

THE GENERAL STRIKE

Discussion articles from the pre-fusion joint discussion bulletin, by Cunliffe and Kinnell.

(Also available on this question are a few copies of articles from Internal Bulletin no. 1 by Morrow and Kinnell, and copies of 'The General Strike' by Morrow and Kinnell, and a general article by Morrow and Kinnell.)

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'IB 105 - descent to the pits', by Gunther

The ICL opposition to the demand "General Strike to Kick out the Tories" is coupled with the advocacy of a General Strike - to achieve limited, specific goals, such as repeal of anti-union laws or the defeat of a pay freeze.

So while arguing that a call to remove the government "limits" the outcome of a General Strike in advance, the ICL in effect impose a far more restricted perspective on the very campaign for a General Strike.

Yet experience even in recent years (France in May-June 1968; the confrontation over the Pentonville dockers in 1972; the Labour government's repeal of the Industrial Relations act, in the face of a national strike call by the AUEW) has shown that governments will - under certain conditions - make concessions on precisely such limited questions as wages or particular pieces of legislation in order to head off a General Strike and remain in office to regroup and wage further attacks.

These struggles have also confirmed that the trade union bureaucracy itself goes to great lengths to restrict the demands of the general strike movement to specific, limited demands on economic questions or on particular anti-union legislation. This was the case for instance during the miners' pay struggle of winter 1973-4. The solidity of the action and the growing mass solidarity of the workers' movement were the factors that forced Heath to seek a General Election to prepare the ground for a full-scale confrontation. The miners refused to call off their strike during the election campaign, and eventually concluded their deal with the newly-elected Wilson government. But throughout the action, it has now been confirmed, Gormley and the NUM leaders were shamelessly in concert with the Heath government, seeking at all costs a far on pay which would have enabled the Tories to settle and remain in office. We can see a similar case in the steel strike of 1980. While union leaders in BL and other public sector pay reviews struggled to prevent any simultaneous strikes that might extend towards a general strike, and the TUC moved in to knife the General Strike call of the Welsh TUC, the ISTC leaders themselves battled to separate the issue of wages and jobs. They know all too well that certain concessions could be secured on the pay issue - but to stem the slaughter of jobs meant to reverse the Tory strategy for the industry - effectively defeat the government.

Such conscious moves to limit workers' struggles to issues which can be tactically conceded by a capitalist government form the consistent tradition of the British (and every other) labour bureaucracy. The crucial weakness of the 1926 General Strike was precisely the determination of the TUC leaders to confine the struggle to economic demands; their refusal to put forward any call for the removal of the Baldwin government; and the failure of the Communist Party and left bureaucracy to offer any political alternative to the treachery of the General Council. The ICL point out in their pamphlet (p13) that the 1926 strike committees in County Durham "effectively took control of their area" - but leave out the fact that the limited demands and leadership of that strike led to its defeat.

In our view it is the obstruction of political development by the labour bureaucracy which is a primary obstacle to the development of mass struggle on a scale sufficient to bring down the Tories. We accept that in real terms a General Strike will arise not from some abstract and arbitrary decision by the whole working class, but from the extension of a particular struggle or wave of struggles (with their own specific and limited demands). But we consider it essential to raise - in the context of our struggle to spread and generalise such action - the need to bring down the

It is necessary also to raise propaganda for the kind of organisation needed by the working class to force not only the defeat of the Tory government, but also prepare for the necessary struggles against an incoming Labour government; to spell out the kind of socialist policies needed by the working class, and to draw from these a series of demands to be raised under a Labour government. It is necessary also in this context to counterpose the slogan of a workers' government, rooted in the movement of the masses, to a further repetition of the Wilson/Callaghan governments.

But unless we spell out a perspective for extra-parliamentary mass action by the working class to bring down the Tory government, begin to feel their independent strength as a class, and press home the fight for their demands, such socialist propaganda becomes simply empty rhetoric, or abstract prescriptions for action after the 1984 election.

Indeed it is appropriate to turn the question around. The ICL use the slogan "Boot Out the Tories". Do they not have an obligation to explain to the workers' movement just who is to do the booting, by what means, under what conditions, and exactly what we propose to replace the booted out capitalists? Surely the answer cannot be very different from the one embodied in the WSL's slogans.

We must combat the reformist delusion that the Tories can simply be pressured into a change of line, or that reforms can be won for the working class without mass action to defeat this government. This is now being advanced as a perspective by Peoples March leaders, Heffer-style lefts and wide layers of the labour bureaucracy. We must spell out that when we call for mass action to defeat the Tories we are not simply calling for another 100,000-strong one-off demonstration, for petitions or for protest stoppages, but for all-out General Strike action with the firm objective of sweeping this government from office.

If the Tories under such conditions were to call an election, they would do so not from a position of strength but of weakness. We do not call for a General Election; but we would not oppose one if it were called. We would press for the class action to continue during the election, redouble our efforts to develop the independent strength and organisation of the working class (councils of action, occupation committees, etc), seek means to drive the wedge between the forward-moving working class and its reluctant "leaders" in the unions and the Labour Party, build our own revolutionary forces, and seek to create the most favourable conditions to press home the struggle under whatever government emerged from the election.

We see no reason to be afraid of the possibility that a General Election may be called to defuse our General Strike. We see rather a danger in failing to put forward an adequate political perspective in a potential General Strike situation; the government could once again be handed an extended lease of life by the union bureaucracy with us playing the role of the CP in 1926 - offering no serious political alternative to the limited demands of the reformists.

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After a discussion on the joint NC about the general strike, I wrote a brief note outlining the differences as I saw them. BS did a reply for the liaison committee. The notes are published here as they are. This article summarises the argument and replies to BS's points.

Further reading: Workers' Action pamphlet, Why We Need a General Strike; Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike.

1. MARXISM AND THE GENERAL STRIKE

In the 19th century, the general strike was the slogan of anarchists and utopians, and the Marxists were sceptical. Engels wrote:

"In the Bakuninist [anarchist] programme, a general strike is the lever for unleashing social revolution. One fine morning, the workers in all the industries of a country, even of the whole world, stop work and, in four weeks at the maximum, oblige the ruling classes to surrender, or to attack the workers, thereby giving the latter the right to defend themselves and use this opportunity to tear down the whole of the old society.. [But] it was recognised by all that a complete organisation of the working class and a full kitty were necessary. This indeed was the problem. On the one hand, the government, especially if encouraged by political abstentionism, will never allow the organisation or the funds of the workers to go so far; and on the other hand the political actions and abuses of the ruling classes will promote the emancipation of the workers long before the proletariat manages to achieve this ideal organisation and this vast reserve fund. And if it did have them, then it would not need to resort to the general strike to achieve its purpose"

('The Bakuninists At Work')

In the early 20th century, Rosa Luxemburg, basing herself on the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and also the Belgian general strikes for voting rights, argued that Engels' assessment was now out-of-date and one-sided. Engels was right as against the anarchists, she said; but the real development of the mass strike movements outstrips both the anarchists' conceptions and Engels' objections.

"In a word, the mass strike, as shown to us by the Russian Revolution, is not a crafty method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, but the method of action of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution."

Consequently the task of Marxists was not "to put the mass strike on the calendar on an appointed day", but:

"To give the cue for, and the direction to, the fight; to so regulate the tactics of the political struggle in its every phase and at its every moment that the entire sum of the available power of the proletariat which is already released and active, will find expression in the battle array of the party; to see that the tactics of the social democrats [i.e. Marxists] are decided according to their resoluteness and acuteness and that