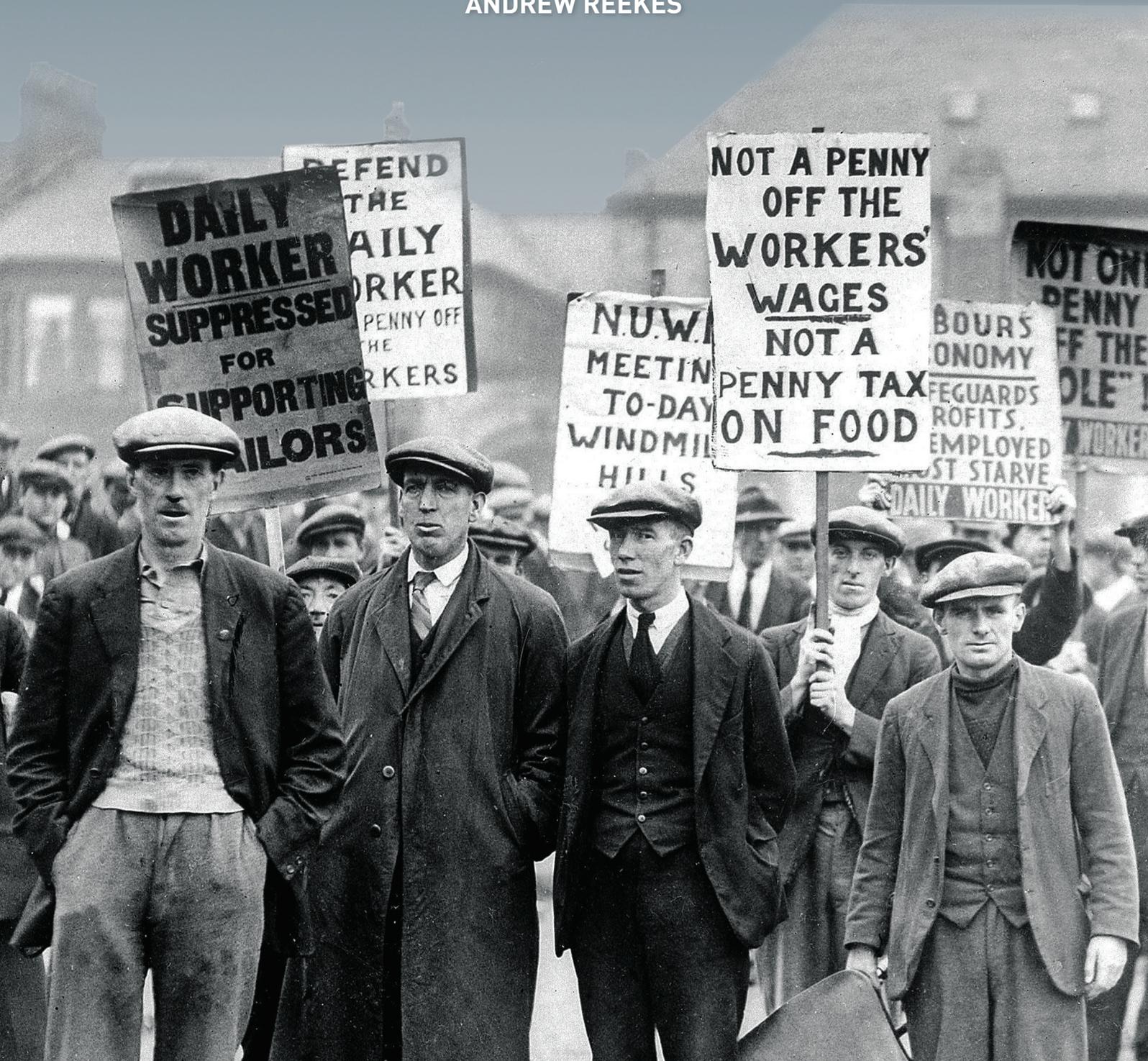


THE 1926 GENERAL STRIKE IN BIRMINGHAM

ANDREW REEKES



Background to the General Strike

The General Strike called by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in May 1926 was a unique event, the only time when the organised working class gave its industrial and moral support to one group of workers for a prolonged period. Something like it had nearly happened before the First World War when the Triple Alliance of miners, railwaymen and transport workers threatened to bring the country to its knees, to be averted by the negotiating skills of David Lloyd George; but now – in the depressed years after 1918, when there was a surfeit of coal, a dramatic contraction in export markets, and an overvalued pound – circumstances conspired to make a fresh reality of industrial conflict. Faced with lower demand for coal, mine owners in 1925 sought to cut wages and to lengthen miners' hours. The miner's union, the NUM, sought to force the government to nationalise the mines, but the Samuel Commission, which the government set up to find a solution to this impasse reported in March 1926, pointedly failed to recommend nationalisation, instead proposing wage reductions and the nationalising of royalties, another matter entirely. Baldwin's Conservative government rejected subsidies for the industry; the miners looked to fellow workers to force it to intervene to protect jobs and wages. The TUC felt it must support miners if they struck, for it concluded that an attack on one section of the workforce would be extended to all workers; and the government prepared the country to survive a major strike, which had the potential to paralyse the country, and to starve it into submission. In early May after long negotiations failed, the TUC called some four million workers out on a General Strike, many of them centred on the heavy industries and in the textile towns of the North.

The Strike in Birmingham

Birmingham, as the nation's second city and as a major industrial conurbation, had an important role to play in implementing the General Strike, called in May 1926. Its significance can be judged by the fact that events in Birmingham featured every day in the Home Office reports to the Cabinet. The extent of working-class solidarity was evident on May Day 1926 when the General Strike was imminent; the *Birmingham Gazette* estimated that 15,000 to 25,000 men, women and children, sporting red rosettes, carrying red flags, formed a two-mile procession behind Oswald Mosley, the charismatic Labour politician and local parliamentary candidate, on a march from Victoria Square to Ward End to hear him address them on the justice of the miners' cause. It was the largest May Day march in Birmingham's history. For them the impending strike was above all a moment of class cohesion in an industrial dispute. It was aimed at forcing Baldwin's government to provide a subsidy to the coal industry, before imposing a settlement on intransigent coal-owners.

Government Preparations

