THE GENERAL STRIKE IN THE NORTH EAST

The General Strike on Teesside

How did the local trade unionists organise the strike? There had been no preparations for the strike and once it had begun it was by no means generally accepted that strike activities should be centrally directed and co-ordinated. The Secretary of the Middlesbrough Trades Council later acknowledged that many trade unionists were anxious lest the 'domestic affairs of individual unions should be interfered with'. The traditional independence of trade unions made them reluctant to delegate authority to a central strike committee. In Stockton, however, the central strike committee claimed that 'this is the headquarters of the strike and all unions concerned recognise our instructions'. Unfortunately no evidence has been discovered to check that statement.

How did a central strike committee function during the nine days? The annual report of the Middlesbrough Trades Council provides a useful description. 'The Central Strike Committee met each day at 3 p.m. whilst from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. various delegates arranged to be at the headquarters to deal with any emergency. The attendance of the delegates was not as good as it might have been ... the delegates were also members of their Trade Strike Committees, whose meetings they also had to attend.' Loyalty to one's own union came first. The central strike committee set up sub-committees to deal with problems such as permits, picketing, publicity, etc. but failed to produce a strike bulletin due largely to lack of resources. The committee's total strike expenses were less than £9! If the strike had lasted longer then the central strike committee would have had more opportunity to develop and historians might have had a more detailed record of its proceedings.

The Government had prepared an emergency services organisation which aimed to minimise the effect of the strike. Teesside was in the Emergency organisation's Northern Division. Volunteer Service Committees in West Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Stockton saw to it that essential services were maintained. About 3,000 people volunteered to help the Government on Teesside but we know neither who they were nor what they did, although public transport, docks and police seem to have been the main sectors employing them.

Historians have emphasised the lack of violence during the General Strike but violence was present and had the strike lasted longer than nine days, might have led to a more serious situation. The two major violent outbreaks on Teesside arose out of the running of trains by volunteers at West Hartlepool and Middlesbrough. This is not surprising because transport workers bore the main weight of the general strike and it was the movement of transport which was likely to produce most resentment among strikers because militants knew that if transport could be moved, then the impact of the strike was automatically diminished. Worse still, it might have an adverse effect on the morale of workers who were ostensibly not striking for themselves, but in order to obtain justice for their comrades in another industry.

The more serious disturbance was at Middlesbrough where the railway line was blocked for a time and some damage was done to railway property. This was on the night of May 6th. On the following two nights, crowds clashed with the police, shop windows were broken and some looting took place.

Several arrests were made on these last two occasions and all save one of those charged had a long list of previous convictions. This does suggest that local criminals took advantage of a tense situation to resume their private battle with the law. Nevertheless, whether trade unionists were involved or not, the clashes illustrate the dangers brought about by the strike and could easily have taken on a political colour.

The one arrest in the area which was unquestionably politically inspired was that of the locally well-known Communist Jack Bell. Many members of the Communist Party suffered a similar fate during the General Strike. Their activities were already well known to the authorities, their language was inflamatory and they were easy targets under the Emergency Regulations which gave to the police very wide powers. Bell was the organising secretary of the Middlesbrough Communist Party. He was charged with committing an act likely to cause disaffection among the civil population and HM forces, and with having on his premises certain documents likely to cause sedition and disaffection among the civilian population or the armed forces. He received a two months prison sentence. Bell's arrest and trial illustrate how easy it was to pick off known militants. The authorities were taking no chances even though Communist strength was low and their connection with the mass of the labour movement tenuous. It was safe to arrest communists in a way it would not have been to arrest more orthodox strike leaders.

On May 11th, the so-called 'second line' of strikers, mainly engineers, were called out. Twenty-four hours later, the strike was called off. It would be interesting to learn how well these men responded to the strike call but neither companies nor unions seem to have any idea. Save for a few press reports, Teesside is as blank on this subject as elsewhere.

If many engineers did join the strike they must have been confused and upset by the collapse of May 12th. Returning to work, especially as the coal stoppage continued, was going to be difficult for all strikers but especially so for those who had only just stopped work. The way the strike was terminated made some victimisation inevitable. May railwaymen on Teesside were put on short time and the Middlesbrough dockers did not return to work until May 25th on terms a good deal less favourable than before the stoppage. There must have been many individual cases of hardship which will never be uncovered.

It is hard to assess the effect of the General Strike on Teesside. The fact that no coal was being mined in the United Kingdom from April 30th 1926 to more or less the end of the year seriously hampered the traditional Teesside industries already in a depressed condition. About 30,000 iron and steel workers were unemployed on Teesside by the end of May 1926. On the eve of the shutdown of the coal industry 147 blast-furnaces had been in operation in the area: only eight were still working at the end of July. By October 25th 1926, Thornaby had 48% of insured workers registered as unemployed, Middlesbrough 47% and Hartlepools 45.4%.

