

9. The Rise of Worker Militancy

Organisation and Representation

On a sweltering August day in 1901 a signalman was sacked for orchestrating agitation for a pay rise. Colleagues claimed victimisation. His conduct, calibre and competence were not in question but his act of incitement in a labour dispute was. The word conciliation was not in the vocabulary of Ammon Beasley, general manager of the Taff Vale Railway Company. He called in William Collinson, a one-time trade union official, and former omnibus driver who supplied blackleg labour to companies with striking workers.

The Society of Railway Servants was determined to keep Collinson out. Richard Bell, general secretary, urged caution but militant workers picketed the Company. Beasley contacted the Employers' Parliamentary Council which assisted employer MPs in the House of Commons. The Council had published *The Case Against Picketing* by W. J. Saxby. Based on disputed case law, the Company was likely to obtain an injunction prohibiting picketing of its premises and, more worrying, might even be awarded damages against the Union.

The union was taken to court and lost but the Court of Appeal reversed the decision. Victory was premature as in July 1901 the House of Lords overturned the Court of Appeal ruling, and added a crucial condition. The funds of a trade union could be sequestrated to pay damages incurred through Company loss of revenue, the costs in resisting an action and costs to keep a business going. The Taff Vale Judgement imposed damages of £23,000 on the Union and a further £3,000 costs. It was a monumental penalty and a clear warning. Such punitive action could bankrupt a trade union with the threat too of legal action against its leaders.

The Boilermakers' Union noted the decision and sought by a 75% majority to call for "working class opinion being represented in the House of Commons by men, sympathetic with the aims and demands of the Labour movement." The Executive agreed to elect a future MP, arousing the interest of other unions. On 27 February 1900, at the Memorial Hall in Faringdon Street, London, the Labour Representation Committee was formed. The Independent Labour Party and Marxist Social Democratic Foundation were represented. Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie set out a model constitution containing three important tenets: no connection with the Liberal or Tory parties, each party to have its own candidates and manage its own assets and, thirdly, a joint committee be established to manage Parliamentary campaigns.

Ramsay MacDonald was appointed General Secretary. Motivated by pragmatism more than idealism, he was well equipped for Parliamentary liaison with connections to the Liberal Party, through a Scottish home rule group, the Marxist SDF and Independent Labour Party. Richard Bell of the rail union stood for Parliament in the railway heartland of Derby and won. So did Keir Hardie who was elected MP for Merthyr Tydfil and stood too for Preston where he lost. At that time it was permissible to stand for two constituencies.

On its foundation, the Labour Representation Committee had about 350,000 members, and in the following two years this swelled by 100,000. The spectre of another Taff Vale judgement haunted the trades unions. Soon the United Textile Factory Workers joined, further boosting membership that rocketed to 860,000 with 130 trade unions represented. The Committee decided to extend its remit and revise its constitution. The modest sum of £200 per annum was agreed for an elected MP who would otherwise require a private income, for until 1911 they were unpaid. Lloyd George insisted, it is "not a remuneration, it is not a recompense, it

is not even a salary." Rather, "it is just an allowance to enable us to open the door to great and honourable public service."

The Glassworkers Union, echoing views of Ramsey MacDonald and Keir Hardie, proposed that "members should strictly abstain from identifying themselves with, or promoting the interests of, the Liberal and Conservative parties." The resolution was overwhelmingly accepted. The Labour Representation Committee catapulted into the Edwardian political age to become the, Parliamentary Labour Party. It fought the 1906 election, gaining 29 seats.

One Out All Out

In 1909 John Galsworthy's play, *Strife*, was first performed. Set in South Wales, it depicted the chasm between labour and capital. Workers at the Trefartha Steel Plate Works had been on strike for months as entrenched attitudes had hardened. The play illustrated the huge pace of change, generational divide and jaundiced views of capitalists, and a discontented workforce. Galsworthy foresaw unfolding events. Writing to campaigning Millicent Fawcett, he stressed that with the help of the Women's Movement, "The Labour Party can, if they so wished, paralyse and control our politics." It was a sobering and prescient assessment.

Wages had stagnated with low inflation but food prices continued to increase. Workers saw bosses increasing profits and dividends made at their expense. On 1 January 1910, the Coal Mines Regulations came into effect, providing the perfect storm. The Act forbade miners to work more than 8 hours in any 24. This meant a rotating three shift system, playing havoc with personal and family life and sleep patterns. Within a week, 70,000 miners in Durham and Northumberland went on strike. The dispute dragged on with no end in sight. In March a disputes expert, former civil servant George Askwith, was called in to arbitrate.