By contrast, for the government the General Strike was a good deal more subversive than that: it was illegal, in the opinion of the distinguished lawyer Sir John Simon, who pronounced it to be so in the House of Commons. The government therefore believed that it was an unconstitutional challenge to parliamentary democracy, the first act in a drama possibly leading to a Bolshevik revolution, the pervading fear of which explains why twelve Birmingham communists were arrested and jailed in the previous October 1925. The government pushed through an Emergency Powers Act enabling it to assume the authority to control the armed forces, the police, and to produce its own newspaper, the *British Gazette* (provocatively and belligerently edited by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill). The Ministry of Health under its minister, Birmingham MP Neville Chamberlain, had already issued Circular 636 in November 1925 requiring local authorities to secure the maintenance of public services 'during an emergency,' and so Birmingham City Council formed its own

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MAY 19, 1926.]

PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.

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“THE BRITISH WORKER.”

MR. PUNCH (to Volunteer). “THANK YOU, SIR.”

[With Mr. Punch's enthusiastic compliments to the great army of amateur workers who sustained the Nation's life.]

World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Birmingham Emergency sub-committee under Sir David Brooks for the duration of the strike, and this worked closely with the police to maintain law and order, as well as essential services. It was Brooks who made the appeal for volunteers prompted by the OMS (the Organisation for the Maintenance of Services in 1925), the government's body to deal with a national stoppage; by the end of the strike he was able to thank more than 12,000 such volunteers, largely middle class citizens (sometimes University of Birmingham students) who had helped run buses and maintained essential services where needed. For many young volunteers this was simply fun, the

opportunity to drive a bus, as at Selly Oak depot, or to ride on an engine footplate; strikers by contrast deemed it to be 'blackleg labour.' Some of the volunteer help also had the potential to embarrass, as with the announcement on 3 May that 'Birmingham Fascists place their services unreservedly in the hands of the civil authorities'.

TUC and Local Labour Strike Organisation

At the behest of the TUC, Birmingham's local Trades Council worked to bring trade unions and Labour politicians together into one forum, a small committee representing the big unions of railwaymen, printers and

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iron and steel workers; this Emergency committee concerned itself with publicity, with permits (for the supply of food and fuel), with regular communications with other regional committees throughout the Black Country, especially Wolverhampton which looked to Birmingham for a lead, and with a clutch of specialist sub-committees responsible for different industries and geographical sub-divisions of the city. While the print workers effectively stopped the production of local (and national) newspapers (until the advent of brief rather amateurish news sheets towards the end of the strike), the Birmingham committee was able to communicate its version of events – as a result of the generosity of Oswald Mosley who provided the printing press – via a daily Strike Bulletin. The TUC's *British Worker*, and the local Communist party's *Birmingham Worker* (which appeared until closed down on the arrest of its district organiser) were also distributed widely. As a consequence, the union position is well-documented in Birmingham across the nine days of the strike's duration; however, the government case was forcibly made in the *British Gazette*, of which more than 70,000 copies were fetched by car from London and distributed daily by the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce.

