

Chapter 3

To the Masses – The General Strike

AT the age of 18, in 1923, after four years of recording the passing of trains from a signalbox window, my encyclopedic knowledge of the Victoria-Brighton line timetable had been rewarded by promotion to the indicator on Victoria Station. That train indicator was completely hand operated. It had two dozen clocks, which showed the time, platform and destination of departing trains. A phone connected me with the signalboxes and the guards' lobbies, so that both the travelling public and the traffic staff could be informed of any unscheduled changes.

Under that indicator there were cupboards. These I was able to use for keeping those publications I was selling. And I was always dodging around the station, because things would go wrong, trains used to come in at the wrong platform. So that gave me one excuse. And, in addition to that, I was a seller on the station of the *Railway Review*, an excellent paper which the NUR used to publish weekly. There used to be a sort of competition as to how many you could sell. That too increased the legitimacy of my dodging around. Thus, I built up contacts. The disadvantage was in my being so young. But it was a fruitful period – seeing how to operate as an individual in a workplace. And I did have quite a degree of support on that station. They were nearly all members of the three or four Battersea branches of the NUR, by and large, the workforce at Victoria all lived in Battersea. Later, I initiated the duplicated Communist paper, the *Victoria Signal*, which I was in a position to distribute at the same time as the *Railway Review*.

The reorganisation of the party introduced great changes in the activity of its members. In place of the weekly branch meeting where opinions were exchanged, the membership was divided into working groups directed to a specific function, either in their union, Labour Party, trades council or workplace. The purpose was to weld the party membership to the working class and to its organisations, and so be able to give leadership and coherence to the daily struggle. This, we were taught, was 'Bolshevising' the party.

When I began to build a workplace branch of the party on Victoria Station, I was the only member. But I was not without supporters, most of the railwaymen living in Battersea were influenced by its advanced tradition. In the guards' and shunters' lobbies could be found pre-1914 Herald League and ILP members, many of whom were committed supporters of Battersea Labour Party's left wing politics. Outside the

station, I had the help and expertise of Claude Healey, the Westminster Communist Party organiser. He was secretary of the typewriter mechanics' trade union and had an office in Fleet Street, above Jack Hobbs' cricket shop. It was from there that we produced the two page *Victoria Signal* fortnightly, though its actual content was prepared by regularly calling supporters to meetings in the lavatory attendants' lobby at Victoria itself.

That paper won extraordinary support. It circulated up and down the Brighton line and was looked for. If it arrived anywhere late, you were soon made aware of this. Even the platform inspectors paid their halfpenny. The reason for its popularity lay in its agitational treatment of simple issues and its lead on how to remedy a wrong. It brought into prominence the ordinary grievances of railwaymen and carried their discontent into the union branches. In that way, the hope was to build solid support for Communist politics in the union branch.

One such agitational issue, highlighted by the paper, was the condition of the shunters' lobby. At the end of the old No 7 platform, beneath the connecting stairs, was a mean little lobby that was used by the shunters. In the days of the steam train, railway shunters had the dirtiest and most dangerous job, uncoupling railway carriages and engines and coaches. Manually breaking the Westinghouse coupling required much strength, and resulted in them being smothered in filthy black grease. Their lobby, where their worksheets were pinned up, was sparsely furnished. There was a bare table in the centre, a naked electric bulb, a gas ring for a brew up and a few hooks to hang coats and mackintoshes on. To clean their hands, the shunters were supplied with rag shoddy and a tin of soft soap. Such conditions were a recipe for discontent.

Another reflection of working conditions in the 1920s on Victoria Station was the employment of outside porters for no wages. Those men used to stand in front of the station with a trolley and take luggage from the incoming taxis. Then they would see the passengers onto the train. These men depended exclusively on tips for their pay. But the railway company controlled the numbers of outside porters employed. Each man had to deposit his insurance card in the station superintendent's office and was issued with an enamel armband with a registered number – 'Outside Porter No XYZ' – and a peak cap. Even the term 'outside' was a misnomer because, when important trains arrived (such as the Dover boat train with passengers from the Continent, or the 'Brighton Belle'), those outside porters were expected to meet them so as to handle the passengers' luggage. It was a precarious living, even if it could not strictly be termed casual labour.