A wage dispute erupted in South Wales where a dock strike started in May. The railways were next when a worker was asked to work at a different location within Gateshead. He refused and was promptly sacked. The shunters went on strike, paralysing freight traffic around Newcastle with mouldy fruit in the market and smelly, rotting fish on the quayside. Signalmen came out in support and the dispute extended to York and Carlisle. After the company agreed to the dismissal being investigated, the strike was called off. Industrial disputes in 1910 were now at an unprecedented level and were set to intensify and spread like a contagious disease.

Militancy was in the air with strikes in the South Wales mines and cotton mills of Lancashire. The Ely Pit in Penygraig was owned by the Cambrian Combine. A new seam had opened in 1909 but the Consortium said the 70 miners worked too slowly. The miners responded this seam was harder to work and they were penalised by payment of piece rates. The company locked out not only the 70 affected but all 950 workers at the mine and hired outside labour instead. Other pits came out in sympathy. On 18 September 8,000 men at Tonypany voted to strike, bringing the total to 12,000. The owners then considered locking out all 200,000 men in their employ.

Around this time, at Shaw near Oldham, a grinder at Fern Mill refused to clean a machine saying it was not part of his duties, whereupon he was sacked. The mill owner was incensed, referring to the Company grievance procedure that had not been followed. The card-room had unilaterally determined whether to accept revised duties. Arbitration was offered and declined and an ultimatum was given. Either Fern Mill returned to work, or all 700 mills would cease operation. Later that day, 500 mills closed "until further notice." The employers would

not reinstate the grinder at Fern Mill but would offer him the next vacancy elsewhere. By the end of the week all 700 mills were shut with about 140,000 people idle, in spite of Askwith's attempts to conciliate. Finally, he did persuade the Duke Mill in Shaw to employ the grinder. The strike was over but memories of this industrial dispute would linger.

In the Rhondda, 120,000 men would be on strike by 1 November 1910. They sought 2/6p per hour but were offered "starvation wages" of just under two shillings. In spite of the Miners' Federation trying to moderate the rhetoric, 8,000 men at the Powell Duffryn mine came out in sympathy. Later that day, 6,000 men stopped work at Maesteg and several thousands at other local pits.

The Cambrian miners met in Tonypany on 2 November to "fight with grim determination to win." The Miners' Federation issued strike pay, hoping the men would accept the Cambrian offer. Milking publicity, directors gave £100 so local children could be fed at school. A train carrying non-union members was attacked and the men beaten up. The cottages of colliery managers had their windows smashed, to the disgust of the Federation that had lost control. The stakes were now upped. On 7 November, a bugle sounded at 4 am whereupon strikers marched on pits employing non-unionised (scab) labour. They were chased away, having tried to tamper with the ventilation shafts and pumping systems. By early evening, the Rhondda had erupted into violence with fierce fighting between miners and police. Capitalist owners were seen as Russian Tsars in oppressing the working classes.

Churchill intended sending in the cavalry and infantry but, sensing the incendiary nature of such a move, next day despatched 70 Metropolitan mounted police and 200 constables on foot. After hours of relative calm, violent acts took place at Llwynpia as strikers tried to wreck Cambrian Coal Trust property. As darkness fell looting started, at which point Churchill called in the cavalry, stationed within proximity. All three pits in Tonypany were at a standstill. At the Glamorgan Colliery, only the efforts of police and managers prevented the mine from being flooded in an act of sabotage. The Times reported the events of 8 November as "an act of naked anarchy" with stampeding rioters and baton-wielding police confronting each other.

Militancy spread from mines, mills and railways to a long-running lockout on Tyneside after a dispute with boilermakers. The expression Great Unrest was coined but worse was to come. Strike action was orchestrated, and syndicated, in trying to seize the means of production and distribution through co-ordinated action. Three days later the Cambrian miners returned to the Glamorgan Colliery and closed it by barricading themselves in. A great concern was their stealing 100 lbs of the explosive saxonite, plus detonators and fuses. The mine owners had every right to be worried as on 18 November this was used to try and blow up the house of a colliery manager.