The effect on the political thinking which the strike had on Teesside workers is even more difficult to assess. The Communist Party does not appear to have made the ephemeral gains it did on Tyneside. The first local elections after the strike did not show any noticeable swing to the Labour Party as occurred at Hull. Nor did more people bother to vote.

It was well into the thirties before Labour began to dominate the Parliamentary seats in the district. Of course these are not precise indicators of increasing political awareness but they are suggestive. The strike may have had a considerable impact on individuals.

About 25,000 workers joined the General Strike on Teesside. The relatively small number of trade union activists got down to the job of organisation, the remainder waited to see what would happen. If the strike had lasted longer than nine days, the Government, as well as the TUC, would have been faced with a serious dilemma. More violent clashes were probably inevitable had the Government insisted that supplies got through and had the strikers been determined that they should not.

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The North Eastern Daily Gazette and the General Strike

It is interesting to summarise my recent paper on the Press and the General Strike on Teesside at a time when the work of a group from the Centre for Mass Communications Research at Leicester has just been published as a Penguin Special.* This concerned an event of only two years ago, and the way in which the media predetermined the nature of that event; a scrutiny of the Gazette over the brief period before, during and after the General Strike supplies material for a case study in systematic misrepresentation.

Initially there was the question of whether or not the Strike would take place. Negotiations took place and the principal parties were evaluated. We can see from our generally accepted historical accounts, quotes from Cabinet ministers showing that however inept were the miners leaders, the owners were worse, and the Government worse still.**. But compare the Gazette: in face of the lock-out notices due to come into effect two days hence the men are 'unalterably opposed to a reduction in the existing wage rates ... or an extension of hours. But they have not given unmistakable evidence of their readiness ... to consent to considerable sacrifice for the common good'.***

The owners are extorted to 'see that the men enjoy the wages necessary for the maintenance of their working efficiency and for the modest contentment of themselves and their families',**** and they are commended

* Halloran, Elliott and Murdock - Demonstrations and Communication: A Case Study (Penguin Special 1970)

** See Comment by Lord Birkenhead on the Mine Owners, and further comment by L. S. Amery on the Government

*** 28th April, editorial comment

**** 28th April, editorial comment

for their flexibility in that they seemed more willing than the miners to accept Baldwin as a negotiator, who saw the choice between longer hours or shorter pay.* Any implication that the recent economic policies of the Government had worsened the coal export situation are not to be found, rather the reverse. Comment of Churchill's second budget ran 'What he needs is a level head and a stiff upper lip ... When a private citizen cannot afford a motor car or a country mansion or a steam yacht he goes without ... in so far as Mr. Churchill's management of the Treasury is really humdrum, that is a cause for sincere thankfulness'.**

Once the Strike had begun the newspaper's response became more shrill. Responsibilities were fixed in the most extreme forms, and the labelling was constantly reinforced as the nine days of disruption progressed. The moderation of the owners is taken for granted and the Government emerges in the guise of St. George; the dragon is personified by the leaders of the TUC but hope remains for all those who resist the policies of their trade unions; the task for the ordinary citizen is unmistakably clear.

Under a heading 'Coal War Ushers in the Merry Month' the final peace bid of the Prime Minister is seen to be frustrated by the obstinacy of the miners: an obstinacy stiffened by the support of the TUC.*** On the first day of the Strike the position was summarised, 'Great Britain is face to face with an immeasurable calamity. Let there be no mistake about that. The General Council of the TUC has presented an ultimatum to the nation: 'the miners must have what they want. If you don't give it to them we will take you by the throat and choke you into submission, even if we have to kill you in the process'. The role of the Government is then clear: to 'preserve civilised law and order, and the nation must lend its whole-hearted active support'.****

The minority position of the strikers is stressed in a number of ways without any real analysis of what could constitute a majority and a minority in such circumstances. The Durham mining community is reported: 'I don't want any strike' remarked a grey-haired miner to a Gazette reporter. 'We had enough in 1921. Most of us had something in the purse to start off with then, but we've got nothing now.' After commenting that this statement probably represents a pretty general view, a (presumably) minority view is given, 'We simply cannot stand any reduction,' said one young fellow, 'If we have to starve we may as well starve here as down the pit'.*** A numerical assessment of the minority position appears two days later when out of an adult population of 25 millions, the TUC represents only 5 millions; and even if dependent females are accounted for, the main body of citizens face the malcontented third.

