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The General Strike in Gloucestershire

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The General Strike in Gloucestershire

By A. R. WILLIAMS

AS the government, employers and trade union leaders manoeuvred and negotiated in the winter and spring of 1925-26 in an effort to settle the almost insoluble dilemmas that faced them, there were many parts of the country which were ignorant or neglectful of the seriousness of the situation. London, the mining areas and other centres of industry might view with concern the antics and utterances of the leading figures on the national stage but most parts of the country took a less involved view of the situation. Extremists of the left and right might threaten or decry the danger of revolution but north Gloucestershire pursued its placid way, caught in the excitements of the silent cinema or listening to 2LO on the radio.

Local newspapers¹ gave accounts of the London negotiations without a great deal of editorial comment. An editorial in the *Gloucester Journal* of Saturday, May 1, was short and lacking in any sign of alarm: just as much space was given to the signing of a Russo-German treaty. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* took a more positive stand against the miners. The mine-owners' ultimatum would mean that their employees, already badly paid, would have their wages reduced by 20 per cent; these were the "new proposals which the miners stubbornly refuse to entertain".

The government had enjoyed a respite of a year since a previous threat of a national strike had receded and had used the breathing space to implement its emergency powers. Plans to cope with a crisis were announced on 20 November 1925, and quietly but smoothly the government's machinery was prepared. The country was divided into ten areas, each controlled by a Civil Commissioner. Earl Stanhope organised efforts in Gloucestershire, Somerset, Dorset, Devonshire and Cornwall, supported by a squad of assistants, coal officer, food officer, four military liaison officers, railway and postal representatives. Against this the General Council of the Trade Union Congress offered nothing except defiance and calls for unity. However, even though they were unorganised, the workers of Gloucester

¹ This article is based on material in *The Cheltenham Chronicle*, the *Echo* and the *Gloucester Journal*. The best account of the national impact of the General Strike is to be found in C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940* (1955).

were determined to celebrate May Day and Sunday, 2 May, was filled with demonstrations of popular enthusiasm. First, there was a march and a service at the Cathedral at which Bishop Russell Wakefield, formerly Bishop of Birmingham, preached and later a crowded evening meeting at the Hippodrome. Many had to be turned away as the hall was filled to its fullest capacity by those who had turned out to listen to Frank Hodges, secretary of the International Miners' Organisation. He was unable to come and Bishop Wakefield spoke for a second time in a tone which was full of sympathy for the miners. It was a meeting which displayed enthusiasm and a quiet dignity as the audience listened to items of classical music between the speeches of vigour and determination.

There were omens of future developments at Cheltenham when on Monday, May 3, large numbers of empty charabancs from many parts of the West of England were driven through the town for unknown destinations. Rumours of petrol and coal shortages filled the air and the Town Council organised itself into a Coal Committee.

Tuesday, May 4, was the first day of the general strike, or the national strike, as the unions called it. For most of the public there were two immediate effects: compositors on the staffs of many newspapers came out on strike (but not journalists) and the transport system was paralysed. The *Echo*, printed in Cheltenham, was immediately down to one sheet. Railways closed down at once. On Wednesday, May 5, one train ran from Gloucester to Birmingham and on the following day there were two trains each way, manned by inspectors. Similarly, trams stopped running. Newspapers give only a partial idea of the full impact of the strike in the area, concentrating, for the most part, on the instances where the strike was broken. However, it is possible to piece together quite a complete and apparently accurate survey of the progress and impact of the stoppage. For example, a report in the *Echo* on Thursday, May 6, recorded that an apprentice and labourer, the last men working on the site, had stopped work on the Boots building in Cheltenham. By Friday, May 7, volunteers were restoring some sort of service on the railways, with twelve trains running from Cheltenham to Derby, Birmingham and Gloucester, with connections to London. There were three trains daily from Bristol to Paddington and four from Bristol to Gloucester. A few lonely trams ran in the streets, two in Cheltenham by May 7, manned by inspectors and two motor-buses probably manned by volunteers. On the same day, the *Echo* apologised to readers about its size, still only one sheet, and defended its fair dealings with its striking employees. The printers earned

£4 4s. 5d. for a 48 hours week and were given one week's paid holiday a year and Bank holidays. In comparison with many of the manual workers who were on strike, for example the miners, this was relatively generous for the miners earned only about 75s. and would have had this reduced to 45s. if they had accepted the employers' conditions. On this same day, 20 special constables were sworn in at Gloucester.

