

THE STRUGGLE IN ENGLAND

The Great Lessons of the English General Strike.

By John Pepper.

If we would determine which are the fundamental lessons that the general strike will teach the British proletariat, we must examine the most important experiences of the English working class, which led them to use the weapon of the general strike. Every proletariat learns in the first place from its own experience; the British proletariat however has, up to now, learned only from its own experience.

The British proletariat has had three great experiences in the last few years.

The first experience was that of "Black Friday" 1921. The miners, isolated and left in the lurch by the railwaymen and transport workers, were defeated. The lesson of this experience is that the isolated fight of one branch of industry is certain to incur defeat.

The second great experience of the British workers was that of the Labour party Government in 1924. The whole British proletariat was, in consequence of the nine months' rule of the MacDonald Government, penetrated by the fundamental lesson that purely parliamentary methods cannot produce palpable results for the working class.

The third experience was that of "Red Friday" in the summer of 1925. The attack against the miners was repulsed by common action on the part of the railwaymen, transport workers and miners who threatened with a general strike.

The working class drew from these experience the conclusion that common action of the workers of all the decisive branches of industry is necessary and that, in a direct mass fight outside Parliament; in other words, the use of the general strike as the most direct weapon of the proletariat.

The fact of the general strike itself will be another new experience which will determine the further line of thought of the British proletariat and the strategical and tactical arsenal of the British working class.

The first fundamental lesson of the British proletariat will be a violent shaking of the democratic and parliamentary illusions of the working class which have been deeply rooted for years. In no country of Europe have the workers had such an imperturbable faith in the impartial character of the Government, in the sanctity of Democracy, in the Parliament. The workers have now seen with their own eyes how the constitutional Cabinet is turning into a civil Commissary of exceptional law, equipped with dictatorial means of power. Legality, the great fetish of the British working class, now means the illegality of the trade unions, the confiscation of the strike funds and making every single trade union member responsible. For decades, the British Government has been able to keep up the semblance of being above party and above class; in the great general strike, however, it had to show its colours and to declare itself openly as the strike committee of the bourgeoisie. The British workers have for decades spoken of "our army" and "our navy"; now they have had personal experience that "their" army and "their" navy are the armed power of the bourgeoisie. The person of the King was also "sacred" in the eyes of the British working masses; the royal proclamation of the condition of exceptional law will now have made the British workers susceptible to the slogans of the republic.

The second great lesson of the general strike will be the criticism of the general strike as a weapon of war. The workers will see that the general strike as a defensive weapon, as a purely "economic" means of fighting, is insufficient. Just as it learnt from Black Friday the lesson that an isolated army corps of the working class is beaten, as they learnt from the experience of the Labour Government the lesson that the purely parliamentary weapon is blunt, they will now learn the lesson that the general strike is only an irresistible weapon in the hands of the proletariat when it does not limit itself to economic slogans, when it fights not only against the employers, but against the Government of the bourgeoisie. The significance of the general strike as a political weapon, the connection between economics and politics, the understanding of the question of power will be the second great, fundamental lesson of the mass strike.

Distrust of the Right treacherous leaders will be the third lesson of the English general strike. On the eve of the great fight, May 3rd, the "Daily Herald" was able successfully to issue the slogan "Trust your leaders". After the betrayal and capitulation however, the slogan of the workers will be: "Away with the treacherous leaders who have abused our confidence!"

During the fight, the great masses did not yet clearly realise the treachery of the leaders of the Right. After the fight however, they will watch the action of their leaders with eyes which have been sharpened by the fight and the capitulation.

The workers will now understand what it means when leaders like Mac Donald and Thomas get up in Parliament in the middle of the strike and declare that "they are and always have been on principle against the general strike".

One of the most important results of the general strike will be a refusal on the part of the workers to follow their old leaders. The General Council is the first step in this enormous process of casting its skin, through which the British working class is passing; — the casting of the old skin of the old generation of leaders and the rise of a new body of leaders.

The most important, the most fundamental lesson however, which the British working class will learn from this gigantic fight, will be the recognition that neither the trade unions as economic organs alone nor the merely parliamentary political fight alone can lead the proletariat to victory, to liberation from capitalist exploitation. The working class will now understand the necessity of organising a political party which can not only gain

seats, not only deliver parliamentary speeches, but is capable of organising victoriously the revolutionary fight of the proletariat.

The result of these fundamental experiences and of all the above mentioned experiences will be the rise of a Communist Party on an enormous scale. The mobilisation of the whole armed force of the State and the mobilisation of the Supreme Court of Justice which declared the general strike illegal, will have a decisive influence on the development of the Communist Party into a mass party.

The Astbury decision will have as deep an effect on the whole existence of the British Labour movement, as did the Taff Vale decision in 1901. The Taff Vale decision at that time convinced the British proletariat that, with purely trade union means, their fight was hopeless; that the power of the State and class justice could deprive them of the right of picketing strikers, that the trade unions collectively could be made responsible for the action of any individual member. The British working class replied to the Taff Vale decision of the Supreme Court of Justice by forming its first political mass organisation, by founding the Labour party.

The Labour party was from the beginning a Reformist, opportunist organisation; nevertheless Lenin was right when in 1908 he advocated the British Labour party being admitted to the Second International on the grounds that "the Labour party represented the first step towards the formation of a truly proletarian organisation in England, towards a conscious class policy, towards a Socialist Labour party". There can be no doubt that the Astbury decision, a repetition of the Taff Vale decision, will force the British Labour party to take a second step towards a class conscious policy, towards a truly Socialist Labour party.

The first violent shock to British imperialism through the rising competition of German and American imperialism in the nineties, had driven the British bourgeoisie to its first great general attack on the British trade unions, on the British working class. The Taff Vale decision became the symbol of the general offensive of the English bourgeoisie against the English proletariat. The present-day crisis of British imperialism which now sees its world monopoly threatened by the superior American imperialism and by the progressive industrialisation of the colonies, has driven the British bourgeoisie to a new general attack on the working class. The mobilisation of the power of the State and the Astbury decision are the decisive steps in this offensive. The result of the first crisis of British imperialism and of the first offensive of the British bourgeoisie was the formation of the Labour party. The result of the second decisive crisis of British imperialism and of the second general offensive of the British bourgeoisie will without doubt be the formation of a Communist mass Party.