These themes reoccur in the succeeding nine days. Under an editorial entitled 'The Call of Duty' it was stressed that the crises was one of

* 27th April, news item 'negotiating for Coal Peace with Tied Hands'

** 27th April, editorial comment

*** 1st May, news item

**** 3rd May, editorial

'democratic constitutional government versus the dictatorship of an irresponsible minority',* and four days later under the heading 'How It Began', it was stressed that the Government stopped talks with the TUC over the Daily Mail having been inconvenienced, but really the advanced preparations for the strike on the part of the unions forced the hand of the Government.

Encouragement to break the Strike came in a number of ways. On the 6th May an editorial item under 'Blacklegging' pointed out that under these circumstances, such behaviour is patriotic because industry is thus held together for the aftermath; and on the following day under 'Obedience' it was pointed out that this is a virtue, sometimes: not when it is to come out on strike. For those remaining on strike two aspects opened up: the real (sorry) nature of their characters, and the hopelessness of their struggles.

After reference to a philosophic calm in Middlesbrough on 6th May, the Gazette described the attempt to prevent the crossing gates at Sussex Street being closed on the following day as 'Riot at Middlesbrough'. Alongside an account of the incident were hints of Red Intrigue at many levels. The editorial comments on the following two days both returned to the incident at Sussex Street and to shop window breaking in Linthorpe Road. The first referred to irresponsible youths in Middlesbrough, and to 'a gang of several hundred men (young and irresponsible)' in Stockton; the second put the blame for the Middlesbrough 'riots' on 'hooligans' and exonerated the TUC. On the same day, however, under the heading 'The Next Step' a demand to call off the Strike was made, and the nature of the dispute described as a revolutionary attempt to set up a sectional dictatorship.

Regarding the hopelessness of the struggle from the TUC point of view, two themes in particular are pursued. One is the advanced nature of the preparations made to beat the Strike alongside the rush of volunteers from the common people. Two days before the actual start of the Strike the Chief Constable of Middlesbrough (Henry Riches OBE) is reported as having acted on Home Office instructions, which although confidential from the press, elicited a comment from Mr. Riches 'this time we are ready'. The Town Clerk (Preston Kitchen) similarly confided that a special committee of the Corporation had already met on several occasions. Appeals for all sorts of volunteers were made, and on the second day of the Strike, it was reported that 'as early as seven this morning men were waiting outside the Municipal Buildings, Middlesbrough, to enrol for voluntary service'.

The second theme concerned signs of early failure on the part of the Strike. The local news of 6th May reported that the General Strike was weakening and that essential supplies were being restored. Large numbers of private buses were reported from Stockton in spite of some peaceful picketing, whilst a number of trains were arriving at both Stockton and Thornaby. In Middlesbrough, the Chief Constable was reported as being pleased 'at the sane and balanced behaviour of all classes'. Again on 11th May a news item declared that the Strike was weakening, and stressed the declaration of its being 'illegal' (by

* 4th May, editorial

Sir John Simon in the House of Commons). The next day of course saw the end of the Strike. Reports contained no hint of the excessive moderation of the TUC leadership but stated quite starkly: 'General Strike Called Off - TUC Hauls Down the Flag'. There was little notice taken of the Samuel proposals but there were plenty of dark hints regarding the future of prominent strikers.

Throughout these two weeks or so a clear pattern of news handling emerges. Events are not reported as such but are interpreted in order to fit a given formula; if there is no matching then the events are ignored. The reader is not informed but presented with a point of view the subjectivity of which should interest the historian when a less partial record of events is placed alongside these issues of the Gazette.

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Mr. J. Feeney, a retired locomotive driver who was a member of the first strike committee set up in Middlesbrough in 1926, spoke to the Group's Teesside meeting. His speech was recorded and the following are brief extracts from his stirring address.

Before the strike

"... I would like, if I can, to create the atmosphere which prevailed among the working class in those years. The war had resulted in 800,000 of my generation and the preceding generation being slaughtered in France ... at the end of the war strikes broke out in the armed forces ... Due to the conditions following the war one could see and feel the development of a political consciousness (among the working class) that so far as Teesside was concerned resulted in the election of "Red Ellen"* in 1924 ... at this time in Middlesbrough in fine weather you could not possibly go out any night unless there was a political meeting somewhere, a favourite place for meetings (was) down at the Station. On Sunday it was outside the Park gates ... We used to take the Town Hall Sunday night after Sunday night, if we got somebody like Jim Thomas or Arthur Henderson we could not only fill the main hall but the crypt too and then we had them waiting outside. It was remarkable how much money they would put in the hat when we went round ... (Mr. Feeney commented on the events in coalmining in 1921 and 1925 and continued) in 1924 my own union had to come on strike in defence of our existing wages and conditions ... as May 1926 approached I may say we were very conscious that a strike was imminent ... when I say 'we' I mean people like myself an ordinary rank and file member of a trade union ... This atmosphere ... had been created by the methods by which our society was being operated (and) when it became quite clear that the Baldwin government was behind the coalowners then we began to prepare for a strike ...

