

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO



THE GENERAL STRIKE of 1926

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I highly recommend it.”

CLAIRE TOMALIN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW
IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Laura Carter

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Introduction

For nine days in May 1926 more than two million British workers did not go into work. They were striking in support of the British coal miners who were in an acrimonious dispute with their private employers, the mine owners, over wages and working hours. The situation forced the government to respond with an unprecedented level of state intervention in the everyday lives of ordinary Britons. This national crisis was unique; there has never been another general strike. It therefore occupies a central place in the social history of modern Britain.

The General Strike has long been a flashpoint for historians interested in the labour movement and trade unionism. It is often seen as the high watermark of class tensions between the two world wars, an expression of the radical potential of the British working class. Historians now generally agree that the strike was defensive and had limited political and economic repercussions. But recently social and cultural historians have revisited it to examine its social implications and how the memory of the General Strike has been passed between generations of workers. These new studies have enriched our understanding of the long-term consequences of the General Strike and contributed to a more nuanced picture of class and community in Britain both before and after the Second World War.

This short guide offers an overview of British social and economic history after 1918, the causes

and events of the General Strike, and an analysis of its consequences. It contrasts new historical approaches, which highlight everyday experiences of the General Strike, with more traditional political readings.

The aftermath of the First World War

How did the British economy fare after the First World War?

In the 19th century Britain was a global economic power, manufacturing and exporting goods across the world. Her vast geographical empire and imperial assets supported this position. But from the 1880s other countries began to catch up with Britain, which had had its industrial revolution at the end of the 18th century, much earlier than the rest of the world.

The USA and Germany emerged as major competitors in this period, prompting a debate among historians over whether the British economy was in decline between 1880 and 1914. Stephen Broadberry has shown that manufacturing productivity remained strong and competitive in industries which could draw on Britain's robust supply of skilled labour and where production methods were flexible. But Britain was out-

performed in key sectors such as the motor industry where foreign competitors were more technologically innovative and able to apply modernised mass-production techniques.* The British economy, as a result, was entering a long-term decline at the turn of the 20th century – one rooted in deep structural problems.

Martin Weiner has tied this decline to a weakening of Victorian entrepreneurialism and a growing hostility to industrialism amongst the ruling classes.** Nowadays, however, most historians think Weiner overstated his argument: there is plenty of evidence, they say, that British culture was modernising as it moved into the 20th century.

The First World War (1914-1918) accelerated the development of modern industrial techniques, both in Britain and abroad, and quickened the global shift in economic power, leaving Britain weaker and America stronger. It also ushered in a more vocal labour force in Britain, whose demands would gradually force the state to make more interventions in the economy.

Britain's late Victorian and Edwardian political system was underpinned by free trade: a commitment to leaving international markets free of restrictions and duties. The historian Frank Trentmann has shown that before the First World

War free trade could be hailed as a disinterested policy allied to national progress. It had appealed to citizens as consumers, rather than as workers. But from 1914, free trade declined in popularity.* Protectionism was seen as a potential solution to the fact that, after the war, the British economy was weaker than it had been compared with its major competitors.** High levels of unemployment exacerbated this shift in the years following 1918. Levies could protect British-made goods from being out-priced, thus safeguarding British jobs. Moreover, other countries, such as the USA, were protectionist, rendering Britain's "open" economy less viable in the global marketplace.

A crisis in Britain's staple export industries – heavy engineering, shipbuilding, textiles, steel, and coal – was palpable by the end of the First World War. The situation seemed to offer a golden opportunity for Protection, which Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform League had been campaigning for since the beginning of the century. Protectionism, however, did not win much political or popular support in the 1920s and its failure to do so can be seen as one of the causes of the General Strike in 1926.

The problem was essentially a lack of decisive action by the government. It failed to commit to

* Stephen Broadberry, *The Productivity Race: British Manufacturing in International Perspective, 1850-1990* (1997).

** Martin Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (1981).

* Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, (2009).

** Protectionism is the opposite of free trade, the practice of levying customs duties on imports.

either a wholesale shift in economic policy towards protection – or a well-conceived plan to tackle the structural problems in Britain’s heavy industries. As a result, by the mid 1920s, the conditions which made industrial action highly likely were in place. Ross McKibbin explains the situation in political terms, arguing that in the interwar years the three main political parties (the Conservatives, the Liberals, and Labour) all pursued incoherent economic policies at odds with their ideologies and with the wishes of their core voters. This generated an instability which led to “a largely sterile system of industrial relations whose most pointless expression was the general strike of 1926”.*

After 1931, protectionism was adopted comprehensively under a coalition “National Government”. This aligned the Conservatives with a tagline of “stability”, which brought them much electoral success during the economically tumultuous 1930s.

Was Britain in a state of “class warfare” between 1918 and 1926?