Other outrages continued for days with another incident on 21 November in Tonypany. A signalman was forced to stop trains carrying strike breakers as otherwise his signal box would be smashed to pieces. The battle of Penygraig commenced that evening with 30 Metropolitan police injured and 50 rioters. Two detachments of Hussars arrived as the police tried to quell the riot. The next day military personnel were posted at strategic locations, with the threat of immediate arrest for all trouble-makers if any attempt was made to disrupt work, intimidate 'scab' miners or destroy property.

By early December 2010 there was little appetite to continue the strike, other than by young men with no family commitments. Emergency funds for school meals were soon exhausted. So were many miners who turned on militants, opposing a strike ballot. Askwith met with the

Cambrian miners' deputation. The dispute had gone on for three months with 12,000 miners affected, but trouble now flared in Aberdare when 10,000 men went on strike one week before Christmas. A return to Cambrian Mines was thwarted by pay as, by meeting miner demands, this would set a precedent for other mines in a form of ripple effect. The miners stayed out until August 1911 in spite of Federation pleas and dwindling strike funds. Facing the prospect of starvation, the offer of 2/3d per ton was accepted. It was precisely the same piece rate that was offered and rejected one year before.

The industrial relations climate was becoming ever more aggressive and uncompromising. An index of 100 for wages in 1895 was now only 101, falling to 96 in 1911. Germany and the USA were overtaking Britain in productivity, taking an ever larger share of global markets. Disputes soared. In 1905 about 67,600 workers were involved in strikes. By 1910 this had ballooned to 385,000; over five times.

The competitive threat to jobs was set to explode on Clydeside, as on 21 March 1911 at the Singer works, 12 female cabinet polishers were asked to take on the work of three colleagues. As they were paid piece-work, this meant a loss of two shillings a week. They went on strike. Within two days almost all of the 11,000 workers joined them in sympathy. The company threatened to close the factory and relocate work to other European plants. A secret ballot was held. The workers decided to return but Singer had not finished as 400 workers were sacked, including the ring-leaders. Deep scars from this bitter dispute affected all workers and soon the term Red Clydeside was coined, a furnace for militancy.

Held to Ransom

Elsewhere, fragmented unions combined to become far more forceful and militant in specific sectors covering the whole of Britain. Docks dispute leaders Ben Tillett and Tom Mann formed the National Transport Workers Federation. With docks and rail unions united in aims, they exerted huge co-ordinated power with potential to paralyse ports and movement of freight. A docks strike in Southampton on 14 June 1911 spread to Liverpool and London. Virtually static pay was the prime issue with rising food prices, whilst company profits and dividends soared.

On 7 July Askwith reached a provisional settlement between the Manchester Ship Canal and dockers involving 18 unions, but disputes in Cardiff and London were spiralling out of control. On 1 August between 4,000 - 5,000 workers in the Albert & Victoria Dock came out on strike in a heatwave, leaving food to rot. Arbitration was offered if the men returned to work. Two days later the Surrey Docks came out as did the railway workers affected. By 9 August, in sweltering heat, and with tempers fraying, a total of 100,000 workers in the East End were idle. Fish, fruit and vegetables were becoming scarce and frozen meat doubled in price. Soon Billingsgate porters joined the strike. Churchill was clearly annoyed by the antics of strikers who sought to intimidate those who wanted to continue working.

A few miles away the Parliament Act was approved, finally ending House of Lords opposition, but the minds of politicians were fixated on a looming national disaster. The Times reported, "thousands of tons of food are actually perishing." Food supplies for 6-7 million people were in jeopardy as prices rose further, including bread. Wholesalers were worried as they would soon be forced out business if this continued. At midnight on 11 August, the strike was called off after protracted talks at the Board of Trade. The working day was cut from 12 to 10 hours, overtime was now paid at 9p per hour, with 1s per hour for all hours between 6 pm and 8 am.

Trouble flared again in Liverpool over a wage dispute with the Liverpool & Yorkshire Railway Company. Soon other local rail companies became embroiled. Dockers joined in too whilst others working for steamship companies were already on strike. A Joint Strike Committee had instructed workers not to handle any freight or merchandise on rail wagons to show solidarity. This prevented cargoes from being moved from the docks. The owners threatened a lockout from 14 August. Merseyside was soon to become a cauldron.

Taking no chances, the Mayor despatched 400 men of the Warwickshire Regiment, arriving at dawn on 10 August. Police were drafted in from Birmingham and Leeds, plus the Royal Irish Constabulary, to provide a corridor for the safe passage of goods. Skirmishing soon escalated on the nights of 10 and 11 August but, after reading the Riot Act to workers, the combined force was successful.