The Strike

"Now I want that to be clearly understood because this was a fact that the working class of this country did prepare for a strike and did prepare in this town. John Bromley† came to Teesside to present the TUC's case ...

* Ellen Wilkinson (1891-1947) was Labour MP for Middlesbrough East from 1924-1931 and for Jarrow from 1935 till her death.

† John Bromley was general secretary of the ASLEF and prominent as a national level leader of the TUC.

Speakers pointed to the consequences of the proposals for the miners (but also) if this was to go on unrestricted then inevitably we would go back to the conditions of the pre-war 1914 days and that dream of Lloyd George that this would be a country fit for heroes to live in would collapse and disappear completely. There was a feeling in the workers that we are not going to go back when the strike started ... (There was) never no question of it being unconstitutional ... the strike itself was of a purely defensive character, nothing political at all about it ...

"The strike as far as Middlesbrough was concerned was conducted by a strike committee that consisted of the five NUR branches ... the dockers ... the tramwaymen's union ... and the riverside workers. We had a strike committee that went into operation at precisely midnight on 3rd May. It had its first meeting at what was then the Labour Party headquarters in Middlesbrough ... because the rooms were inadequate the strike headquarters was moved to the Railway Club in Southfield Road. The Committee chairman was a member of the NUR called Frank Lewis, commonly known as 'Cockney' Lewis ... The committee had the whole of its machinery in operation ... There was a qualified clerk from the railways and telephones. We immediately got down to work; we created the whole machine in order that we could keep in contact with every other district in Great Britain as far as we were able to do with the mobility we had, particularly with the lads on the motor cycles. As a member of my branch committee I was automatically a member of the Teesside Central Strike Committee. The strike was being conducted very efficiently in order that the necessary road vehicles could transport the goods that were necessary to the hospitals and places of that sort they came to our Strike Committee to ask us to give permits to their drivers to enable their drivers to move their vehicles on the streets of Middlesbrough ... that was authority and that authority was growing ... It was this committee which decided whether the Middlesbrough dock gates should be manned or not ... No train passed Sussex Street crossing unmolested ... Whether you call them hooligans, or whatever name you give the, is completely immaterial; the fact that the strike was on, the fact that they had to stop anything from being done, in order that we could compell something that was a bit more realistic in terms of justice ... to the miners ... Anything that we could do to implement that decision was fair game ...

"When the looting began to operate on the scale that it did ... the Mayor went to the Captains of the destroyers .. what good did that do? ... But (when) he came to our Strike Committee and appealled to the Committee to organise a meeting for him. We organised a meeting early on Sunday evening ... it was packed to overflow ... 'Cockney' Lewis was chairman ... and saw to it that the appeals of the Mayor got a fair hearing ...

"The Trades Council now began to come into the picture and sent a letter to the Transport Strike Committee inviting representatives (for their committee). The old timers, veterans of many strikes, looked at me and said 'you go ..." (Mr. Feeney explained that there were 'many stonewallers' on the Trades Council, the return of Samuel, the national efforts to end the strike and commented 'the determination was undermined and we began to see that waffling...").

The End of the Strike

"Even so when it came to the ninth day there were none of us prepared to have the strike called off. We believed we had the power to save the miners in the way that we wanted to save them. I remember leaving a meeting of the Trades Council when the news came through together with Alderman Ramsay, old Alf, and he said to me 'we've had it, we've been sold down the bloody river'; and he was the most moderate of men. These sentiments were echoed throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain because the rank and file of the trade union movement were determined to continue the strike providing that the leadership had remained solid. I

walked down that street with old Ramsay rather broken hearted that we should have ended in that way. For myself the next days work that I did was in August of that year. I had to go and get assistance from the Guardians to the tune of about £23 and every penny of that £23 I had to pay back. It took me a long time to do it, I finished up paying 6d. a week. I was working in Leeds during the Big Slump when I paid the last tanner and that was only as a result of getting a letter threatening me with what would happen if I did not pay up. And that is what happened to many more people ... I believe that that strike in 1926 was the highest level that the working class have reached in this country since the Chartist Movement."

Extracts from replies to Questions

Q. If the basic cause of the Miners' distress was as you said the capitalist system, why did you not try to politicalise the strike?

