about the working class and what they had to put up with...

I remember delivering Milburn Street. At that time that was where the electricity was made - big generators and coal furnaces - and I remember the delivery that day, and I saw a notice pinned on the door saying: “If the staff due on Monday does not turn up for duty they will be considered as retired”, you know “sacked”. Brutal it was. The iron grip - “Get back to work — or else.”

The miners strike was having a great effect on light. When I went down to London in the September - still the lights were out.

There was an ambivalent attitude towards the miners at that time. Some supported them, and others said “These buggers, they're just causing trouble.” You know, the usual. I supported them. I was beginning to get political then. I was then aged 25.

The postal workers didn’t go out on strike. We had our instructions. “Don’t do anything except post office work.” We went down to the station and refused to do anything that was railwayman’s work. For instance, the post office people only handled mail bags, the railway people handled parcel bags. So we didn’t handle parcel bags. We weren’t supposed to handle anything blackleg. If black-leg workers handled the bags, we would leave them on the station platform. We wouldn’t deal with them. We didn’t break the strike. The other workers realised that we were on their side. We were co-operating with them in every way, and were refusing to do any of their work. They knew we were only doing our own work. They knew we weren’t on strike, because at that time it was illegal for post office people to strike. At that time it was like the police — police weren’t allowed to strike.

Naturally with all kinds of people being out of work it was affecting other people. The miners’ strike was a very important thing. The coal stopped, you see, and in those days nearly everyone had a coal fire — it had a tremendous effect on the community.

I was a non-political person at that time. I'm not now. I know where I stand. The strike changed my opinion. It made me into a socialist. Before that I was nothing. In fact I was inclined to think that judges were clever people, their rulings were good, and that royalty was a good thing. All the orthodox things that you're brought up to think. You're brainwashed to accept the status quo...
At the end of the strike, after the miners went back -- they were starved back as you know -- it was a failure. We went round the post office every week and collected money for the miners. We were always collecting for the miners. We supported them. A shilling off your pay was a lot in those days. I might have been earning 30 shillings a week in those days.

R.A. Raffan was for many years a Labour Councillor on Aberdeen City Council until regionalisation in 1975. A member of the Trades Council, he was in his late 20's at the time of the strike.

I was working on the railways at the time. I was a member of the Railway Clerks Association. I was on the Trades Council and became involved in organising the strike in Aberdeen.

Everybody was very keen to organise and to picket -- to keep the foodstuffs moving and the like. But as I remember it the feeling was that it was not a revolutionary situation in any way. It was more a case of obeying the unions' call to strike and that was it.

In Aberdeen there was certainly no talk of bringing down the government, although this might have been true in the south. The strike did make people more political and many joined the Labour Party in the months after the strike.

During the strike I spent all my time at Bridge Street and Belmont Street where we controlled the movement of the traffic -- so I didn't have any real idea of what was happening outside in the streets. Bridge Street was the premises of the Independent Labour Party -- it was a sort of collecting area for everyone that was on strike, including their wives. It acted as a kind of social centre. My day was taken up with issuing the transport permits and organising the pickets. We had pickets at the railway station, the Bridge of Dee, the Bridge of Don, somewhere along the North Road Woodside way, and at the harbour. We had them at the works as well. The pickets had a very easy time of it as I remember. I didn't encounter any troubles or difficulties with the police.

Towards the end of the strike they were all keen to get back -- but there was a strong feeling of solidarity with the miners, and with the working class.

After the strike there was some demoralisation. There was the feeling that we had achieved nothing, that we had been let down by the T.U.C. who had called everyone out and achieved nothing. There was a feeling of disappointment...After the strike
things soon got back to normal. There was some victimisation— it was ten days before they took me back— it was one way of punishing us. I can remember the station master at Broughty Ferry who was on strike— they made him wait a few months before they took him back, and then he was sent to Arbroath as a ticket officer.

Scene outside the I.L.P. Rooms in Bridge Place— the "collecting area for everyone that was on strike."
G.R. McIntosh was Secretary of the Trades Council between 1925 and 1935. An ex-Chairman of the Aberdeen branch of the I.L.P., he served on the Conscientious Objectors’ Tribunal during the war. He has been awarded the C.B.E.

I was a joiner in the A.S.W. (Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers) working on a housing scheme at the time. I was the Secretary of the Trades Council. I wasn’t a full-time official, and was only there in the evenings.

