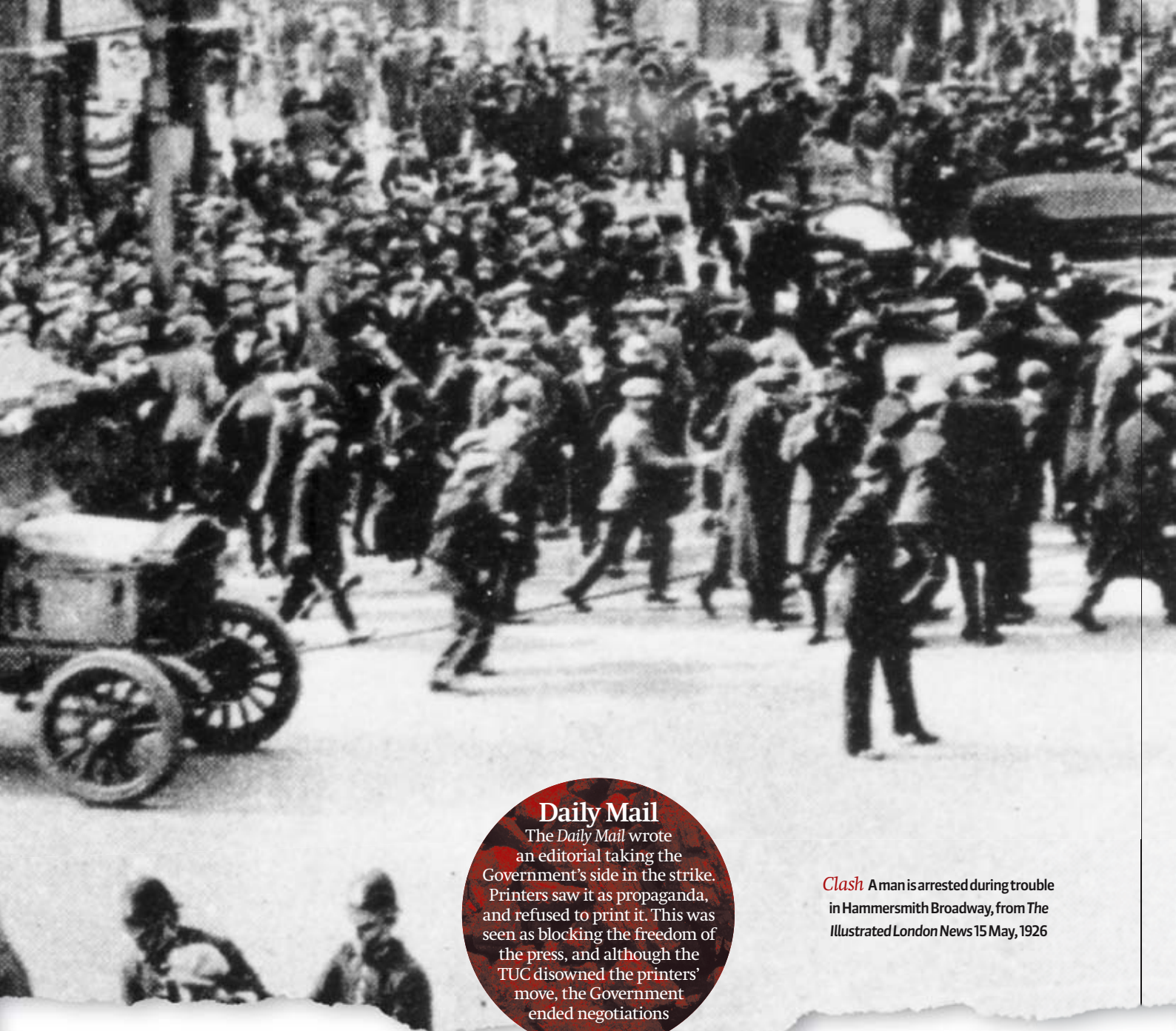




*Words by Nell Darby*

# Ancestors *on* Strike



### Daily Mail

The *Daily Mail* wrote an editorial taking the Government's side in the strike. Printers saw it as propaganda, and refused to print it. This was seen as blocking the freedom of the press, and although the TUC disowned the printers' move, the Government ended negotiations