A. ".. considering the atmosphere following the Zinoviev letter and other factors ... to have given the strike a political atmosphere or a political directive would have been suicidal ... We have to give due regard to the real situation the total membership of the trades unions (about) four millions* at that time (and) the general workers were not in the main in the trade unions."

Q. I would like to ask you something about the atmosphere in the strike committee itself - was it an exciting one, was it a feeling of being depressed ... or expectant really of getting something ...?

A. "Something that really happened to me (will best illustrate this). Round about 1923 someone watched me play football and thought I was a bit good and they signed me up so I stopped buying "Woodbines" in order that I could get a little more wind. In 1926 as a member of that strike committee because of the attention, excitement and so on on the second day of the strike I went home and I said to my Missus have you got tuppence for a packet of "Woodbines" .. I started smoking and I smoked for a long time after that .. because of the terrific tension that there was in that committee room .. It was open 24 hours a day there was always someone on duty and we took it in turns who would do the night work... the atmosphere was one of real determination, (as Charlie ... said "us railway men are not going back until the tramwaymen go back ..."). The whole atmosphere of the place must be the atmosphere, I think, of a military headquarters when there is an offensive being developed and you are confident you are going to succeed that is the sort of atmosphere I experienced certainly it cost me a lot of tuppences for "Woodbines" after that ..."

Q. In reply to a question on the riots.

A. I am not sure that it would be altogether right to describe them (the rioters) as hooligan elements. The tension was in the town the fact that we had two destroyers in the river and everyone knew they were there and the prupose of their being there ... Efforts were made to move transport ... strike pay was inadequate to live on ... poor relief only available to wives and children ... There was general tension ... something was bound to go ... a plate glass window .. one arm in to be followed by more ... a crowd would hear there is a bus in 'so and so' and in no time you have probably a couple of hundred people and they be away like greyhounds to where it had been reported. It would be upturned and and these were the kinds of thing that were happening. They were happening because there was a genuine belief that what they were doing was helping the cause .. The strike leadership had to say they did not countenance this sort of thing but we had to accept it because it was part of what we were doing ..."

*1926 numbers of trade unionists affiliated to TUC 4,163,944 of total in trade unions 5,219,000

A COMMENT BY JAMES STEPHENSON OF WINLATON

Mr. Stephenson, after the first World War, was a member of the Independent Labour Party. Soon he became Chairman of Victoria Garesfield Miners. He was Chairman for four years. Then he moved to Rowlands Gill where he was elected checkweighman and was Secretary of the Rowlands Gill Miners' Lodge for ten years and was Secretary during the 1926 strike. Later he moved to Blaydon where he was Secretary of the Lodge of the Blaydon Burn Colliery and he was also checkweighman. He was also a member of the Gateshead Board of Guardians for their last five years and has been a Blaydon Councillor for 36 years. He has also taken part in a BBC broadcast on the 1926 General Strike.

Q. Was Rowlands Gill colliery a large one?

A. Rowlands Gill was only one of the smallest of the collieries in Durham county but it had its own importance, I think, in the annals of the Durham Miners' Association. It was always one of the more progressive collieries. They always looked to Rowlands Gill for a lead on a lot of problems as they came up.

Q. Do you mean technical problems or labour problems?

A. Labour problems and problems connected with the industry.

Q. Where did the men live?

A. The men lived in colliery houses in Lily Terrace and Carl Terrace and they also had some colliery houses at what is locally known as "The Bottoms" at Rowlands Gill which has now been cleared for a camping site. They also had some colliery houses at the village of Highfield. The rest, I should think, were scattered in private houses and in a few council houses that there were in the early days.

Q. Do you remember any of the stoppages before 1926?

A. Well, I remember them all, the minimum wage strike and several others. Before the first war I remember I was a putter at the Chopwell Colliery and they had a most unusual stoppage there. It was a restriction of output, where the men had agreed to fill one tub per day and I remember going to work and nothing coming out except one tub for each man. That went on, I think, for over a week and finally the Lodge found a solution to it.

Q. Where did you hold your meetings at Rowlands Gill?

A. When I first went there the Rowlands Gill Lodge had their meetings in the small Co-operative Hall. I do not think it is there now. Afterwards, after 1926, they built a hall of their own and had meetings there. In 1926 they were held in this small Co-operative Hall.

Q. Were the meetings large?

A. From the point of view of the number employed there I would say the meetings were very well attended. There was quite a lot of interest taken in the problems as they arose.

Q. That would be especially the case in 1926?

A. Yes. Every time there was a meeting in 1926 one could say that 75 per cent of the men attended. Obviously they had nothing else to do. Meetings during the stoppage were held during the day when there was plenty of time.

