

Black Friday: Learning from defeat

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An article from 1984, after the TUC sold out the struggle at the *Stockport Messenger* newspaper, pointing to the similarity with Black Friday in 1921

The Trade Union Congresses disgusting betrayal of the National Graphical Association (NGA) and Len Murray's spineless toadying before the Tories has called forth references to "Black Friday" and the record of Jimmy Thomas.

Whilst history does not repeat itself in a literal sense, important lessons must be learned from the great defeats and betrayal as well as from heroic victories. Unfortunately at the present we have great need of learning the lessons of days like Friday 15th April 1921.

The years immediately preceding the First World War, the last two years of the war itself and the two years succeeding it were years of advance and ascent for the working class movement in Britain.

In 1910 total union membership stood at 2.5 million; by 1920 it had reached 8.3 million. These were years of massive and militant struggles the seamen's and dockers' strikes of 1911, the railwaymen's strike of 1911 and the miners' strike of 1912 were the first fully national strikes in their respective industries.

Not only did this period see an unprecedented intensity and breadth of struggle. It also saw the birth of real anti-bureaucratic rank and file movements in many unions. The most notable were the Miners' Unofficial Reform Committee, established in South Wales in 1911, the Amalgamation movements in the rail and engineering industries, and the wartime Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee movements.

The militant rank and file accordingly played an important role in initiating the wave of unrest that swept Britain. On the 28th January 1919 The Times complained that "the instigators of these revolts have almost as bitter a distrust and hatred of those trade union officials as they have of the 'bosses' or the government".

Lloyd George's Cabinet Secretary, Tom Jones, in a memo dated 8th February 1919 referred to the "mutiny of the rank and file against the old established leaders".

The most powerful sectors of the working class were undoubtedly the engineers, the transport workers, the railway workers, and most powerful of all the miners. The latter three sectors had formed or reformed powerful federations or industrial unions in the pre-war period. In early 1914 they had come together to form a Triple Industrial Alliance pledged to assist each other in disputes given the obvious and immediate need for solidarity between the three sectors.

The rank and file of these unions were militant and the grass roots leaders imbued with syndicalist and socialist ideas of a class wide struggle against the bosses and the government and for nationalisation of their industries and for workers' control. The official leaders were cast in a distinctly different mould.

The Miner's demands

Frank Hodges, the Secretary of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) was a pronounced 'moderate'. James Henry Thomas Jimmy Thomas - also MP for Derby, became General Secretary of the NUR in 1917. He was an enthusiastic recruiter in World War 1. He was a friend of Lady Astor and a repulsive fawner on the aristocracy in general. He was a bitter foe of the rank and file of his union. At first sight the leaders of the Transport Workers' Federation - to be transformed in the years 1920-22 into the Transport and General Workers' Union - were more promising. Robert Williams. Secretary of the Federation since 1910, architect and advocate of the Triple Alliance, was also a founder member of the British Communist Party.

But the most powerful and central section of the British working class remained the miners. There were over one million miners at the end of World War 1, and over 800,000 were members of the MFGB. In 1918 the coal industry produced a record 287 million tons, of which 98 million tons were exported. There were 3,000 pits owned by half that number of firms.

In 1917, Lloyd George had been obliged to take the mines into state control, whereupon a system of national agreements with the MFGB had been instituted. The union set itself the threefold aim of achieving a minimum wage, permanent national agreements and the nationalisation of the industry. On the other hand with the post-war boom promising record profits, the employers were pressing Lloyd George to hand control of their pits back to them.

At a national conference in January 1919, the MFGB adopted demands for a 30% wage increase, for a six-hour day and for nationalisation. When Lloyd George refused, they balloted the members for strike action, gaining a six to one majority in favour. Conditions could not have been more favourable to the miners. The 3.5 million strong army was in what Churchill later called "a convulsion of indiscipline". In the great transit camps at Folkestone and Dover, 12,000 soldiers demonstrated. At the Army Service Depot at Kempton Park, a soldiers' council was elected which declared that it would fraternise with the workers. On January 6th, armed soldiers demonstrated in Whitehall. At the end of January, Glasgow was convulsed with a general strike which spread to Edinburgh and Belfast. Even the police force was restive.

Yet the miners' leaders allowed Lloyd George to talk them into a parliamentary commission led by Sir John Sanbey. Whilst the majority of the commission came out in favour of nationalisation in June 1919, this was a Pyrrhic victory for the MFGB. The commission produced four separate reports and Lloyd George used this as a pretext to shelve the lot in August. Having let one vital moment slip, the miners' leaders now allowed the enormous mood of sympathy for them to slip away by taking their case to the TUC in September.

