

THE BRITISH GENERAL STRIKE OF 1926

Since early 1925 the British miners were working longer hours and their wages shrank day after day. The mine owners were facing rising costs and their profits were falling. When the first group asked for higher wages and better conditions of work the second group rejected any substantial improvement. The stage was set for a major “industrial” confrontation and the TUC (Trades Union Congress, the Confederation of British Trades Union) wanted to make a show of strength.

The establishment was worried. For the last couple of years there were rumors about communist plots and subversion. The Communist revolution in Russia was not that far away and there was an air of uneasiness in the working class. That’s why when the talk started about a major strike in support of the miners the right wing press wrote defiantly of a “revolutionary movement to destroy the government and the civil liberties” and was calling on the authorities to be firm and strong.

But finally the TUC called for a General Strike in support of the miner’s demands to be started by midnight on May 3rd 1926. A united front of workers in many sectors, which included the newspapers printing unions, were in the lead to make the movement a success.

So when the strike started the 4th of May there were no milk in the doorsteps, very few newspapers, no trains or trams and few telephone lines available.

To try to encourage the workers to go back to work and to keep the public informed, the government decided to publish a newspaper and to be its editor it choose non other than the most famous of all British politicians, Winston Churchill. To be able to hit the streets with an uncompromising, tough and provocative newspaper the government had to use the installations of another paper, the Morning Post, now stopped, and confiscate any newsprint that was available.

When the TUC heard the news that the Government planed to publish a newspaper, which they considered a strikebreaker, under the stewardship of Churchill, they too decided to reach the public with their own publication. They didn’t call it a newspaper but a strike bulletin which was published in the afternoon, and despite the difficulties and a last minute attempt to prevent its publication by the authorities, the British Worker was born before midnight the 5th of May 1926 with an initial run of 320.000 copies, slightly more than the 230.000 of the main competitor the government’s own British Gazette. The first edition of the British Worker was published the 5th of May and the last, issue number 11, the 17 of May. The paper blamed the authorities for shortage of newsprint, which by the way the British Gazette didn’t have. It supported the strike and the worker’s demands until the end but the views expressed were considered moderate and it always appealed for order and a firm rejection of provocations.

The British Gazette published also its first edition the 5th of May after working all day, since 10 am, with only one functioning linotype and lack of journalists, typesetters and printers, and the last, issue number 8, the 13th of May. Some of the people working to publish the paper slept in the same offices, which were protected by the police. The paper claimed to have published 2.209.000 copies in eight days but was accused of overprinting using newsprint form other newspapers. Some bundles of papers were seen in the streets unopened and the newspaper was distributed to many households unsolicited.

But the main British newspapers, whose proprietors were staunchly opposed to the strike, and sided with the government, they also decided to publish every day at all costs, even if it meant using their wives as switchboard operators, volunteers with no experience whatsoever to use typewriters and any other skilled or unskilled operator coming from far away to use the linotypes or the printing presses.

The Times, then more than ever an institution in the British media, managed to print a copy everyday but it was something of a shock to see the newspaper reduced to a size of 20x33 cms, typewritten and with only two pages the 5th of May. That perhaps was one of the major signals that something unusual was going on in the country. From a circulation of 48.000 that difficult day of 5th May, The Times recovered immediately its usual size and shape the morning after, including the advertisements and notices in the entire front page, and slowly went back to the 342.000 copies by the end of the strike. The chronicles note that The Times was against the strike but reported fairly on developments and was not a mouthpiece of the authorities.

The Daily Mail, a right wing newspaper whose editorials blamed the strikers as revolutionaries and subversives, had also difficulties but used its printing facilities in Paris to publish a normal newspaper and fly it to the United Kingdom by plane. Some days the Mail put in circulation in the UK the local British edition and also the "Continental" edition brought from Paris. The Daily Telegraph managed to publish even more than one edition per day but often in small format and, as for other papers, typewritten and with only two pages.

By day four of the strike, the Daily Mirror, managed to print the first pictures, something that became common the following days for this and other papers like the Daily Graphic. By day nine the strike was called off and newspapers, that publish extra editions of the event, were slowly going back to normal.

It was the first general strike in British history and the newspapers managed to tell the news to the readers every day some way or another despite many difficulties, including lack of transportation and professional staff. But at the same time the power of the press establishment as strikebreakers and a conservative force was evident. It was a huge defiance to the strike that eventually contributed to its failure.

Josep Bosch
www.josepbosch.net