The minutes of the Trade Council's Emergency Committee for those nine days are also a valuable source for the historian. The first few days of the strike saw the committee recording with some pride how extensively the stoppage had been implemented: there were no miners, of course, but Birmingham was a place of multifarious metal-working firms encompassing small arms, munitions, motor manufacturing and its many accessories, chemicals and building businesses. Ten thousand railwaymen based in the city came out solidly as did the six thousand members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU). Some of the smaller engineering workshops were completely un-unionised and their management paternalistic. The committee's time was preoccupied with advising workers from different unions on whether to join other trade unionists on strike, at some of the motor plants, at *Austin*, *Wolseley*, *Lanchester*, *Dunlop* and *Lucas* for example. For successive days the complicated situation at *Cadbury* and *Dunlop* prompted lengthy discussion and negotiation, for here workers were divided in their response; in both cases employers were renowned for their

constructive approach to labour relations. At *Cadbury* there were eighteen unions represented.

A continuing daily responsibility was the business of granting permits for vehicles carrying foodstuffs for the general population; it was a consistent mantra of the committee that the general public should not suffer from the strike. But the committee's efforts were also augmented by Labour visitors from London like the MP Morgan Jones, who addressed a big rally in Calthorpe Park attended by over ten thousand on 8 May.

Nine Days of the Strike in Birmingham

Having been confident on the first day that all transport – 'road, passenger, carrying traffic, both trams and buses' – had been stopped, a running theme across the strike was the committee's attempt to make a reality of the boast. With private cars and charabancs continuing to run – the Birmingham branch of the National Council for Women organised a roster of volunteer drivers to get women to work – there was much eventually fruitless debate about whether, or how, to interdict petrol supplies. Successive committee minutes tell a story of widening fissures in the transport strike. While on 7 May, the fourth day, the minutes could record that 'no trams or buses were running, all railwaymen were out and that industrial paralysis was spreading,' men were in fact beginning to return to work on the mainline rail services; the next day would see more cracks appearing in the united front with fifty Allied Transport drivers reporting to work, while on the seventh day (10 May) tramway-men were going back to work, just as the TUC extended the strike to the 'second line' of workers, to all transport men and engineers and power workers. By 12 May the Tramways Department was confident enough to plan to restore a full service.

Organisers of a total stoppage faced several problems. Firstly, while inconvenience was caused to commuters getting to work, in general normal life was barely disrupted for many; there were no gas or electricity cuts, food was plentiful thanks to lorry convoys from the London docks and Birmingham's agricultural hinterland. Sport (Warwickshire cricket), military tattoos, concerts and lectures continued. The trade unions couldn't make the strike bite enough to force the country to sue for peace. If they couldn't effectively shut down power supplies some businesses would carry on; and power workers, warned

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they'd be sacked if they joined the stoppage, continued to report to work. Birmingham well illustrated a further problem: firms with skilled workers represented by different unions might find some men striking, but often they had the core of a workforce continuing to clock on, enough to keep some production going. Striking workers could picket workmates (and the Lord Mayor publicly reiterated the right of workers to picket on 10 May) but they had to be careful to stay within the law. Charles Rafter, the Chief Constable, enthusiastically enforced the letter of the Emergency Regulations, prominently publicising police powers of stop and search in a Police Notice of 7 May:

It is an offence punishable with three months' imprisonment with hard labour or £100 fine to do any act calculated to prevent the proper use of working of any Public Building, Railway, Canal, Bridge, Road, tramway, Vehicle, Telegraph etc.

Strike bulletins reported examples of men trying to interfere with traffic, for example when a large crowd of strikers stopped seven Hagley Road buses manned by volunteers on 5 May and removed valves from the tyres, immobilising the vehicles; and they reported arrests for incitement, as when for instance Councillor George Sawyer, a railway guard and member of the Council's Watch committee, was detained for saying that the Special Constabulary was 'nothing more than a body of traitors.' Beyond this, the police force's active involvement in protecting strike-breakers was clearly evident on a number of occasions, notably in the 'battle of Bearwood', on Birmingham's north-west boundary. Here towards the end of the strike *Midland Red*, having learnt lessons from the Hagley Road fiasco, determined to run thirty to forty buses; the volunteer drivers had to be protected from furious protesters against black-leg labour by a convoy of sixty cars driven by special constables (some wearing steel helmets), a motor ambulance and twenty Birmingham police supplementing local Staffordshire officers, all overseen by two superintendents and inspectors.