In place of struggle

The TUC refused any industrial support proposing instead a classically toothless publicity campaign 'The mines for the nation' - which proved a miserable failure. Thus the opportunity to force the nationalisation of the industry was lost and the general impetus of the working class offensive broken.

Despite being totally solid, a national rail strike in October 1919 was settled with a rotten compromise. The government had wanted to lower railwaymen's average wages from 51/- a week to 40/-.



Robert Smillie J H Thomas settled on an agreement to maintain the existing level for one year only. Thomas carefully avoided asking the Triple Alliance for industrial support - using the other union leaders only as mediators with the government. An interesting story told to Aneurin Bevan by miners' leader Robert Smillie and retold in "In Place of Fear" sums up the mentality of the union leaders, faced with Lloyd George:

"He (Lloyd George) said to us '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 in our opinion we are at your mercy. The Army is disaffected and cannot be relied upon. Trouble has already occurred in a number of camps. We have just emerged from a great war and the people are eager for the reward of their struggle, and we are in no position to satisfy them. In these circumstances, 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? The strike will be in defiance of the government of the country and by its very success will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. For 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.' "

Revolution abroad

Faced with trade union leaders who feared victory and dreaded the very thought of a struggle for power, Lloyd George - a sly and adept ruling class warrior - knew the cards were stacked in his favour. Yet as long as the balance of forces was still in favour of militant action, the Cabinet and the whole ruling-class could not sleep easy in their beds. Cabinet Secretary Tom Jones recorded in his diary that at the beginning of 1920 "Ministers have the wind up to the most extraordinary extent about the industrial situation. From a meeting yesterday I came away with my head fair reeling. I felt I had been in Bedlam. Red revolution and blood and war at home and abroad".

In fact it was the attempt to intervene against revolution abroad that brought about the Labour movement's last great victory of the post-war period.

Since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the British government had been intervening in support of the forces of counter-revolution in Russia. Since 1918 British troops in limited numbers had been assisting the White armies. By the early summer of 1920 the Red Army had moved onto the offensive against the Poles who had been spurred to attack the young Soviet republic by Anglo-French imperialism.

In concert with France the British government threatened the Soviet Union with war, began the despatch of large quantities of munitions to Poland and summoned the Chiefs of Staff to consider military action. The response of the working class was immediate. On May 10th the London dockers refused to load the 55 Jolly George with munitions for Poland. A week later the dockers union put a general ban on the loading of all munitions destined for use against Russia. On August 3rd the situation became critical when Lord

Curzon, the Foreign Secretary, despatched an ultimatum to the Soviet government.

The next day Labour Party headquarters telegraphed all local parties and trades councils to initiate anti-war demonstrations for August 8th.

The call roused massive demonstrations and was followed up by the TUC's Parliamentary Committee and the Labour Party Executive issuing a warning to Lloyd George's government: "the whole industrial power of the organised workers will be used to defeat this war".

They immediately summoned a National Conference and constituted a Council of Action, mandated ,to secure not only the withdrawal of the war threats, but also diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Republic; and the resumption of normal trading relations with It. The Council of Action was empowered to call a general strike to this end.' Rhetoric was heady at this special conference. J H Thomas secretary of the NUR exclaimed. "When you vote for the resolution, do not do so on the assumption that you are merely voting for a simple tools-down policy. It is nothing of the kind, the resolution to be given effect to, it means a challenge to the whole constitution and the country.

The Chairman of the Labour Party went even further in his warning to the government: "If they cannot run the country In a peaceful and humane manner without. Interfering with the lives of other nations, we will be compelled, even against all conditions, to chance whether we cannot do something to take the country into our own hands for our own people." Delegates rapturously sang the Red Flag' and the Internationale.

On the 16th August the wily Lloyd George, recognising the impossibility of further war moves, declared that the policy of the government appear to differ in no way from that enunciated at the Labour conference".

The episode demonstrated that the labour movement's power was unbroken. It also demonstrated the lengths to which right wing reformist leaders can go if pushed by enormous mass pressure. But once the immediate danger had passed these same leaders rushed to dismantle the councils of action and refused to broaden their scope to the question of Ireland - where British troops were brutally suppressing the nationalist rising - or to combating unemployment which was beginning to rise sharply.

The end of the post-war boom marked the sharp change in conditions that enabled the government to take the offensive. Yet even now the working class had the forces to resist" to turn defence into defiance and a working class offensive. It was the treachery of the union leaders and the unpreparedness of rank and file militants and even revolutionaries that enabled the ruling class to get away with it.