Q. Did you ever go and hear A. J. Cook?

A. Yes, I attended that historic meeting which Cook addressed at Burnhope while the Lodges marched in with bands and banners and was greatly impressed by Cook. As a matter of fact he and I, over the years, built up quite a personal relationship. I did have quite a number of letters from A. J. Cook and I knew him rather well personally. He was a man of great character. I should say also a man of great courage because you have to remember that the whole of the Press and the organs of publicity were all mobilised against Cook and he was built up as some terrible ogre while actually, of course, he was the kindest and most gentle of men that anyone could meet and to have described Cook as he was described by some of the Conservative people was absolutely ridiculous.

Q. Can you remember any incidents connected with your relationship with Cook?

A. I remember being at Highfield and somebody saying to him that an old lady who couldn't get out of the house had been asking after him and he said "Where does she live?" and off he went. We called on her and had a long chat. She was delighted, of course, that he went out of his way to meet her.

Q. I believe you knew Mr. Maxton as well?

A. Yes. Aye, I spoke with Maxton in the Palace Theatre in Newcastle and I had quite a few letters from Maxton at one time. I am sorry I did not keep them now. I also spoke with Cook in the Theatre Royal at Stanley.

Q. Can you remember any incidents in your relationship with Mr. Maxton?

A. I remember the organiser of the meeting at the Palace Theatre said to him "Look, Jimmie, you must be feeling tired, I have booked you a sleeper so that when we go back to London you will be able to get some rest." Maxton said "and how much does that cost?" I think the cost of a sleeper at that time was about 12s. Od. He said "put the 12s. Od. in the funds, I'll sleep propped up in my seat."

Q. Were there many skirmishes in the area during the strike?

A. Well, minor skirmishes. One or two who had drifted back to work were taken there in a wagon with wire netting over the top. The wagons were nicknamed "covered wagons" but the Police came down the streets and made everybody go into the houses until they got these men up to the pit. But I don't think there was anything very much in the way of skirmishes with the public.

Q. Was there any picketing of food vans?

A. Yes, well there was the famous case of Will Lawther who afterwards became a Member of Parliament and President of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, and Harry Bolton who picketed a van at Winlaton Mill and were sent to prison, I think for about three months. The van that was to take some food to a shop in Chopwell belonged to a particular tradesman. It was picketed by the women in the Chopwell village and I think, after the first day, they found they were wasting their time, because nobody went near the shop, and after two or three weeks the firm closed the shop. From that day the firm has never dared to open a business in the village of Chopwell.

Q. Where did the Police come from?

A. The Police we had in the Rowlands Gill and Highfield area were great big fellows from the docks in Hull and I am bound to say, from my dealings with them, that they behaved themselves a good deal better than the Durham Police, because I remember the Durham Police coming through the village of Highfield when I and a group of men were standing at the corner, and they disgraced themselves by putting their fingers up to their noses. I do not know what that was supposed to signify but you would expect policemen to behave themselves differently.

Q. Were there many arrests at the time, besides Henry Bolton?

A. Yes, there were quite a few arrests. I know one case in Highfield where they arrested a man supposed to have made an attack on somebody's car and it was well known in the village that they had got the wrong man. It was the chap's brother who was guilty. But as this other chap's wife was fairly ill, he said "you keep you mouth quiet and I'll go to prison", which he did. He accepted a prison sentence for his brother.

Q. How long was the sentence?

A. I think about a month.

Q. Were there many blacklegs?

A. At Rowlands Gill? Very few. Very few anywhere, I think, in the Blaydon district.

Q. I believe, after the strike, there was a non-political union?

A. Yes, we had a non-political union which started at Rowlands Gill. There was never more than about half a dozen of them and I think the Manager at our place had very little use for them. In fact, the Agent said to me "Look here, Stephenson, I can't trust them." You couldn't. "People who can't play fair and can't be trusted by their own kind are not likely to be very much use to me", and he washed them off as being of no value either to him or to anybody else, and after a month or two they simply faded away.

Q. I believe you were the editor of the news sheet called the "Northern Light" at that time?

A. Yes, this was quite an adventurous piece of my life because we started and published this thing. It was done on typewriters and afterwards run off by duplicators and we published it every day. I should think, during the time of the general strike, it came out from a different place almost every day, because the Police were after us and they almost sat on my doorstep hoping to catch me with it, and we functioned from empty houses and all kinds. Strange to relate, we always knew when the Police were going to raid, and by the time they got there, the birds had flown and gone elsewhere. A chap by the name of Edward Wilson was one of the most harmless men I ever knew. He was given three months for selling "Northern Light" and described by the Police as one of the most dangerous communists in the district.* If Ned was a dangerous communist, then he was a peculiar communist so far as I am concerned, because I don't think he would have said "boo" to a goose.