*Clash* A man is arrested during trouble in Hammersmith Broadway, from *The Illustrated London News* 15 May, 1926

## In May 1926, workers across Britain came out on strike in support of miners' conditions. We look at why the protest failed, and how you can trace those involved

**M**any readers will remember the miners' strikes of the 1970s and 1980s. The protests were seen, in retrospect, as the last stand of a dying industry; yet they were also the latest in a long line of militant action instigated by strong trade unions. The most infamous union action was exactly 83 years ago, when miners rebelling against working conditions and pay led to the General Strike of 1926.

The General Strike only lasted ten days – from 3 to 13 May, 1926 – yet it had

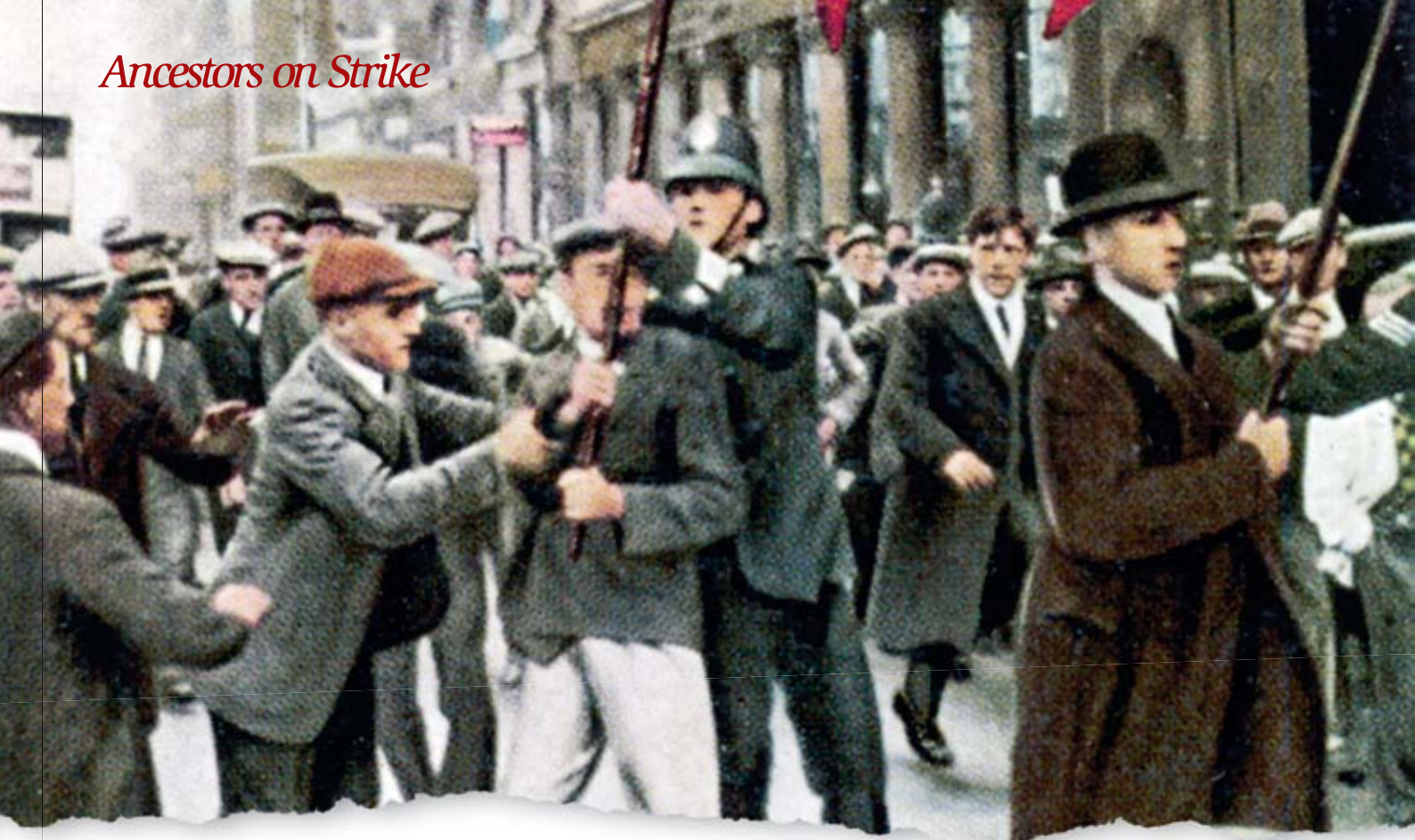
far-reaching implications for unions, political parties and individuals alike. It was called by the General Council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to make the Conservative Government, under Stanley Baldwin, stop wage reductions and poor conditions for miners.