A clear majority for action

In the summer of 1920 the miners demanded a rise in wages and a lowering of coal prices. A strike ballot recorded a heavy majority in favour and strike notice was given for 26th September. The Triple Alliance partners were called on for support. At once the other unions demanded a postponement and renewed negotiation\$ The government was adamant and the miners' strike began on October 16th. Having failed to stop the confrontation. the NUR balloted its members on strike action and - doubtless to Thomas's dismay - received a clear majority for action.

The strike was settled a. few days later on the basis of 8 temporary settlement which was due to expire in March 1921. In the aftermath of this disgraceful display of weakness, the union leadership did nothing whatsoever. In marked contrast, the government acted swiftly to take advantage of the time allowed by the agreement to prepare their forces for a showdown. In just five days they rushed the Emergency Powers Act through Parliament. This allowed for Orders In Council to be passed, and for courts to be set up for summary jurisdiction in the event of a "national emergency" This act effectively allowed for a war-time type

of dictatorship similar to the "state of siege" that the pre-war Prussian regime had at its disposal. This act was to serve the ruling class well both in 1921 and 1926. Yet again the TUC made only verbal protests.

As the new year dawned, the full force of the economic crisis hit. Prices, including coal prices, tumbled. Between January and March 1921, losses in the coal industry were running at £5 million a month.

The owners clamoured for wage cuts. In Wales, for example, they demanded a 49% reduction.

The government announced its intention to decontrol the mines on the day the temporary wage agreement expired - March 31st. The extent of government employer collusion was underlined when the employers announced their plans for sweeping wage reductions and a return to district agreements to operate from that very same day.

Lock out notices were posted at the pits whilst the Westminster talking shop was still chewing over the Decontrol Bill. Miners' wages on average stood at 9/8d. The employers were asking for a 42/- cut in South Wales. Even the government's Minister of Labour was moved to describe the proposed wage reductions as "8 bit thick",

The return to district agreements was, if anything, a worse threat since it would effectively destroy the hard-won unity of the MFGB. It would enable the employers to settle with the profitable sectors, drive down the wages of the less profitable and close unprofitable pits more or less at will. Moreover, as an attack on the largest, most militant union, it was clearly meant to set the example for a general employers' offensive. If the miners were defeated then the whole working class line of battle would disintegrate, leaving only bitter rearguard actions to be fought by isolated sectors.

The leaders who had feared to take on and defeat Lloyd George when the government was weak and ill-prepared were not likely to put up spirited resistance when he was on the offensive. As soon as the lock-out was announced, the government declared its "state of emergency". Royal Proclamations mobilised the armed forces and despatched them to "occupy" the mining areas. Machine gun posts were stationed at pit-heads.

A Defence Force of some 80,000 "volunteers" i.e. middle-class strike breakers - was called up. The mentality of this band of would-be White Guards was summed up in a novel written in this period:

"Us ... meaning the Decent Crowd, Anybody with a stake in the country, including the unfortunate Middle Classes. AU of us. Well, we accept the challenge. We're ready to knock hell out of them ... This clash has got to come. We must get the working classes back to their Kennels. Back to cheap labour. Back to discipline. Otherwise we're done". (Sir Philip Gibbs. "Middle of the Road" 1923) .

The flush of triumph in this passage is undoubtedly the product of hindsight, but the vicious hatred of the working class is unmistakably genuine.

FRATERNISATION AND PANIC

The MFGB formally appealed to the Triple Alliance "to take strike action in order to assist the miners in the present crisis". On April 8th the full conference of the whole Triple Alliance assembled and as a result the Transport Workers and the Railwaymen issued strike orders. At a local level strike committees and often joint committees were created, in many cases on the initiative of Communist Party members.

Fraternisation was organised with the soldiers and with the many unemployed who had joined the Defence Force in desperation. Examples multiplied of military reservists refusing service. The London District of the Electricians Union and of ASLEF pledged themselves to take strike action and sent delegates to the Triple

Alliance meetings.

The prospect of an imminent generalised conflict with the government threw the union leaders, especially Thomas, into near panic. Lloyd George remarked scornfully in Cabinet

"I don't think J H Thomas knows where he is, or he would have been along to see me. He wants no revolution". And again he showed a shrewd assessment of his man: "Thomas is all for peace, he does not want 8 row to please Hodges. I have complete confidence in Thomas's selfishness" (Hodges was the MFGB's secretary)

Whilst the millionaire press kept up a propaganda barrage against miners for letting the pit ponies suffer, Lloyd George fastened onto the issue of the safety men and pump operators, and demanded that the MFGB send them into the pits as a precondition for any further negotiations. The leaders of the Triple Alliance now began to show their fangs - against the miners. They demanded that the miners accede to Lloyd George's request and postponed the strike action to Friday April 15th.

