

buried by stone having sparked off the explosion. The union here quote "The French Fire-damp Commissions" experiments which proved sparks of friction could not ignite firedamp which was more flammable than dust. These experiments carried out by Taffanel were not being cited as sufficiently sound evidence in order to discard a theory, but other experiments quoted in Taffanel's report have been totally ignored e.g. Taffanel's theory of inferior lamps igniting firedamp, such lamps having been banned in France. The union considered all the arguments and in the end they summed up by agreeing with Mr. Hall (the manager) and Dr. Thornton (the electrical expert) that electrical sparks caused the explosion and it started in the dusty seam. No damaged cables or fuse boxes were found. The miners' took the words of Hall and Thornton and gave their electrical cause as the most probable when Atkinson and Taffanel had cleared and checked out this theory and dismissed it in favour of a firedamp explosion ignited by inferior or unsafe lamps in the Brockwell seam. What was a "white-washed" inquest and a conspiracy of silence" by the Home Office went unchallenged from the union quarter.

TELLING IT AS IT WAS

Military intervention in mining disputes, 1921-26

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Mark Dent

Newspaper accounts of the 1921 miners' strike give graphic reports of the presence of the armed forces ready to intervene when required. The spectre of the Russian Revolution and the idling on the street corners of battalions of out of work war heroes were sufficient motivations for the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, to take such precautions.

That such fears were generally held in the upper echelons of society can be gauged by the entries in the Bishop of Durham's diary:

April 3rd 1921. It is a woeful reflection that the main thought in the minds of the people on this fair morning is a thought of anger, of apprehension, even of malice. And where is there left any exorcising virtue. We are in the grip of a malignant fate and as prisoners held fast to a treadmill, perforce we must go forward, though we disapprove the direction and detest the effort. And there is no confidence or possibility of confidence left to us. Even in this strike which seems so insensate and sinister can I purge my mind of a double suspicion that the coal owners want to utilise the crisis to break Labour and the Government want to justify the Prime Minister's language about the ominous risk of Revolution.

April 7th 1921. It really looks like a determined effort to start revolution, though what the men can gain by it is hard to see. But the heady wine of their windy theories has got into their heads and nothing can hold them back from 'having a shot at it'.

April 24th 1921. The King looked tired and worried. He spoke much of the strike and said that Lloyd George had determined to be quite firm against the attempt to impose nationalisation on the nation. He had 100,000 men under arms.

13th April 1921. For the most part, Newcastle was an eminently peaceful-looking city yesterday in the bright sunshine that helped to lighten the burden of care many people are carrying nowadays. Yet reminders were not lacking of the grim danger that lurks in the industrial crisis and the preparations that are being made to meet it. Out Fenham way, tanks and big guns were in evidence and columns of marching men who if they were in civilian dress yet gave every evidence in the swing and rhythm of their movements of previous military experience.

18th April 1921. The stream of humanity which passed the toll boxes at each end of the High Level Bridge during the weekend was furnished with a sharp reminder of the industrial crisis, for khaki sentries stood on guard in business-like attitude. More were posted in the near vicinity and a number of sandbags were stacked beneath an arch. Then overlooking the parapet one was given further room for thought in the shape of the grey bows of a couple of destroyers which were moored close to the Quay Wharf. Altogether the scene was reminiscent of war days and more than one observation was passed as to 'what it all meant'.

13th April 1921. More striking still was the squadron of armoured cars parked for a spell in the Bigg Market, the cynosure with their crews of many eyes. Dull grey in colour and with machine guns peeping from their turrets, these cars had a sinister yet eminently useful appearance. And 'useful' is a word which struck one as quite applicable to the officers and men who manned them. They had the look most of them of tried soldiers who knew their job. Let us hope there will be no test for them at home.

The Leviathans were manoeuvred on at least one occasion, for my father, then a boy of eleven, remembers that in the village of Burnhope, the day after a baker's van had been held up and its confectionary contents distributed to the miners' families, an armoured car appeared and patrolled the streets of the village, for a short but significant boyhood time.

That such military excursions into rebellious mining communities were envisaged is also witnessed in the log book of Long Newton Church of England School, in Lord Londonderry estate country between Darlington and Stockton. On April 14th 1921 the entry simply reads, "Military authorities called at school today re billeting of soldiers."

In the General Strike of May 1926, apart from the display of armed might in London and the presence in the major seaports, there is little evidence to suggest that the Baldwin Government was prepared to use the armed forces on a large scale, and in the North East reliance was placed on the civil powers of the police to maintain and, if necessary, restore law and order. It is also true that the relevant P.R.O. files which should disclose the machinations of the Government with regard to the use of the Armed Forces remain secret.

In the first week of the General Strike the avenues from Newcastle into the heartland of the Durham coalfield were heavily picketed, and these proud pickets were able to exercise a great deal of control over the passage of people and goods along the routes. On the weekend of May 9th the besieged authorities made a concerted effort to regain control over the roads, police baton charges were instigated at Birtley, Ferryhill, and elsewhere in the North West of the County. Henceforth police escorted lorry convoys were the order of the days of that May.