During World War I, there had been a heavy use of coal in Britain, leading to a depletion in supplies and a reduction in the amount of coal exports. Subsequently, after the war, there was a fall in

productivity, demand and prices – yet mine owners continued to try and make profits. This meant reducing workers' wages to pre-war rates and increasing their hours.

### Miners' rights

In 1925, mine owners announced they wanted to reduce miners' wages. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) and the TUC argued against it. The Government introduced a nine-month subsidy to keep miners' ▶



► **Flag down**  
A policeman tries to take a flag out of a protestor's hands

Image: © Mary Evans Picture Library

wages at their current level, and set up a Royal Commission – the Samuel Commission – to look into the situation. In March 1926, the Commission reported the mining industry needed changes, but rejected calls for it to be nationalised. Mine owners then set out their own proposals, stating that wages would be reduced by between ten per cent and 25 per cent. They said miners would be locked out of their places of work from 1 May if they rejected the cuts.

The MFGB rejected the proposals, and at a TUC conference on 1 May it was announced that a general strike would start in two days' time.

## Mass movement

On 3 May, it is estimated that between 1.5 and 1.75 million workers came out on strike in support of the miners. Those included those working in the transport, printing, iron and steel, building and chemical industries. Engineers, shipbuilders and textile workers were placed on a reserve list, to come out on strike later, if needed.

Support for the strike varied in different areas. In Bradford, support was almost 100 per cent,

with tram workers, engineers and dyers going on strike. In Liverpool, 70,000 workers went on strike, with 40,000 in Leeds. Historian Keith Laybourn, in his book *The General Strike of 1926* (Manchester University Press, 1993) estimated that over 80 per cent of workers on the Great Western Railway – everyone except for clerical staff and supervisors – were on strike for the full nine days.

In Scotland, industrial Glasgow was the focal point of the strike. A Strike Committee was formed and there was strong support from

workers. However, strikers in the city faced opposition from the Conservative city council, which sought to keep services such as the tram network running by using volunteers. However, seven-eighths of Glasgow's railway clerks went on strike, and only one-fifth of the city's trams could operate.

For accounts of the General Strike from a Scottish perspective, both Glasgow Caledonian University and the Glasgow Digital Library, organised by Strathclyde University, have published detailed accounts ([www.gcal.ac.uk/radicalglasgow/](http://www.gcal.ac.uk/radicalglasgow/))

## Peaceful action?

Violence was rare during the General Strike, with little trouble between strikers and those who broke picket lines. There was spasmodic trouble, with riots on Plymouth trams, in Hull and Middlesbrough, and a violent march in Leeds

## The miners strike out

*How the nationwide protest took shape*

- **30 June 1925** Coal owners decide to cut wages
- **3 July 1925** Miners reject their new terms of employment
- **31 July 1925** Red Friday: announcement of nine-month Government subsidy to maintain wages
- **March 1926** Samuel Commission recommends withdrawal of Government subsidy
- **1 May 1926** Miners locked out of pits for rejecting new terms of employment
- **3 May 1926** General Strike starts
- **7 May 1926** TUC and Herbert Samuel work out proposals. MFGB rejects them
- **11 May 1926** Court decides the General Strike is illegal
- **12 May 1926** TUC General Council visits PM to announce decision to call off strike
- **13 May 1926** General Strike ends

**Helping out** The grandson of the 2nd Earl of Lichfield as a volunteer train driver during the General Strike

[chapters/general\\_strike.html](#)) and (<http://gdl.cdli.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyve20.htm>). Postal workers were part of the striking contingent, and this led to communication problems for the TUC, as mail trains and deliveries were cancelled. It tried to overcome this by setting up a system of dispatch riders, with networks of messengers who travelled by bike or motorcycle to get information out. The TUC also produced a newspaper, *The British Worker*, during the strike, using the *Daily Herald's* printing presses.