The Trades Council would have been -- whether some people liked it or not -- acting as a general body of labour’s opinion on the General Strike in Aberdeen. Whether there was a Strike Committee separate, I can’t remember -- it didn’t matter. The Trades Council was responsible.

It was a funny General Strike, the building trades were supposed to be free from the General Strike as they were building houses, well, the building trade wasn’t engaged in building houses only, and a whole lot of the building trade carried on working.

I don’t remember any specific occurrence that would make history. I can’t remember a parade being held. I think there were little tiffs on certain jobs with the railwaymen, but they were insignificant. The police were called but there was nothing substantial, there wasn’t half-a-dozen people killed or anything, as a consequence. Now, I do remember a little little-tattle with the railwaymen at a certain station and the police came, but it was nothing at all. I think that anything that happened was very minor, that’s the answer.

The Communists used it of course, naturally, they would use it. They encouraged people to see, to hear, that a general strike had meant a lot -- to prove their point of view -- which it didn’t of course. I was an anti-communist, you see. My position was to keep the Trades Council clear of these people and I was not at all popular. I’ve never been popular, of course, the only man that I was popular with was Ramsay MacDonald, I was his agent in Aberdeen.

I’m not sure that there was wives saying “What the hell are we out on strike for? Where are we going? Why? The miners, what did they do for you?” You know the tripe... They supported the men, but they didn’t go out physically in support. I’m not saying that they took a stand and said at a mass meeting “We want our men out”, that didn’t happen... We tried to get collections off those who were working, but it was infinitesimal...

Whatever people may say about the General Strike, there was a general satisfaction that it did not bring about what they thought it might do, a unification of the labour forces. It didn’t do that... We didn’t gain much by it. The General Strike quite frankly did not bring about the desired effect of the British T.U.C., who wanted this strike for the miners’ interests principally. For the miners had to go on fighting. I kept the miners’ leaders here free, in this house, Joe Westward and company. They came after the Strike, you see. They were having concerts and getting money.
The Trades Council wasn’t enthusiastic for the Strike, they weren’t kicking up damned rows because we weren’t organising, they didn’t do anything like that. As a matter of fact, it was a great enjoyment when the Strike finished. Collapsed, of course. And it was the after-effect of it that must be memories in their minds of how Baldwin and company treated them, ‘We can do nothing, we’ve got to get the country back first, the miners can...’ It was the miners that brought it about.

The Strike failed, and the effort had been made to assist the miners, and mind you, it was a sentimental position — the sentiment was for the miners. The miners’ struggle and their defeat, when they were forced to accept lower wages. That was something, and that’s about all it did.

There was no great attitude towards the Strike (on the part of the people) except sympathy with the miners. You might think it was a great opportunity to propagate a society different from our own, well we could have never done that. I was big enough to realise — to try and get the solidarity that there was, for the miners’ sake. There was no other reason. I don’t think that you could have expected (I’m speaking of Aberdeen, I think I can speak of the country generally) that you could have used the situation to overthrow society. All that you could do was to keep them solid meantime, because of the miners. Don’t let the miners down. And that’s about the most you could get out of it, because society wasn’t prepared for that. The communists... don’t know what it means to try and overthrow society as we have it. It’s alright for a few unemployed to think that that’s so.

I want you to understand that in my opinion, as I’ve already said, it was a strike that took place because of the miners, and how they were treated by the government of the day — the Baldwin government. Being asked at that time, difficult as things were, to take a lower standard of life, it was something that appealed — not very deep, I agree, but it did appeal to the people generally. But as a week, ten days went on, the question was “Where are we going?” The government was making the point in the press, that nothing could be done until the men went back. For the government to agree that something should be done whilst the Strike was on would be paying for it, it couldn’t be.

Had the Strike not been called off when it was it might have collapsed. The people who mattered said “Thank God.” I don’t think it was an exhibition of solidarity, only for a cause that didn’t last more than ten days. I think the solidarity would have gone had the Strike lasted. After all, politically, the people at that time were not so far advanced, could I say, as we are today.

It was an event in history, there is no doubt about that. There was value in it from the point of view that historians will have something to think about before they go into another, much more prepared than they were, because they weren’t prepared, it was the sentiment for the miners that did it.