THE GOVERNMENT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GENERAL STRIKE.

ALL IMPARTIAL OPINION SUPPORTS THE MINERS.

No one will accuse *The Daily News* of being Bolshevik. Its leading article, May 3rd, 1926, read:—
"That the negotiations were summarily discontinued at 11-0 p.m. Friday night was yet another of those tragic blunders of the Government. . . What was the point at issue? The miners' leaders claimed that they were quite ready to consider a reduction of wages, **BUT THEY WERE NOT PREPARED TO ENTER NEGOTIATIONS ALREADY PLEDGED TO SUCH A REDUCTION.** They also asked what guarantees the Government had to offer that the necessary searching reorganization of the mines would be expeditiously effected. Both on the whole were reasonable questions to raise. . . . In spite of a nine months' respite, there has not been a tittle of reorganization and it was not until Wednesday, two months after the publication of the Commission, that an amiable but entirely irrelevant Prime Minister drifted into the negotiations at all."

J. R. MACDONALD, M.P., AT TRADES UNION CONGRESS, MAY 1st, SAID:—

"At 10-0 o'clock on Friday night he believed they had got peace . . . when the sword was drawn towards midnight on Friday, it was not the hand of Thomas or Herbert Smith or the miners or any one belonging to the General Council, but the head of the present Government. . . There was no cause or impediment, as far as the miners were concerned, against full negotiations on the Commission's Report."

**THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT
WANTED PEACE, BUT IT WOULD
NOT DESERT THE MINERS.
THE MINERS WERE ASKED TO ACCEPT
THESE REDUCTIONS IN THEIR WAGES.
WOULD YOU ACCEPT SUCH WAGE
REDUCTIONS AS THESE?**

THE AVERAGE WORKING WEEK OF THE MINER IS LESS THAN FIVE DAYS.	Present Earnings. Per Day.	Earnings Proposed by Mine Owners.	Reductions.
SCOTLAND	s. d. 10 4½	s. d. 6 4½	s. d. 4 0
NORTHUMBERLAND	9 2½	6 4	2 10½
DURHAM	9 11½	6 5	3 6½
SOUTH WALES	10 9	7 0	3 9
EASTERN DIVISION	10 11	7 5	3 6
LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE	9 11½	5 11	4 0½
NORTH WALES	9 1	5 6	3 7
CUMBERLAND	10 8	5 8	5 0
FOREST OF DEAN	8 11½	5 0	3 11½
SOMERSET	8 5	6 1	2 4

THE MINERS STAND BY THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION,

which said:—

"Before any sacrifices are asked from those engaged in the industry, it shall be definitely agreed between them that all practicable means of improving its organization and increasing its efficiency should be adopted as speedily as the circumstances of each case allow."

THE GOVERNMENT HAS SCRAPPED ITS OWN REPORT.

Printed and Published by The Birmingham Printers, Ltd., 42-44, Hill Street, Birmingham, for
The Birmingham Borough Labour Party, 180, Corporation Street.

The exuberance of the authorities led to an incident on 10 May which was widely reported nationally. The *Strike Bulletin* had reported erroneously that the Government had been defeated the night before on an amendment to the Emergency Powers Act. This was interpreted as being a deliberate falsehood, calculated to demonstrate how the government's position was weakening; so, police raided 180 Corporation Street, the Trades Council HQ where the Strike committee was based, confiscated the printing

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press, typewriters and printing paper, and more importantly arrested the eight members of the Strike committee including the editor, Labour candidate and close friend of Mosley, John Strachey, and later on all the Emergency Committee members. Oswald Mosley, so proactive in the printing and distribution of the *Bulletin*, happened to be in London, and wanted to be arrested too in a gesture of support, and to illustrate the extent of the authorities' over-reaction. But the event was upsetting and disorientating for the committee members who were eventually found guilty and fined; it must have been an unwelcome distraction in those last fraught days of the strike.

Calls for Peace

Whilst there was a visible polarisation, between trade unions and the authorities, each taking entrenched positions on the strike, there were also voices of moderation in Birmingham calling for peace. On 7 May (day four of the strike) an appeal presented by Canon Guy Rogers and Reverend Leyton Richards, representing one hundred and fifty Anglican and Nonconformist ministers across Birmingham, called on the Emergency Committee to press the government to resume negotiations and offer a renewed subsidy, in return for an end to the strike. They were fearful of the consequences for the fabric of society of a prolonged stoppage. They were talking to the converted on the Trades Council's committee. A few days later on 11 May the *Birmingham Gazette* extensively covered a meeting of women citizens held at Queen's College, chaired by Mrs Barnes, wife of the Bishop of Birmingham; in her address she highlighted their collective 'desire to save suffering,' for 'who but women knew better what industrial warfare means in the home?' Continuing with that military metaphor she demanded 'an immediate armistice' and the opening of fresh negotiations. Within days the women delegates would indeed see the desired end to hostilities, even if the result was less equitable than they might have hoped.