In the months preceding the General Strike, the *Victoria Signal* campaigned for 100 per cent trade union membership – as did CPers and others up and down the country. To that end, we were successful

in persuading the union branch to organise a trade union 'showcard' day. By that method, we learnt our union strength and weakness on the station. It was that effort to unionise the station that had brought to light the plight of the outside porters. Many were ready – even anxious – to join, in the hope of stabilising their position. This agitation also had repercussions within my branch of the National Union of Railwaymen – Battersea No 1 – which was normally right wing and pro-Jimmy Thomas. At that time, the branch members had the utmost difficulty in resisting my proposal for a showcard day. I also used to be on the Southern District Council of the NUR as a deputy delegate, and I can remember the embarrassment my proposal caused there too. So with that campaign, we were hitting the nail on the head. We were putting ourselves – Communists and sympathisers – in the factories or in the railway depots in good standing with other workers who were interested in strengthening the union. We organised those outside porters. I took a deputation of them to the Battersea No 1 branch to try and get them into the union; the branch appealed to national headquarters. But the leadership resolutely refused to organise them.

At one stage, we tried to organise the outside porters to boycott the incoming boat trains. The idea was that instead of the outside porters moving with their trolleys to meet them, they should remain at the front of the station. We had planned for that day and tried to organise supportive action from the other station staff. But, on the vital day, it only needed one porter to move his trolley in the direction of the arrival platform for that token strike to collapse. This happened. Such action was expecting too much from men whose sole means of livelihood were the tips, the generosity of the public. True, some months later, in the massive May Day demonstration to Hyde Park which, in London, formed the prologue to the General Strike, some of those outside porters could be seen marching under the banner of the *Victoria Signal*. But, once the strike had begun, some of them were to scab, despite our bringing out a special edition, specifically urging them not to.

A popular feature of our station paper was the profile of a railway company director. Applying the technique developed by Walton Newbold, we illustrated – by using *The Directory of Directors* – the multiplicity of directorships a given railway company director held. When listed, that information reinforced the image of the wealthy employer who dismisses the railway workers' just claims, as embodied in the *All Grades Programme*. This agitational series was greatly appreciated and warmly discussed.

But the *Victoria Signal* was merely one of three such efforts I was involved with. In Dorman and Long's steel works, just along by Battersea Power Station, near what used to be the Great Western goods depot of Nine Elms Lane, we had a YCL factory cell, which produced a duplicated paper called the *Iron Fighter*. And at Nine Elms – which was

not only a marshalling yard but also had engine sheds – we had contacts or party members, and so the *Nine Elms Spark*, a factory paper, was produced there. So, what with the *Victoria Signal*, there were two Communist Party workplace papers connected with the South West Local, while the YCL produced the *Iron Fighter*.

The railway depot papers, of which the *Victoria Signal* and the *Nine Elms Spark* were examples in the period of 1924-26, reached a wide audience. They initiated a new form of working class journalism that came into full bloom in the days of the General Strike. What made them a success was the extraordinary regularity with which they appeared, and their close ties with their readers. In the effort of the Communist Party and Minority Movement to rebuild a militant spirit on the railways – to halt the retreat, to campaign aggressively against sectionalism – they made an important contribution. Nationally, such factory papers took off about the period of 1925-26, and were really an expression of local talent coming forward for the first time.

In December 1925 the Railway Wages Board – a representative tribunal with an 'impartial' chairman – published its findings against the railway unions' claim for a wage increase. That wages board award produced a stir all through the railway system. A special general meeting of the NUR was convened to consider the situation, and decided by a narrow majority to accept the award. At the time, it seemed to me that the *Victoria Signal* and my speeches in the union branch were really in tune with the thoughts of all railwaymen.

The front page symbol of the *Victoria Signal* – what today is called its logo – was based on the Beecham's pills advert which had a signal in it, this we copied onto the stencil. Now, about this time, JH Thomas, the NUR's right wing leader and, by now, an ex-cabinet minister, came to Battersea. I went to that crowded railwaymen's meeting in Battersea town hall, expecting the seething anger that existed to erupt. I came away thoroughly dejected. Jimmy Thomas – butt of the cartoonist, idol of the Establishment and persuasive leader of the railwaymen – rose to speak to what I thought would be a highly critical audience.

He commenced by reminding us all of his long, dedicated service to the union and of the conditions of service that we then enjoyed, compared to the time when he had been on the footplate. Then he attacked the *Victoria Signal*, not for its politics, but as an example of outside interference in our union affairs. Taking the current issue of the paper with its masthead illustrating a railway signal at danger, he asked: 'Has any railwaymen ever seen a signal pointing towards the railway track?' That crowded meeting rocked with laughter as he ridiculed those ignorant outsiders who sought to instruct us railwaymen what to do. Our simple little mistake – we hadn't given it a thought – had them all laughing. Particularly when you're young there's nothing more wounding than ridicule. A protest from me at that point resulted in a notice of

a motion in my own branch to remove me from the branch committee.