There might have been some victimisation, but I can’t recollect that there was victimisation to an extent as a consequence upon the General Strike, of men or women, I can’t remember that. There was a whole lot of people found out their political opinions. They always knew mine....
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

This is by no means an exhaustive survey of all the material available on the General Strike. We have tried to select books which will be of interest to the general reader and which can be found in most libraries or have been published in paperback. The section on local studies is quite detailed as many of these titles are not generally known. Books which have been particularly useful are marked with an asterisk.

A number of books have appeared in recent years all proposing a reassessment of the Strike; Christopher Parman, The General Strike (1972), Margaret Morris, The General Strike (1976),* Gordon A. Phillips, The General Strike (1976), and Patrick Renshaw, The General Strike (1975). An older book which is interesting for the anecdotes of the volunteers is Julian Symons, The General Strike (1957). There are a number of contemporary histories such as those by Emile Burns and A.J. Cook, the miners’ leader, which are no longer widely available.

The biographies and autobiographies of many of the leading figures nationally are also useful, for example, Baldwin, Chaimerlain, Margaret Bondfield, Citrine, Clynes, Horner, Thomas and Turner.

Other useful books include Alan Bullock, The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Vol. 1 (1960) and Ralph Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism (1961).* For the best brief description on the Strike see Charles L. Mowat, Britain between the Wars (1955).


M. Morris, The General Strike (1976) includes four local chapters on Battersea, Glasgow, the Pontypridd area and Sheffield.


Ernie Troy, Brighton and the General Strike, Crabtree Press, 57 Tivoli Crescent, Brighton BN1 5NB. 20p (10p p. and p.)


There is a booklist on the General Strike comprising 77 titles called Remember 1926 available from Harold Smith, 21 Gwendolen Av., London, SW15 6ET. 50p.

The General Strike, 1926, edited by Jeffrey Skelley (Lawrence and Wishart, 1976) contains a number of regional studies and personal reminiscences.
FOOTNOTES

1. Although this generalisation is probably less true for Dundee due to the existence of a local union for the textile trade, the Dundee and District Jute and Flax Workers' Union, under the strong control of J.S. Sime.


3. Despite the pressure from journalists and print workers for the S.T.U.C. to publish a Scottish paper for the strikers, the S.T.U.C. refused, on the grounds that it would conflict with strike discipline(1), until the British T.U.C. exerted pressure on them. The S.T.U.C. finally decided to produce ‘The Scottish Worker’. The first copy was not published until May 10th — a week after the strike had begun and only a couple of days before the strike was called off in London. The paper appeared for 6 days, starting with a mere 25,000 copies and reaching 70,000.


5. Aneurin Bevan, in his book “In Place of Fear”, cited the occasion in 1919 when Robert Smillie, Robert Williams, and Thomas, (the leaders of the miners, the transport workers and the railwaymen — the Triple Alliance), met with Lloyd George. Smillie recalled how Lloyd George addressed the union leaders:
   "'Gentlemen, you have fashioned, in the Triple Alliance of the unions represented by you, a most powerful instrument. I feel bound to tell you that we are at your mercy...if you carry out your threat and strike, then you will defeat us.'
   'But if you do so', went on Mr Lloyd George, 'have you weighed the consequences? ... if a force arises in the State which is stronger than the State itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the State, or withdraw and accept the authority of the State. Gentlemen,' asked the Prime Minister quietly, 'have you considered, and if you have, are you ready? From that moment on,' said Robert Smillie, 'we were beaten and we knew we were.'

6. Bevan observed:
   After this the General Strike of 1926 was really an anti-climax. The essential argument had been deployed in 1919. But the leaders in 1926 were in no better theoretical position to face it. They had never worked out the revolutionary implications of direct action on such a scale. Nor were they anxious to do so.

7. There was a general dissatisfaction with the conduct of the SH and MA in Scotland during the General Strike, largely due to confusion arising out of the order prohibiting all forms of transport although allowing foodstuffs to be moved. General Secretary Hugh Lyon aggravated the situation by his liberal interpretation of what were essential foodstuffs and issuing permits from the Association’s office without authority from the S.T.U.C.

8. The National Minority Movement was formed in 1924, to aid the work of Red International of Labour Unions in Britain. It had metal, transport, and miners sections and its aim was to unite workers in the factories by the formation of factory committees, and to create one union for each industry. It was included in the Labour Party’s list of proscribed organisations from 1926 onwards. For further information see R. Martin, “Communism and the British Trade Unions”, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.

9. From August 1924 to April 1928 the rates per week for the unemployed were men — 18 shillings, women — 15 shillings, dependent children — 2 shillings each.