The scene switched to mass rallies outside St George's Hall, near Lime Street Station where events turned ugly. Police drew batons and used water canons as rioters, intent on violence, erected barricades. Lime Street Station became a virtual field hospital for the 350 injured. A detachment of Scots Greys Guards was sent to try and quell rioting that had spread across Liverpool. On 14 August, the ship owners activated their threat of a lockout that left 25,000 workers idle.

The government was alarmed at the crescendo of violence and economic effects as food and other goods had not moved for ten days, even with 3,500 troops. Rail workers in other parts of Britain struck in sympathy, requiring the government to post guards at all main stations. By now, Walton Jail in Liverpool was full and prisoners were shipped elsewhere. Tom Mann, the strike leader, gleefully spoke of "complete paralysis." The Mayor of Liverpool informed the Earl of Derby, "a revolution is in progress." Food in major cities was starting to run out. All 25,000 soldiers at Aldershot were placed on standby, as the government feared a state of anarchy was about to sweep Britain.

On 17 August the offer of a Royal Commission was rejected by the four major unions, leaving Asquith no choice but to somehow keep the rail and docks open. A general strike was called, and next day 200,000 rail workers were idle. Electricity workers in Liverpool then came out on strike, posing health threats to public safety. Two warship cruisers, Antrim and Warrior, were despatched to the Mersey whilst riots took place in Birmingham, Leicester, Derby and Llanelli where a train containing 120 soldiers was stopped. At Chesterfield, the Midland rail station was wrecked on 19 August, with similar scenes of violence and looting in Lincoln.

That very day the government sent Lloyd George, Ramsay MacDonald and conciliator George Asquith to negotiate. After a marathon session of thirteen hours, the rail workers agreed to return to work. In Wales, 75% of drivers were still out on strike and 90% in the East Midlands. At Llanelli a mass picket held up a train, believed to be full of 'scab' labour prepared to work. Events turned nasty as the Worcestershire Regiment drew fixed bayonets. They then opened fire, killing two strikers. As darkness fell on Saturday night, Llanelli descended into chaos as an orgy of destruction ensued. Rioters wrecked and looted the town centre but overnight came news of the agreement made in London to end the strike.

The situation remained tense in Liverpool with dockers staying out on strike until a guarantee was given of reinstatement of all workers sacked, including those promoting the strike. The city, awash with decaying rubbish, was described by the Times correspondent as "a sewage farm." The heatwave continued with genuine fears about threats to health. In the Rhondda Valley new wage demands were made and Durham too, with blame placed on revolutionaries.

It was George Asquith who ended the Liverpool strike in persuading the Tramway Company to reinstate most workers for striking in sympathy. Tom Mann realised that many workers wished to return to work, having had enough. His victory was solidarity and in linking trade unions in a consolidated national action, wielding immense power. Such tactics would be used again. The 1911 summer of industrial mayhem had shaken the Government to the core. The King urged Asquith to find some way of curbing the unrestrained power of trades unions as the foundations of society were under increasing threat.

Relative calm by the end of the year was not repeated in 1912, a year of discontent. Miners renewed demands for a minimum wage, whilst mine owners felt the pinch of an eight hour day. In January, 700,000 mineworkers were balloted on a national strike and four out of five voted in favour. Over one million miners, of whom 850,000 worked underground, would walk out at the end of February. Compounding the strike was the differing pay rates in 17 regions, with owners insisting that wages were linked to output. Strike pay would last 4-5 weeks for the 70% in the Federation. Both sides were invited to the Foreign Office on 22 February by Asquith. The meeting, lasting nine hours, ended in deadlock. The Miners' Federation would not commit to a decision before their national conference five days later, and the mine owners wouldn't budge from their position. Negotiation was at an impasse.

A conciliatory offer to improve pay, and promise of no owner exploitation, was accepted by mining regions producing 60% of output, and rejected by others. Derbyshire, Leicestershire and South Wales came out on strike. Asquith and Asquith engaged in discussions with miners and owners for several fruitless days. By 1 March 1912, with 800,000 miners still on strike, owners were worried about pits becoming uneconomic. Deadlock continued as coal stocks declined. Another lengthy session failed on 15 March as 170,000 workers in other industries came out. With great reluctance, the Government felt it had no option but to introduce a minimum wage bill but without stating precise rates. Tom Mann, who was arrested for trying to incite soldiers to mutiny, called for one union per industry. The implications were clear – ransom tactics. An indignant Balfour spoke for Unionists in referring to unlimited union power, and the paralysis of the British economy.

