

Oliver Cooper (MA Modern History – University of Sheffield)

Bursary Research Report

The bursary generously provided by the Society for the Study of Labour History allowed me to travel to the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick for holdings relating to the 1926 General Strike. The title of my MA thesis is 'Towards a Semantic History of the 1926 UK General Strike'.

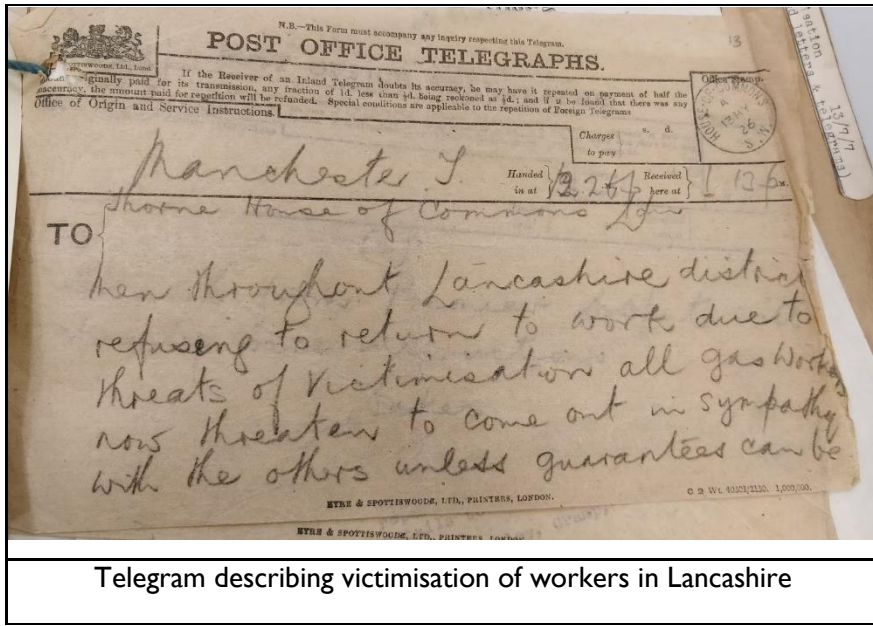
My research used materials from the archive of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), who called the strike of its members across numerous industries in solidarity with the miners. The strike, called on May 3rd, 1926, was the largest industrial event in hitherto British history. My study analysed the language of discourse during the General Strike to understand how perceptions and expectations of the strike were framed.

The primary source material for the research was newspapers, useful as multi-authored and contemporary examples of language. The speculative reporting of the newspapers which came out every day acted in part as a propaganda war, nearly all papers national and local against the strike.

The management of perceptions and expectations by the TUC was a delicate operation. On the one hand, the strike had to be seen to be effective to put pressure on the government for concessions. However, the language of the press accusing the General Strike of being revolutionary had to be countered, the cautious tone left parties in the dispute discontented, especially with the effective capitulation on May 12th, 1926.



A Daily Express retrospective on the General Strike



Telegram describing victimisation of workers in Lancashire

My attempt was to use the linguistic turn of recent historiography to analyse newspapers conceptually. For expectations I adopted Reinhart Koselleck's notion of the 'horizon of expectations', accepting that the range of potential futures were constantly changing in the face of new experiences during the strike. Our understanding of this

very real concept for contemporaries facing the uncertainty of the strike is a supplementary aspect to the previous scholarship. Future studies in this style could take my synchronic analysis and incorporate diachronic study of political and social concepts to create a wider history of the General Strike and mining lock-out.

THE GOVERNMENT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GENERAL STRIKE.

ALL IMPARTIAL OPINION SUPPORTS THE MINERS.

No one will accuse *The Daily News* of being Bolshevik. Its leading article, May 2nd, 1926, read—
 "That the negotiations were summarily discontinued at 11.40 p.m. Friday night was yet another of those
 " tragic blunders of the Government. . . . What was the point at issue? The miners' leaders claimed
 " that they were quite ready to consider a reduction of wages, BUT THEY WERE NOT PREPARED
 " TO ENTER NEGOTIATIONS ALREADY PLEDGED TO SUCH A REDUCTION. They also asked
 " what guarantees the Government had to offer that the necessary searching reorganization of the
 " mines would be expeditiously effected. Both on the whole were reasonable questions to raise. . . .
 " In spite of a nine months' respite, there has not been a title of reorganization and it was not
 " until Wednesday, two months after the publication of the Commission, that an amiable but
 " entirely irrelevant Prime Minister drifted into the negotiations at all."

J. R. MACDONALD, M.P., AT TRADES UNION CONGRESS, MAY 14, SAID—

"At 10.40 o'clock on Friday night he believed they had got peace . . . when the sword was drawn
 " towards midnight on Friday, it was not the hand of Thomas or Herbert Smith or the miners or
 " any one belonging to the General Council, but the head of the present Government. . . . There was
 " no cause or impediment, as far as the miners were concerned, against full negotiations on the Com-
 " mission's Report."

**THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT
WANTED PEACE, BUT IT WOULD
NOT DESERT THE MINERS.
THE MINERS WERE ASKED TO ACCEPT
THESE REDUCTIONS IN THEIR WAGES.
WOULD YOU ACCEPT SUCH WAGE
REDUCTIONS AS THESE?**

THE AVERAGE WORKING WEEK OF THE MINER IS LESS THAN FIVE DAYS.	Present	Earnings	Reductions.
	Earnings. Per Day.	Proposed by Mine Owners.	
SCOTLAND	10 4½	8 4½	4 0
NORTHUMBRLAND	9 2½	6 4	2 10½
DURHAM	9 11½	6 5	3 6½
SOUTH WALES	10 9	7 0	3 9
EASTERN DIVISION	10 11	7 5	3 6
LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE	9 11½	5 11	4 0½
NORTH WALES	9 1	5 6	3 7
CUMBERLAND	10 8	5 8	5 0
FOREST OF DEAN	8 11½	5 0	3 11½
SOMERSET	8 5	6 1	2 4

THE MINERS STAND BY THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION,
which said:—

"Before any sacrifices are asked from those engaged in the industry, it shall be definitely agreed
 " between them that all practicable means of improving its organization and increasing its efficiency
 " should be adopted as speedily as the circumstances of each case allow."

**THE GOVERNMENT HAS
SCRAPPED ITS OWN REPORT.**

Printed and Published by The Birmingham Printers, Ltd., 42-44, Hill Street, Birmingham, for
 The Birmingham B. Co. and Labour Party, 180, Corporation Street.

Pro-Strike Message (Birmingham)

Telephone: VICTORIA 9820 9821 6418


The Trades Union Congress General Council,

WALTER M. CITRINE

Secretary: **FRED BRAMLEY.**
*To whom all communications
 should be addressed.*

Time Ref.: _____ Our Ref.: _____

Department: _____



32, ECCLESTON SQUARE,
 LONDON, S.W. 1.
 12th May 1926.

The General Strike is being terminated to-day.
 Members on strike are, however, asked to await
 instructions from their own Head Offices. The T.U.C.
 is telegraphing to all Head Offices asking them to give
 the necessary instructions to their members.

No exact time for the termination of the
 General Strike can be fixed in view of varying circumstances
 in the different trades concerned, but Head Offices will instruct
 on this point.

A. FUGH (Chairman)
 WALTER M. CITRINE (Acting
 Secretary)

Circulation confirming the end of the strike