What were the social consequences of the First World War? In 1918 the Representation of the People Act granted universal male suffrage and partial female suffrage (women over the age of 30 who met minimum property qualifications could

* Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951* (2010).

vote). For the first time, Britain was a “mass” democracy.

The act also enshrined in law changes in British society which had, in effect, already taken place – class and gender shifts which had been felt by many in their everyday experiences during four years of war. Although the political urgency of the Edwardian women’s movement had subsided, women had proved their worth working in factories for the war effort. Campaigns for women’s rights continued throughout the interwar years on more local, single-issue platforms, and many quiet victories were achieved.* Middle-class women began to assert their place in public life, taking a more active role in pressure groups and exercising more influence over politics, at least informally.** “Middlebrow” literature penned by women writers was notably popular between the wars.***

Meanwhile, a whole generation of men had been traumatised by the horrors of combat on the Western Front. Strikingly, a higher proportion of middle-class than working-class men had fought and died in the First World War because working-class men were more often employed in “reserved”

* Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds.), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (2013).

** Helen McCarthy, ‘Parties, Voluntary Associations, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain’, *The Historical Journal* (2007).

*** Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991).

occupations.* Wartime experiences helped to sow the seeds of the social upheaval that came in the wake of 1918.

During the war the demand for labour to fuel Britain's war machine had driven up workers' wages, leading to a short economic "boom" between 1918 and 1920. After the war the labour movement continued to consolidate and grow. Trade union membership peaked at 8.3 million in 1920.** War-time conditions had also facilitated the development of rank-and-file trade union structures through the shop stewards' movement and the establishment of workers' committees.***

But post-war prosperity proved temporary. The demobilisation of soldiers caused fierce competition for jobs. In cities that relied on their docks as a major source of employment, such as Cardiff and Liverpool, race riots erupted and workers from ethnic minorities were attacked. In Luton, a southern town with relatively high employment, popular unrest over inflated food prices during the Peace Day parade of 1919 left the Town Hall gutted by fire and the Mayor was forced to evacuate the town.**** These examples illustrate the highly regional nature of Britain's economy between the



Women working in at the Leys Malleable Castings Company in Derby, 1928

wars. These regional differences were in turn reflected in the uneven strength and density of trade union power, and ultimately in the support base of the parliamentary Labour Party.

The "old", heavy industries were blighted by unemployment in the early 1920s and it was in these communities that Labour could build support rooted in tangible issues.* The result, in January 1924, was Britain's first Labour government, which took office with the support of the Liberals. It only lasted until November. But, brief though it was, this episode proved that Labour could function as a

* Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (1998).

** Trade union membership declined thereafter, at 5.6 million by 1922. See Alastair Reid and Steven Tolliday, 'Review: The General Strike, 1926', *The Historical Journal* (1977).

*** James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (1973).

**** Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010* (2014).

* Jon Lawrence, 'Labour and the politics of class, 1900-1940' in *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (2011).

legitimate parliamentary party. At the same time it confirmed that the party would need to establish support beyond “traditional” working-class communities in order to build a national base.

The middle classes were also deeply affected by the First World War. The high inflation of the immediate postwar years hit those with savings, small land holdings, and property. This generated a widespread refrain that the middle classes were “pauperised” by the war, whilst the working classes seemed at first to be thriving and were more politically empowered. But the notion of “pauperisation” was more rhetoric than reality. Five years after the end of the First World War it was evident that the middle classes had retained economic dominance over Britain, a position they had been consolidating since the late-19th century in trade, business, and the professions.*

Moreover, the common cultural characteristics of the middle classes intensified between the wars with the growth of owner-occupied suburban housing, privatised leisure, and “middlebrow” music and literature. This was often projected on to the nation as representative of a “national” culture. There were also anxieties amongst the middle classes about how to keep the new “mass” democracy in check, an anxiety fuelled by widespread fears of socialism as continental Europe underwent the shockwaves of the 1917 Bolshevik

* Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (1998).

revolution. Some middle-class opinion formers believed the solution lay in reinstating old hierarchies; others took a more progressive view, looking to the new institutions of the state, such as secondary schools and the BBC, to impose a “civilising” order.

So class feeling, at least as old as the industrial revolution, had real political and cultural contours in Britain that were gradually emboldened in the years after 1918. What had changed was not the position of the workers, but their self-awareness, in turn alerting the middle classes to the need to assert what made them special and superior. But it was really the urgent economic situation back in those “old” heavy industries that galvanised these underlying tensions. Jon Lawrence has identified the coal disputes of 1920-1921 as the turning point in the intensification of class feeling in the 1920s, and it is to these that we now turn.*

The coal problem

Why was the coal industry in crisis by the early 1920s?

Most of Britain’s heavy industries faced long-term structural problems in the early 20th century. They were unmodernised and dependent on out-of-date

* Jon Lawrence, ‘Labour and the Politics of Class, 1900-1940’.