The bill passed its second reading by a majority of 125. A weary Asquith rose to speak at the Committee Stage. He referred to the stubbornness of both parties that had rendered havoc and mischief on an unprecedented scale, and to holding them to account for their actions. All avenues had been explored and exhausted, with "all the powers of persuasion, arguments and negotiations," He added, "I claim that we have done our best in the public interests and with fairness and impartiality." The House listened intently to Asquith's very moving speech that reduced him to tears. He had given his all and could do little more. The bill received its Royal Assent on 29 March 1912.

A sporadic return to work started on 1 April and several days later the Federation ordered men back to work. Miners were disappointed the Act did not specify rates, whilst company owners soon realised the Act did not insist on secret ballots for any strike action. Neither did it ban secondary picketing and a closed shop, requiring all employees to be union members. Other jumped on the militancy bandwagon. The National Transport Workers Federation saw a chink and in May sought a closed shop agreement, whilst garment workers in the East End went on strike. The transport workers dispute was not confined solely to the Port of London and soon spread nationally, involving other trades too. The instigator, Ben Tillett, wanted all related unions to come under the one Federation, and for best rates to be paid, setting the standard for the rest. The balance of power in trade relations would then shift fundamentally.

Lloyd George suggested arbitration, to which the Federation agreed, but with the proviso their stated terms were to be met; otherwise a national strike would be called.

Lloyd George met with Lord Devonport, chairman of the Port of London Authority on 6 June. His proposals to avert a strike were rejected four days later, whereupon the Federation called out 300,000 workers in British ports, citing the 'brutal weapons' of intimidation and starvation. By 19 June, the Federation was short of funds and workers drifted back with some having had to resort to the indignity of the workhouse, such was their plight. Returnees increased in July but dock owners, now sensing victory, were in no mood to compromise with Lloyd George.

By 24 July, faced with destitution and starvation, rioting broke out in the docks. Fires were started and food stocks looted. In London, Ben Tillett convened a meeting on Tower Hill after which 5,000 - 6,000 men marched on the docks where more rioting took place, but his call for a national strike was rejected. Three days later the dock strike was over. The appetite for industrial strife was diminishing, given greater resolve by business owners to resist actions, and in strike funds being exhausted. In 1912, there were 857 industrial disputes involving 1.3 million men with nearly 40 million days lost. The next year 1913 was relatively quiet.

Resistance to Change

Militancy returned in 1914 with 937 strikes in the first six months. Union membership in the four years to 1914 increased from 2.4 million to 4 million. Miners, railwaymen and dockers were intent on calling a national strike with engineers and shipbuilders. Only war intervened. Faced with another onslaught of industrial action, and crisis in Ireland, Britain faced the very real prospect of revolution and not only civil war in Ireland.

In this book, *The Social Unrest*, Ramsey MacDonald traced the roots of conflict back to the Peasants Revolt of 1371 and to education, and accumulation of wealth, with little regard to investment and in workers who created wealth. He said, such inequality was immoral, adding, "the decay of good breeding and of clean serious living was everywhere apparent."

The new rich could not claim any moral superiority and had no right to command deference. There was no attempt to increase stagnating wages even though their profits soared. The resultant era of perpetual strife was inevitable. H. G. Wells, in seeing both sides, conceded that public policy kept workers relatively uneducated and submissive, tantamount to "a beast of burden." In contrast, workers attempted to restrict hours of work and create complexity in terms and conditions for their sole benefit with no regard to the commercial impact, or to the national interest. The result was a form of stalemate to the detriment of the British economy.

No wonder there was only modest investment and little advance in ingenuity and innovation. Meanwhile, Germany and the USA forged ahead in output through investment, methods and training. The main concern of Wells was that trade would go elsewhere, and that society "will be left in possession of an exceptionally large contingent for the abyss." The rise of militancy shifted the balance of power between employers and workers in a labour intensive economy, with the enormous industrial muscle of federated unions.

Britain was to pay a heavy price for the polarity of company and employee relations, unlike Germany, and for apathy in resting on its laurels in resisting change and improvement, from investment, systems and working practices to training and management. The new climate of industrial relations in the Edwardian era did not bode well for an uncertain future.