Chaos at Unity House

The miners unwillingly and fatally conceded the point. It is a law of the class struggle that a strike postponed is a strike half-way to being called off.

A series of visits to Downing Street by the union secretaries began. Lloyd George held firm behind the employers' demands. On the night of April 14th. the miners' secretary Frank Hodges made an entirely unauthorised offer at a meeting of liberal and Tory backbenchers in the House of Commons.

He proposed a temporary wages settlement that would leave over the other demands of the miners. Lloyd George saw his moment and pounced.

Writing a letter to the MFGB, he pressed for a temporary settlement leaving aside all the miners demands, and specifically the demand for a National Pool of mine profits, out of which the miners should be paid by national agreement. This weak and utopian project nevertheless embodied the last defence of the national negotiations principle. To surrender it for another "temporary agreement" in deteriorating economic conditions would have spelled doom for the miners.

On the morning of the 15th, all was chaos at Unity House where the Triple Alliance was in virtually permanent session. The MFGB Executive met separately and repudiated Hodges' position, but only by one vote, with two members absent. They decided to refuse Lloyd George's offer. Thereupon led by the wretched Thomas, the other sections of the alliance began to demand further talks. At this point Herbert Smith - President of the Yorkshire miners - uttered his famous remark to the clamorous NUR and TWF leaders: "Get on t'field. That's t place".

Unity House became a scene of Bedlam, Miners. railwaymen's and transport workers' leaders paced the corridors shouting at one another. Miners' leader Hodges was slumped over a desk weeping uncontrollably, J H Thomas chased Smith across Euston Square pleading and begging for the miners to give in. The miners withdrew, and Thomas, Robert Williams. Bevin and Co, rushed to Downing Street for more private talks with Lloyd George, who now realised victory was within his grasp.

The Cabinet Secretary Jones' memoirs recall his cynicism. Whilst Thomas and Co were speaking, Lloyd George passed Jones a note saying "It is not enough to have a good cause", to which Jones scribbled the reply "You must have good leaders". Nodding, the premier replied again "I'm sorry for the miners. I'm not heartless enough for this sort of thing".

With the miners absent, the TWF proposed that they be asked to return and that the Triple Alliance announce that it was indeed finalising preparations for the strike. The NUR delegation voted this proposal down 28 to 12. Thomas then put forward a resolution calling off the strike because of the miners' rejection of Lloyd George's offer, It was passed with only two votes against, At 3.00 pm a smiting Thomas trotted down the steps of Unity House to the waiting press and announced "It's all off, boys".

The inevitable defeat

The miners fought on alone until mid-summer, but their defeat was now inevitable. Miners' pay fell from its 89/9d level at the end of the first quarter of 1921, to 58/10d by the end of the following quarter. Dockers suffered a 25% reduction in pay in the year following. By the end of 1921, 6 million workers had received wage cuts of no less than 8/- a week. Union membership fell from 8.3 million to 6.6 million in one year, and unemployment topped the 2 million mark.

This stunning defeat was entirely the work of the wretched reformist leaders, The best of them were completely unable to see that past gains could only be defended by militant class struggle, When the class enemy faced them with the political consequences of militant tactics i.e. when the political Challenge to the state that is implicit in a general strike stared them in the face they panicked and rushed to surrender. J H Thomas, the worst of them, was a bought and sold traitor who was consciously trying to sell his members and the working class to the highest bidder.

The real tragedy of Black Friday 1921 was that the militant rank and file had no alternative general staff. no national organisation capable of challenging the leadership, preventing the betrayal and carrying the struggle forward, The syndicalist rank and file movements had never understood clearly the question of national leadership and cross industry rank and file organisation, The newly formed Communist Party, which repeatedly called "Watch Your Leaders!" and warned of betrayal throughout the dispute, had no alternative to offer Worse still, Bob Williams of the TWF was a party member although he was instantly expelled after Black Friday.

Only from 1921 onwards did the British CP with the invaluable advice of the Communist International and the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) set about elaborating a policy for rank and file resistance in the unions. Only then did it start the fight for an alternative leadership and for root and branch reorganisation in a process that bore fruit in the creation of the National Minority Movement.

Indeed, perhaps the most vital lesson for us today is that without such an overcoming of syndicalist rank and file, without the building of a strong revolutionary party and a national rank and file movement, the trade union leaders will continue to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory as they have done whenever key groups of workers have prepared to do battle with the government.

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