There are however five independent accounts which suggest that the Civil Commissioner in the North East, Sir Kingsley Wood, was under sufficient pressure to make at least a demonstration of military force to retain this tenuous control of the King's Highway:-

1) A miner from the Stanley area is unshakeable in his belief that the strategic objective of the use of civil and military force in the district was to prevent groups of activists from neighbouring pit villages from meeting and 'plotting' a co-ordinated campaign of action and resistance. (Recollections of Jack Dawson. Author's records)

2) Two armoured cars passed through Durham on Monday (May 11th) travelling in a northerly direction. They evoke not a little interest among the crowd of onlookers. (Durham Chronicle, 15th May 1926)

3) "There were armoured cars, I am not saying a fleet of them, but I saw at least one, it might have been the same one. It used to patrol up and down the road from Rowlands Gill and used to go up to Chopwell." (Albert E Patchett. General Strike Tapes, No 11A. Gateshead Public Libraries.)

4) The Workers' Defence Corps had been called out to support the pickets, eight lorry loads of police had been drafted into the village. Two armoured cars had entered the village one night. This was the result of a car which had attempted to drive through the pickets being struck with a stone. Another private car had driven through the pickets at speed and one of its occupants had fired a revolver. Some distance along the road, it turned round and raced back and again a revolver shot was fired. Fortunately no one was hurt. (Jack Hobbs, miners' secretary, Burnhope Lodge. Miner 26.6.1926)

5) The winning children's essay on the subject 'What I did during the General Strike' was written by Robert Farbridge, aged 9, of Hamsterley Colliery.

"I live in a little village on the banks of the River Derwent. The road that runs through our village is the main road between Newcastle and Consett. When the General Strike started I used to see groups of men standing on the road when I was going to and from school. On the second day there was some men standing with papers in their coats, and a lot of people near them. I went home to get my tea, and asked my mother why the men had papers in their coats, and what all the people were there for. She said the men who had papers in their coats were pickets, and were trying to stop the 'buses and cars from running. She told me to keep away off the road because I may get knocked over by the crowd, but when I got my tea I went onto the road to watch the pickets stopping the cars.

Every night, when I came home from school and got my tea, I used to go on the road to watch the pickets. On the last day I got a fright; two armoured cars came flying along the road with machine guns on, and a soldier standing on the top waving his arms. There was no more picketing done after that day, because my father said the General Strike was ended."

(Labour Woman, August 1926)

Further evidence of the fear of the government and the ruling classes of a potential revolutionary situation developing from the miners' dispute is revealed in the diaries of Bishop Henson:

"July 15th 1926 Fearne and I motored to Harperley and had tea with Colonel and Mrs Stobart. Their garden is wonderful. He told me that during the General Strike all the rifles of the Territorials had to be sent away in order that the risk of their being seized might be obviated. This shows the authorities realised the gravity of the situation."

Such action is confirmed by several old miners in the Birtley district who remember that the windows of the building used as Territorial headquarters were grilled with iron bars during the period of the strike.

Remembering Peterloo, Tonypandy and other incidents, it would be the more surprising if the Baldwin Government had not had secret plans for the use of military force and presence if in their adjudged opinion the security of the State had been threatened in 1926.

The Supply and Transport Committee of the British cabinet decided at a meeting on the 5th May 1926 "on the necessity to make a considerable show of force on the outbreak of serious disorder in any area".

1926 - Women support the Miners

Maureen Callcott

An impressive and moving feature of the recent miners' strike has been the supportive activity of women in mining communities. They have not only provided moral support but also massive back-up organisation to enable impoverished families to hold out for 12 months. This has both demonstrated and nourished their sensitivity about their communities. Here we have Mrs Bella Jolly's account of how the women of Stanley, County Durham, helped miners' families in 1926.* Mrs Jolly came to Stanley from Teesside in the early years of this century when she married Bill Jolly, a miner. She was horrified by the Stanley Pit Disaster of 1909 and when Keir Hardie visited the town they both joined the Independent Labour Party. From then on political activity was central to their lives. In 1922 Bella Jolly was co-opted to the Durham County Education Committee (and remained a member for 50 years), she was also a Stanley Councillor, a magistrate and a member of the Board of Guardians. Mr Jolly left the mines for health reasons in 1918 but they both remained committed to the interests of those working in the major industry in their region. Thus in 1926 Bella Jolly was centrally involved in organising the distribution of food, clothing and other resources in Stanley throughout the six months of the strike. She continues with her own story:

"By that time Mr Jolly was a Schoolboard Man, and they wanted women like me who could be free through the day to go and stop in the labour rooms to answer questions, and enquiries and things like that because men were picketing.

Well I was doing a bit of speaking for the Durham Miners and I was told whatever I had to do was keep my bike clear you know? and to do no outside speaking whatever. They couldn't do anything whilst I was inside but I must do no outside speaking. Everybody knew the fiasco of the general strike, but it was terrible while it lasted. By the time the strike broke out, we were running the child welfare centres, and the Welfares were able to give the children free food because the miners were just on 23s per week. If you were on the dole and just had a certain figure you could get 2 or 3 packets of baby food for the bairns so we continued that and the babies were fed, they were fed with the free food from the Welfare.