### Tracking strikers

There are a few ways of finding out if a member of your family was involved in the strike, either as a striker or as a union official. Graham Stevenson, National Organiser for the Transport and General Workers Union, hosts a website that includes details of several unionists and their involvement in the General Strike – including one man who worked as a bicycle courier ([www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/archives/2005\\_12.html](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/archives/2005_12.html)). Individual unions, such as the National Union of Mine-workers ([www.num.org.uk/?p=history&c=num&h=6](http://www.num.org.uk/?p=history&c=num&h=6)) also hold archive material on past members.

The TUC had sought to avoid a strike, and so had not prepared adequately for it – unlike the



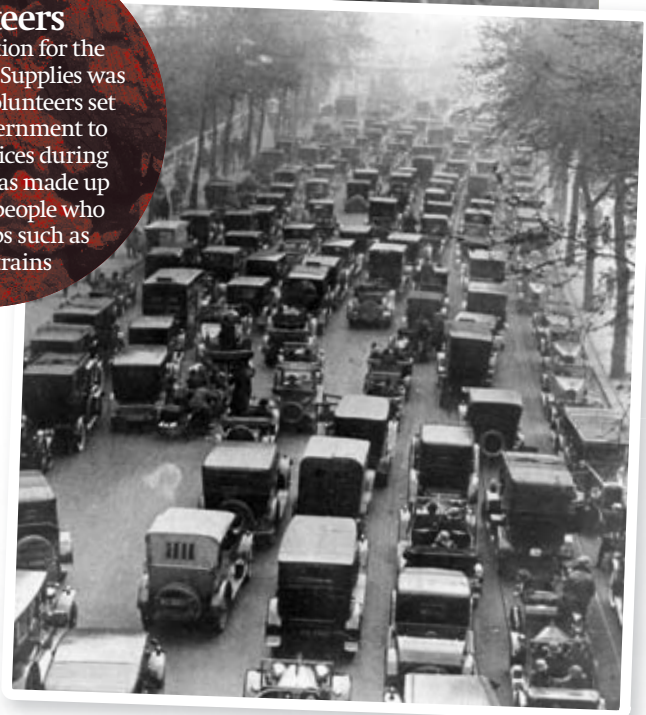
Image © Mary Evans Picture Library/Mary Evans; LN Pictures

### The OMS volunteers

The Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies was over 100,000 volunteers set up by the Government to maintain services during the strike. It was made up of untrained people who took over jobs such as driving trains

food officers were appointed in divisions across the country.

The Government's volunteers came from a variety of backgrounds; for example, some 450 Cambridge University undergraduates worked on the docks during the strike. One of these students was Henry Duckworth, who organised a force of Cambridge students to act as strike-breakers at Dover. Other Cambridge undergrads were employed on the Underground, in power stations, and as Special Constables to maintain law and order. More information on the various professions involved in the General Strike – from transport workers to reserve police officers – is available from The National



[strike/index.php](#)), contain personal recollections and contemporary letters. These include an anonymous letter sent to the TUC in May 1926 expressing support, stating, "I salute you and I thank God that we still have some broadminded Englishmen in our country."

However, a letter, dated 7 May, 1926, says the opposite: "The General Public wish [sic] Trades Union to go back to work and not cause all this hardship and suffering to their fellow creatures by walking six to 12 miles a day to work."