Q. Did he live at Rowlands Gill?

A. He lived at Rowlands Gill and was a member of the Rowlands Gill Lodge.

Q. Over what area was the paper circulated?

A. It was circulated right up to Chopwell, High Spen, Highfield and Rowlands Gill; probably a few hundreds each day, which we sold, I think, for a penny - sufficient to get us enough paper and duplicating material to turn it out for the next day.

Q. I believe some of the Courts were strongly against the miners at this time?

A. Well, that's putting it mildly. Ellen Wilkinson wrote a book on the general strike. She mentioned the savage sentence that was meted out to Ned Wilson as being a classic example of the panic which struck the people who were in control of justice or what was supposed to be justice. Andy Lawther, who was a brother of Will, was sent to prison and the Chairman of the Gateshead Bench said to him - looking back now it is almost laughable - before he sentenced him to prison, "I'm sorry I cannot send you to Soviet Russia." What Soviet Russia had to do with the miners' strike I fail to know, but it showed of course that he was like a lot of other people who were looking for communists under the bed.

* Sir Alfred Palmer, Chairman of the Gateshead magistrates, said in passing sentence: "The manner in which Chopwell has been governed for some time past is a scandel, and this bench is determined to see that that state of things is put an end to. If you think that the Council of Action can hold us the inhabitants in a state of tyranny you are very much mistaken. Why you and those associated with you don't go to Russia, I don't know. I am sure the Government, and I personally, would subscribe willingly to get rid of the whole lot of you and let you go and live in that country where everything is so blissful and so happy. We don't want you. Nobody wants you. You are just a source of danger to the community and the sooner you make up your minds to either reform or to get away, the better for all concerned." Newcastle Chronicle May 21st 1926. (Quoted by Dr. A. Mason in his thesis "The Miners' Unions of Northumberland and Durham, 1918-1931, with special reference to the General Strike of 1926" - University of Hull 1967.)

Q. What kind of activities were there in the area? Sporting activities - at that time?

A. There were one or two football matches. One of the things which actually sprung up was ladies' football matches. I remember some of the girls playing football. I remember also at Blaydon hearing about a sports day that the Blaydon miners had organised but, generally speaking, they had quite enough to keep them occupied in their meetings and their gardens and other things during the time of the general strike.

Q. Were the communists active? Did they demonstrate at that time?

A. The communists, as such, had a fairly active communist branch in Chopwell, but they were absorbed into the general scheme of things and communists and non-communists worked side by side and I should think you would have been a very clever man to distinguish a communist from an ordinary individual. I have always said, and I say again, there are two ways of making a communist; one is reading Karl Marx and the other is by being kicked around by the employers. Consett Iron Company made far more communists than ever Karl Marx made.

Q. What kind of assistance did the men get during the stoppage?

A. I think the most important assistance came from the Gateshead Board of Guardians to which I was elected as a member way back in 1924. By Law, of course, you couldn't give assistance to the men, but what we did was to give assistance to the women and children, and even then we were told by the Ministry of Health that we were giving too much, and we defied the Ministry of Health and continued to give it. The whole of the Gateshead Board of Guardians, with the exception of the Moderates, which is another name for Conservatives, who voted against the proposal, were all surcharged and I remember about thirty of us were lined up, in two great rows, at the Gateshead Police petty sessions and were all charged with giving excessive relief. We were all surcharged to the tune, I think, of about £250. It was too funny for words, because I stood there, and my total wealth, I think at about that time, was about 15s. 0d. - and they surcharged me £250.

Q. You didn't pay this surcharge?

A. It was eventually paid by the Trade Unions and the Labour Party after we got back to work, but I never paid any of it.

Q. How was the relief paid? To the people?

A. It was given 50 per cent cash and 50 per cent food vouchers. I was, of course, a member of the Board of Guardians and I couldn't receive any relief. They took collections and gave me exactly what they got themselves. I never got any more than what they were given and on that we had to carry on.

Q. I believe people in the area also gave gifts?

A. Well; one incident happened to me. I had a brother-in-law who had a shop - boot repairing - and used to sell boots. I remember going up there and calling in to see him and he looked at my shoes and said "Your shoes are getting a bit thin", and I said "Yes, there are a lot of things getting thin just now". He said "Are those the only shoes you've got?". I said "These are all I have". He went away and brought a pair of shoes back. He said "Try them on; they'll cost you five shillings and you can pay me when you get back to work". After a bit he came with a better pair and said "Try these on. I'll give you the first pair and you can pay me five shillings for that pair, but I'm not letting you go from here with a pair of rubbishy things like the first ones you had". So I came down home and my wife nearly fainted when she saw me arriving with two pairs of new shoes - in the middle of an industrial dispute. She thought I'd gone mad.