The weekly newspapers appeared on Saturday, May 8, and, much larger in size than the dailies, were more informative to their readers. They were also smaller than usual (the *Gloucester Journal* was down from 24 to 12 pages) but there was plenty of space for the reporting of developments in the area. Nor was there any lack of news to report, some of it depressing, such as the closure of factories at Stroud because of the unavailability of raw materials, but most of it reflected how easily the community at large was adapting to hardship. One of the most threatening dangers was of electricity cuts but the Electrical Power Engineers Association continued to work. This did not remove the danger, however, because there was still the possibility of local action. An uneasy compromise was worked out at Gloucester between the city's Electricity Committee and the electricity workers, which resulted in the amount of current produced being reduced by half. Priority was given to hospitals and to domestic consumers; this was presumably to minimise hardship to the general public and consequent complaints. Instead, factories were severely rationed and workmen had to be sent home without pay in the afternoon. Both strikers and workmen threatened retaliation but the uneasy peace was maintained.

In other respects, the newspapers concentrated on reports which gave more hopeful impressions. A skeleton postal service was maintained at Cheltenham with two vans carrying mail from London to Gloucester. Mail to London left Cheltenham at 10.00 p.m. and arrived eight hours later. More local services were maintained between Gloucester, Cheltenham and Worcester. Unfortunately, there is no clear evidence of the volume of mail which was carried by these varied means. At Gloucester, printed forms offering lifts were available for motorists to display on their cars and information was co-ordinated at the Shire Hall about people undertaking long-distance journeys who would be able to give lifts to others. All the time, the numbers of those who joined the Volunteer Services were growing. By Saturday, May 8, there were 860 in Cheltenham, including 74 male students from St. Paul's Training College, and 1,600 at Gloucester. The *Gloucester Journal* thought that in most

respects the region was being affected little after four days of the strike. "The general strike and its attendant discomforts still appear to have perturbed the normal life of Gloucester but little. The absence of trams, the reduced train service, and other stoppages all naturally have their effects, but not to so marked a degree as one might expect."

Such feelings of quiet satisfaction were premature, however, because there was one area of Gloucester where feelings ran high, that is, in the docks. Pickets were on the look out for attempts to man ships with blacklegs and were obviously unwilling to stand by as ineffectually as the tram workers and postal staff were doing. The first crisis occurred on Wednesday, May 12, when a tug was due to leave Gloucester for Tewkesbury. Pickets persuaded the crew to leave but the tug owners announced their intention to use volunteer labour. The tug and its barges were loaded, the *Effort* with 127 tons of grain and the *Sunbeam* with 144 tons. As preparations for the sailing were completed scuffles broke out between pickets and a strong band of policemen. Whether these were all regular policemen or whether special constables were present is not clear and estimates of the number of pickets vary from 300 to 500. Nobody was injured in the brawling, nobody fell in the dock but the atmosphere was stormy. In spite of the efforts of the pickets, the tug and barges sailed. The following day, the employers decided to follow up their success and send a tug and an empty lighter along the canal to Sharpness to pick up a cargo. This time a union man agreed to sail with volunteers and another crowd of dockers and seamen turned up to line both sides of the docks and canal. Having second thoughts, the union man left the tug *Speedwell* and its lighter, the *Beaujoy*, now with police on board. Struggles broke out at the swing bridges as strikers resisted police efforts to give the tug free passage. It took a baton charge before the dockers fell back and the outcome was that fourteen men were arrested to be tried the following week.

The general strike collapsed suddenly on Thursday, May 13, to the surprise of everybody outside the small groups of negotiators in London. The anxiety of the strikers was not now whether they could last out and win but the terms on which they would be taken back to work. For most of them, the hatchet was buried quietly enough but there were isolated but important areas where employers were determined to take advantage of the situation. On the day that the strike ended, the Cheltenham Tram Service announced that "Old employees can return on the same wages, but must work longer hours." The following notice was posted.

THE GENERAL STRIKE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

“ Notice to all men who dismissed themselves from their work. Kindly turn in all uniforms and all property of the Company within the next 12 hours and collect your insurance cards. Applications for re-employment will be considered only from non-union men.”

At the same time, the manager of the Company informed the local newspaper that he had a group of men available for immediate training. The strikers held firm and demanded that all should be treated equally and re-engaged on the same terms as before the strike. The Company backed down and work started again on Friday, May 14. It was also a few days before trams reappeared as usual in Gloucester but this, it was claimed, was because of the unusual volume of traffic on the roads. At the same time, railway workers were suspicious of the plans of their employers and were in no hurry to return to work. Consequently, the factories at Stroud remained closed. By Friday, May 14, only half-a-dozen men had returned at Cheltenham. Rumours claimed that strikers would be engaged only if they agreed to the loss of privileges such as rights of seniority but, soon, even these doubts were allayed and communications were completely restored.