Union Defeat

For by 12 May Corporation management in Electricity and Gas departments, and on the Tramways committee was markedly more bullish and aggressive; as a corollary strikers' confidence was waning, as they saw increasing

numbers of trams, buses and trains running, and as engineers wavered about whether to join the strike. It was on this the ninth day at midday, that TUC officials called off the General Strike with no guarantee for the miners on the key issues. Labour leaders like Ramsay Macdonald, and indeed some powerful trade union bosses like JH Thomas, had never wanted this kind of direct union action and were only too willing to support a cessation of hostilities prior to search for a compromise. Despite the evidence that miners were staying out (and would not return to work until the autumn) many striking workers in Birmingham and elsewhere believed that the strike was over because the battle had been won. Oswald Mosley, at a great victory rally of over 5,000 at Summerfield Park perpetuated the canard when speaking of 'a workers' victory' while others like J Corrin of the TGWU argued that the workers had forced the government to reopen negotiations.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, as the Trades Council Emergency committee found out on the morning the strike was called off. It stayed in being, not to savour the fruits of a labour victory, but to cope with widespread evidence of victimisation, as employers played hardball with workers keen to return to work. Among the many telegrams the TUC headquarters in London received were a number from Birmingham enumerating examples of such victimisation 'on railway services, in the municipality, and by a large number of engineering firms, and other employers endeavouring to impose fresh terms as between employers and individual workmen.' The Home Office report to the Cabinet of 13 May recorded how:

Railwaymen at Birmingham... object to signing GWR notices that they are not relieved of the consequences of having broken their contracts. At Dunlop men at Birmingham have reported for work but were told that the company was not ready for them. Four hundred BSA engineers applied to return to work but were referred to the Labour Bureau. They declined to go there.

The report might have added that the Corporation Tramways Department (besides announcing that it was not prepared to recognise unions any longer), Tangye's and Avery's had all written to striking employees terminating their employment, and saying that they had to reapply if they wished to get their jobs back. The Emergency committee successfully interceded with the Engineering Employers Federation, while the Tramways Department

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eventually backed down when threatened with the prospect of an ongoing guerrilla war conducted by its employees. But ironically it was individual members of that Emergency committee acting for those victimised who suffered more: its secretary Fred Rudland was removed from the bench of magistrates, Councillor Sawyer's return to work as a railwayman was unconscionably delayed, while Councillor Schumer, a Post Office engineer was dismissed for his allegedly 'inflammatory speeches' during the strike.

Effects

The effects of the strike were widely felt. Baldwin's government had won (as moderate trade union leaders like Ernest Bevin recognised) and in 1927 it hastened to outlaw general strikes in the future. A depression which Winston Churchill had exacerbated by his return to the gold standard in 1925, accelerated rising unemployment; the situation for workers was then compounded by union

defeat in the General Strike. Both factors explain a sharp decline in trade union membership in the next decade. But while they had lost in 1926, there were enough embittered working people in Birmingham to exact revenge of a sort on Neville Chamberlain and his Conservative colleagues in the years following the strike. Indeed, 1926 can be seen as the year when the Labour party in Birmingham, inspired by men like Mosley and Strachey, started to make serious inroads into what had been a Unionist fastness for decades, since the days when Joseph Chamberlain was in his pomp. Within months Oswald Mosley would triumph for Labour in the Smethwick by-election; by 1928 Labour would hold 36 Council seats, and in the General Election of 1929 a flood tide of Labour victories carried the party's candidates to Westminster in six of the city's twelve seats. And although there was a Conservative recovery after the fall of Macdonald's government in 1931, the outline of a future Labour Birmingham could be dimly discerned in the years immediately after the General Strike.

Andrew Reekes has written extensively on nineteenth and twentieth century Birmingham for West Midlands History including *Two Titans One City: Joseph Chamberlain and George Cadbury*; *The Birmingham Political Machine*; *The Ladywood Election of 1924*.

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University of Warwick, Warwick Digital Collection – 'Reporting the General Strike' – a large collection of newspapers and other records relating to the strike in Birmingham.



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