Q. Did the Union help at all?

A. The Union had, from time to time. From time to time there were grants made because it was obvious that the miners funds were soon depleted; there was spasmodic payment of relief from the Union funds. There was also, I think, in the Chopwell area, a certain amount of money supposed to have come from Russia. A woman by the name of Mrs. Helen Crawford I remember coming to Chopwell and helping its distribution.

Q. Were there any soup kitchens?

A. The school children were fed by the Durham County Council while the schools were open which, of course, was a tremendous help. It meant that the children had a meal. It wasn't just soup, it was a midday meal which was given to the children in the schools.

Q. And there were soup kitchens as well?

A. I do not remember any soup kitchens in our district other than what was done as school feeding.

Q. Did the doctors give their help free at that time?

A. My mind is a bit vague on what the doctors did but I cannot remember any objections that people weren't being attended by doctors and I can only assume that the doctors carried on and did what was necessary to be done without expecting any pay.

Q. In your area, though, the money wasn't taken off the wage packet was it? There were collectors.

A. As far as I was concerned they collected because I wasn't paid by the Colliery Company. I think it was off the pay packet in this district as well but people like myself had to pay to collectors.

Q. Was there any coal digging organised?

A. Yes, that was quite an achievement. We in the Highfield district, just on the edge of Chopwell wood, had our own private drift going and this was worked on a rota system. It was timbered up and you could get in. Coal was dragged out in old bath tins on the end of ropes and they had a proper organised system and people got so many barrow loads of coal in turn. It was perfectly organised. Wonderful organisation. All done on the edge of Chopwell wood. I believe in another district they even formed a coal drift underneath the floorboards of a colliery house.

Q. The owners, obviously, did not know about this?

A. Oh no.

Q. What were conditions like at home in those days?

A. Well I never could remember being hungry, because we never lived extravagantly in any case, but we were never without a meal of some kind. I kept a fairly good garden, still do, we always had potatoes and cabbage, and if the meat was a little short, well, we managed somehow.

Q. What about savings though?

A. Savings were, naturally, gone. My wife and I hadn't been married very long, we hadn't many savings to start with. The few pounds we had of course quickly went down the drain.

Q. Were there many debts in the area? For example to the Council?

A. Well, yes. We were buying our own house, with a mortgage on it; a house in a terrace, and when it was all over I only had a fairly big list of debts that were owing to Blaydon Council. I remember coming in one afternoon and my wife saying "Here's another bill, what are we going to do about this?" and I said "Well, have you read the "Daily Herald" this morning?" Hannan Swaffer said (it was Derby Day) a horse was going to win the Derby which had an English name and was owned by a foreign gentleman. I said "That is obviously Windsor Lad, owned by the Aga Khan". So she said "Well, here's 2s. 6d., put it on". I had 4s. 6d., so we put that on, and it won 12½ to one. That is the first time ever I bet on horses and I never bet since, because I always believed the law of averages was against it ever happening again.

Q. I believe Will Driver in Chopwell helped the men a lot at that time?

A. Yes. Will Driver loaned the Chopwell miners a lot when they were out (they were out of course before the general strike started). He let them have leather on credit, nails, hammers, lasts and everything so that they could repair their own boots. Will told me (he was a brother-in-law of mine) that he had actually advanced the Chopwell miners several hundred pounds. He was in business as a shoe repairer and he actually let them have this leather and materials, and in twelve months Chopwell miners had paid him back, had paid back every single penny he had advanced to them. They loyally paid back every single penny.

Q. Was there any help from the voluntary societies and the Church at that time?

A. Never heard of any. Churches, I think, were too middle class to be worried about the miners.

Q. Even the Methodist churches?

A. I never heard of them doing anything.

Q. When the men ceased the strike and they all went back to work, was there a feeling of bitterness?

A. Well, if there was, it was well kept down. I didn't find any bitterness. There was disappointment but they were determined that there would be another day. This was only the first round of the battle that would be continued later on. They said "We are not defeated, this is only the first round of the battle, and the people who will win will be those who win the last battle". I think that finally, when the mines were nationalised, they could say they had won the battle.

(This tape recording was made by John Adamson, of Consett Technical College.)

Publications of Interest to Members

About to be published:

Dr. A. Mason "The General Strike in the North East" 40s. (University of Hull)

Next year:

Prof. E. Allen, J. F. Clarke, Dr. N. McCord, D. J. Rowe "The Engineers Strike of 1871" (Frank Graham) 50s.

Already published:

D. Bythell "The Handloom Weavers" 75s. (Oxford University Press)