The dockers were not pacified so easily and they still kept the port of Gloucester closed to all but a dribble of trade. The impending trial of the fourteen men who had been arrested on Thursday, May 13, poisoned the air and employers were clearly determined to hang on to the right of using non-union labour in the docks. The trial took place on Tuesday, May 18, with the courtroom crowded and 500 more outside. Eleven of the defendants were dockers and the other three also earned their living from the port. As far as can be traced, there were no outsiders or alien agitators involved. Evidence in the case was marked by an absence of vituperation and recrimination on both sides; defendants and police were fair and generous in their statements. One of the employers appeared to speak on behalf of a group of the defendants and stated his willingness to re-engage them. The magistrates, however, were not inclined to be lenient. The thirteen of the accused who pleaded guilty were sent to prison for a fortnight with hard labour and the one man who pleaded innocent was acquitted. The strike was still on and it needed the personal and powerful intervention of Ernest Bevin, National Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, to reach a settlement. He spent Wednesday, May 19, at Bristol, organising a return to work in the port there and had to travel to Gloucester two days later to negotiate. Among the seven demands placed upon

the unions was that "The trade unions admit that in calling the strike they committed a wrongful act, and agree that the employers do not by engagement of their labour, surrender their legal rights to claim damages arising out of the strikers and others responsible". Other conditions were the end of restrictions on the use of machines and the free employment of non-union labour. After three hours of hard bargaining, Bevin secured an agreement that there should be no victimisation and that the maximum number of non-union men to be employed in the port was fifteen. In return, the union undertook to strike only after full negotiation and to discourage unofficial strikes. The last vestiges of the general strike in the district were over.

Compared with a number of other places in the country, such as Glasgow, Barnsley, Doncaster and Leeds, there was little bitterness shown by either side during or after the strike in North Gloucestershire. In a letter to the *Echo*, the deputy mayor of Cheltenham commented on the lack of violence in the town and the Civil Commissioner, Earl Stanhope, agreed and congratulated Gloucester on its ability to carry on so normally during the troubles. By the end of the strike, 30,000 people had enrolled in the Volunteer Service in the South West, including 3,100 at Gloucester and 362 at Stroud. The verdict of the *Echo* was that "The Strike, as it turned out, was more of a nuisance than a menace . . . The back of it was broken when they found that volunteer labour could keep really necessary services in existence". Apart from the court case which arose out of the incidents at the port of Gloucester, there were few other prosecutions. A case of alleged assault on a woman at Cheltenham who was selling copies of the *Gloucester Strike Bulletin* was settled out of court. Food prices were hardly affected. There was a temporary shortage of corn and a brisk trade in fruit but the strike was too short-lived to have any serious effect.

In the days which followed the collapse of the strike, union leaders tried to make the best of their defeat. In a crowded meeting at Cheltenham on Sunday, May 16, they asserted that "The strike has justified itself". In particular, they denied that there had been any attempt at revolution or any taints of communism. The calling off of the strike was itself a proof of the absence of any revolutionary motive. Above all, it was claimed, it was not a political strike but one dominated throughout by industrial demands. "It was controlled by the Trade Union Congress Committee. From first to last it remained absolutely in the hands of that Committee. They were responsible for the policy; no one else. The Parliamentary Labour

THE GENERAL STRIKE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Party . . . had no responsibility for the policy at all." (*Cheltenham Chronicle*, 22 May, 1926.)

Not far away, one section of the population felt adamant in its opposition to a return to work. The miners of the Forest of Dean stood alone and, at a mass meeting on May 16, condemned the end of the strike. Their hardship was extreme. More than 200 had applied for poor relief since May 4; they were granted 10s. for a wife and 3s. for each child, payable in kind, not cash. At Westbury-on-Severn, 700 waited outside a meeting of the Poor Law Guardians which gave them 10s. for a wife, 4s. for the first child and 2s. 6d. for other children, up to a maximum of 25s. a week. In their poverty they turned against their leaders who had led them into such futile action.

Meanwhile the public turned its mind and its attention elsewhere. By the end of May, memories of the strike were fading. The end of the miners' strike was noted in only the last leader of the *Gloucester Journal*. The first editorial was concerned with an insignificant incident in the rebellion of the Moroccans against the French and Spanish governments, the second considered the implications of a *coup d'etat* in Poland and the third noted discontent in Egypt. The miners came fourth.