That Thomas meeting was presided over by Tom Pocock who was also my branch chairman. He was a signalman at Victoria North box, a pre-1914 member of the Independent Labour Party, an executive member of the union and a governor of the Central Labour College. He was respected as an able negotiator. From the time when I joined the union – introduced by my uncle Ben Wicks – Pocock had encouraged and assisted me. His supportiveness had been despite his surely knowing one of my early mentors to have been his fellow signalman, Harry Manning, he and Harry had been at great odds, politically and personally, for decades. Often, he made it possible for me to act as deputy delegate to the union's Southern District Council, of which he was secretary. Now he was sponsoring the resolution to remove me from the branch committee. Not that there was anything personal in this. It was very much part of a national pattern, as the coming pages will show.

August 1924 had seen the inaugural conference of the National Minority Movement, the organised opposition within the union movement. The hope was that militant minorities would one day become the majority. After all I have said about Battersea, no one will be surprised to read that our town hall should have been the venue for the NMM's founding conference. This was during the one summer of Labour's first government – born, and soon to be buried, by grace of much of the Liberal Party. This government was currently providing a salutary lesson in parliamentary politics. The repeated threats by that government to use troops and emergency powers against strikers was more of an eye-opener than any number of photos of His Majesty's Labour ministers decked out in top hats, knee breeches and dangling swords. To the exasperation of industrial activists, unions seemed riddled with sectionalism. This had been aggravating the industrial retreat, ever since the immediate postwar boom had collapsed into slump.

Presiding in Battersea town hall over the NMM's founding conference was Tom Mann. He had been an inspiration to workers since the London dock strike of 1889. We now numbered miners and metal workers, women from London's rag trade, unemployed and employed, railwaymen regardless of sectional and craft divisions. What inspiration he gave us! It was time to stop the rot, time to break barriers down, time for industrial unionism to come into its own. And for him the purpose of industrial unionism was not only to obtain another penny in the wage packet, but to fashion a more efficient weapon in the hands of the workers in their battle to change society. As he emphasised, stepping to the front of the platform, pushing up his shirt cuffs, 'kicking capitalism off the face of this planet', he demonstrated the kick like a footballer taking a penalty.

Big Jim Larkin was there. What a giant of a man, demanding to

know what the movement was going to do about 'poor little Ireland'. From the South Wales coalfield Arthur Horner, then checkweighman at Maerdy, outlined the grim condition of his miners since their betrayal by Thomas and the transport workers' leaders on Black Friday of 1921. Horner brought the message that the Miners' Minority Movement was stirring the valleys, and the prophetic warning that cheap reparation coal extracted from defeated Germany would, once the Ruhr mines were back in full operation again, result in fresh attacks on the miners by the coalowners in this country.

In the town hall vestibule was a man with a friendly face, a big hat and wide girth. It was George Hicks, a rising star among the left wing trade union leaders. He was no stranger to the Battersea movement. In fact the bricklayers' branch in Battersea had been for years his base. Yet to push open the door leading from the vestibule to the conference and identify himself with the Minority Movement was something he never did. Both he and AA Purcell, who were destined to dominate the industrial scene in the years 1924-26, had since the engineering lockout in 1922 advocated a more effective centralisation of the Trade Union Congress General Council.

But to become committed to an organised effort to fight the more conservative trade union leadership was not their cup of tea. They chose to remain on the sidelines, to fraternise at embassy receptions, to sign a few ghosted articles for left papers and, in May 1926, when the hour of decision struck, to capitulate to the right wing of the trade union movement.

During the course of 1924, it became clear to anyone in the Communist Party (and outside) that the Labour government was, at most, carrying out Liberal policies. This realisation brought very widespread working class disillusionment – often with 'politics' as such – which found expression in a switch to a more aggressive attitude within the industrial arena. And this too helped nurture the rank and file efforts that came together and formed the Minority Movement during July-August 1924. This development was spontaneous, and not simply Communist Party instigated. It was the return of the base movement to old syndicalist ideas which had existed continuously in Britain since around 1910. In this country, there has always been a tendency for trade union consciousness to boil up without necessarily any broader political conclusions being drawn; as I see it, a recurrent contradiction in the rhythms of the British movement, going back to 1832 at least. We were about to see all too much of this during 1926.

Some weeks after the NMM's launching, the TUC convened for its 1924 congress. Millions of workers, aching for an economic revival, were sympathetic to the Labour government's efforts to reopen trade links with Russia. And here at Hull, as fraternal delegate from the Russian unions, was Mikhail Tomsy. He received an enthusiastic