This was the main problem with the strike; by the transport workers and other vital industries striking, they were causing problems for other working men, and thus alienating them from their cause. As David Lloyd

**Jam Traffic was extremely congested during the strike, from *The Illustrated London News*, 8 May 1926**

Image © The Illustrated London News Picture Library, London, UK/ The Bridgeman Art Library

## "Military forces were moved into Liverpool, Bristol and London, and coal, finance and food officers were appointed"

Government. The latter set up the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) and local networks of volunteers. Local authorities were sent instructions on what to do in the event of a general strike. Military forces were moved into major centres, such as Liverpool, Bristol and London, and coal, finance and

Archives (the Your Archives beta site, at [http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=General\\_Strike](http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=General_Strike), has a detailed listing of its holdings).

Public reaction to the General Strike was varied. The TUC Library Collections, held at London Metropolitan University ([www.unionhistory.info/general](http://www.unionhistory.info/general)

## The Samuel Commission

*The independent board that brought the miners no joy*

The Royal Commission on the coal industry was formed on 5 September, 1925, with the remit of examining the economic position of the mining industry. Some of the things it looked at included the possibility of nationalising the coal industry, and whether it needed rationalising. Wage levels were also studied, and the Commission made recommendations as to how the industry could be improved.

As it had to be seen to be independent from the Government, three of the Commission members were Liberals – former Home Secretary Sir Herbert Samuel; textile manufacturer Kenneth Lee; and London School of Economics director WH Beveridge. Sir Herbert Lawrence was the final member. The Commission decided against nationalisation, and said that the Government subsidy to miners couldn't be continued after its initial nine-month period. It proved unpopular with miners as it argued that the minimum wage should be reduced.

▶ George later said, "The General Strike had obscured the miners' case, and lost them their public sympathy."

### A revolution?

The idea of the strike as a class struggle was something that appealed to the Communist Party of Great Britain, and the Government seized on the idea the General Strike had been organised by revolutionaries to overthrow the Government and

Therefore, the TUC knew that the General Strike could not achieve its aims. It welcomed the intervention of Sir Herbert Samuel, who had chaired the Samuel Commission and was chair of the Coal Commission. But in the end, Samuel's help came to nothing, and various proposals were rejected either by the Government or by the mining unions. On 11 May, after two unions took the TUC to court to avoid them having to call their

## *"Newspapers followed the Government, condemning the strikers and warning of the threat to the nation's stability"*

the political system. Newspapers followed the Government's lead in condemning the strikers and warning of the threat to the nation's stability.

Yet the TUC was keen to call off the strike, especially when faced with an intransigent Government that refused to negotiate or compromise with the unions. It recognised that the strike couldn't be as effective as it needed to be unless more industries took part – but that would cause more difficulties in the lives of the public, and antagonise them. It also recognised that putting pressure on the Government to take part in the fight against wage reductions would never succeed.

members out on strike, the Astbury Judgement argued that the strike was, in fact, illegal. It said only the miners had a valid trade dispute – the other unions affiliated to the TUC didn't. The next year, the Trade Disputes and Trade Union Act was passed, making all sympathetic strikes illegal.

Representatives from the TUC went to 10 Downing Street on 12 May to agree to the end of the General Strike, although they were still hoping for concessions. But the Government was resolute, and the strike ended at noon on 13 May, without any compromises on the Government's part.



Many workers took part in the General Strike believing it would lead to improved working conditions, better pay, and equality between workers and their employers. But after the strike ended many strikers were victimised, and others found they had no job to return to. Many of those who did return to work found their contracts or conditions of service were worse.

### Admitting defeat

The miners, cause of the strike in the first place, rejected the TUC/Government settlement of 12 May, and some continued to fight on for another six months – until lack of money or food forced them back to work. The MFGB was still urging miners to stand firm as late as September.

In November 1926, the MFGB finally backed down on its original demands, and accepted the controversial cut in miners' wages, the abolition of a minimum wage and an extension of the working day to eight hours. Within ten years of the General Strike, the number of miners had fallen by a third from pre-strike levels, heralding the beginning of a long-term decline in the industry. ■

**In charge** Government leaders during the General Strike

**Falling on hard times**  
 Many miners were left unemployed as a result of the strike, and struggled to support families. Just as poor families in the 19th century sought poor relief, some mining families in the early 20th century had to do the same