

The General Strike and its Lessons

By J. R. CAMPBELL.

The Political Meaning of the Great Strike, by J. T. Murphy
(Communist Party, 16, King Street, W.C.2. Price 1s. 6d.).

The General Strike; Trades Councils in Action, by E. M. Burns
(Labour Research Dept. Price 2s.).

THE books by Comrades Murphy and Burns ought to be studied minutely not only by Party members but by every worker who desires to understand the meaning of the events which have taken place in Britain during the present year. We are living in a period when the demands of the daily struggle make theoretical study increasingly difficult, but in spite of the difficulties this theoretical study has got to be undertaken, otherwise we shall fail in the daily struggle itself.

The first of these books—that by Comrade Murphy—was completed by the end of May and deals mainly with the events leading to the General Strike and the lessons of the Strike itself, and with the future which the General Strike has opened out to the British working class. In view of the attempts now being made by Trade Union leaders to represent the General Strike as an accidental event and to assert that the trade union policy based on co-operation with the employers is both practicable and useful it will be essential for our Party members to master the history preceding the General Strike in order to be able to demonstrate to the workers the inevitability of that event.

As Murphy excellently puts it :

“To separate the General Strike from the events leading up to it would be a great mistake. Although this is the first General Strike, it must not be forgotten that a General Strike has been threatened on more than one occasion in recent years. The years 1920, 1921, and 1925 have stamped upon their pages indelible marks which are inseparable from the events of May, 1926.”

and :

“Mr. Cramp cries “Never Again.” Mr. MacDonald and his colleagues proceed to capitalise the Strike into Parlia-

mentary votes but each and every one of them are ignoring certain very important features of the situation which no serious person can afford to ignore. Not the least of these is the fact that on each of the occasions cited, both with regard to the threat of the General Strike and the actual General Strike, the decisions were taken by Congresses and Conferences and by leaders politically opposed to the policy of the General Strike and its implications."

The character of the Trade Union bureaucracy is well described in the statement: "Comfortable in their social life, excellent as collective bargainers and as administrators of trade union rules, they felt neither the necessity nor the desire to 'worry about theory'" "To them Socialism was still some far-off divine event. They faced a severely wounded, quivering European Capitalism and the millions of suffering restless workers with the mentality of the comfortable 19th century Liberal and Tory trade union bureaucrats. They neither understood the class war nor wished to understand it. All they wanted was to be left alone, to return to 'normal.' When all the 'inner histories' of the collapse of the General Council have been written and told, and the stories of cowardice and panic have exhausted themselves, these deeper defects will be found to underlie not only the incidents of failure but the continuous refusal of the leaders to take the measure of history and face up to the new tasks life itself was calling upon them to fulfil."

The Months Before the Strike.

In Chapter 2 we have an excellent description of the process of class consolidation, both amongst the workers and amongst the capitalists, which preceded the General Strike. In reading this chapter it becomes clear that the capitalist consolidation was consolidation under the leadership of the Conservative Party which expresses the will of finance-capital and which knew what it wanted and how to get it. Such consolidation as was achieved by the workers was consolidation imposed upon the leaders by the rank and file and did not place in control of the workers' movement a leadership prepared to hasten the consolidation, or prepared to use such consolidation as had been achieved, in the interests of the working class. The Communist Party, which had done much to hasten the consolidation of the worker' movement, was still too weak to take over the leadership. The result, as Murphy describes, was:

"But the Communist Party has not yet secured the organic leadership of the Labour Movement, with the result

that the crisis of this period finds a working class, in the process of being revolutionised, facing class battles encumbered with a leadership that does not want to fight.”

Next follows a section which deals with the events in the mining industry. This section ought to be thoroughly assimilated by every Party member in order to meet the charge of the Trade Union bureaucracy that the miners had a good settlement in their grasp if only they had not been so stubborn or their leaders so stupid. The part dealing with the actual events of the Strike itself is exceedingly valuable, particularly the description of the events of the Nine Days as seen by the author in the part of the country in which he was operating. The situation existing after the collapse of the General Strike is then analysed in detail and readers will here find the well-known Samuel Memorandum (which is likely to be a feature of the Conference of Trade Union Executives that will discuss the calling off of the Strike) thoroughly analysed and exposed.

There are one or two minor blemishes in what is otherwise an excellent book. Like the first edition of the Party pamphlet, “The Reds and the General Strike,” the book does not deal at any length with the specific part played by the former Left leaders on the General Council either before or after the General Strike, although in two places they are mentioned as acting with the Rights. This does not mean that the attitude of these leaders is in any way condoned. In my opinion, the failure to deal specifically with the Lefts was due to the fact of the Party Executive Committee being in possession of information with regard to the capitulation of these individuals to the Right even before the General Strike so that the resultant tendency after the General Strike was to lump them all together—Rights and “Lefts”—in condemnation. The failure, however, to specifically analyse the rôle of the “Lefts” was important as it tended to create the impression that the Party was condoning their actions. It was a mistake to fail to realise the importance of such an analysis in view of the future struggles with which the working class movement will be faced.

The Nature of the General Strike.

A considerable portion of the book is devoted to discussing the nature of the General Strike, and to reviewing the statement of the General Council that it was purely an industrial dispute. The analysis is in every other way excellent but comrade Murphy has allowed one slip in a paragraph which is bound to give rise to some misunderstanding. The paragraph is as follows :

“What is a political act? A political act is an action whether in the form of words written or spoken, the making of a law, the raising or reducing of wages, the conduct of a strike, the casting of a vote or any other act *which changes or tends to change the relation of the classes in society*. If this definition of political action is correct, there is very little in the life of present day society which has not a political significance, irrespective of intentions. Everybody knows the destiny of good intentions, and for the Labour Movement to have intentions the opposite of its actions is adding childishness to its other defects.”

The weakness of this paragraph is that it seems to meet the General Council's statement that the Strike was purely industrial in character by the counter-statement that all industrial disputes are political and in so doing it obscures, in my opinion, the real point at issue.

No doubt every industrial dispute of a mass character brings in the Government to act on behalf of the capitalist class as a whole even if the demands made are to a body of employers and not directly to the Government.

The General Strike, however, was more than that. It was the General Council's plea that the General Strike only differed from previous strikes with which we were familiar in that a greater number of men were involved. We claim that this is incorrect for the simple reason that the General Strike was not devoted to the coercion of an individual body of employers to make concessions to the miners but was devoted to the coercion of the capitalist State representing the capitalist class as a whole to make these concessions directly in the form of a subsidy or some other means whereby the miners' wages could be maintained at the pre-lock-out level.

There is, we believe, a distinction between a strike primarily aimed at coercing a body of employers, even though the magnitude of that dispute should cause the Government to interfere, and a General Strike directly coercing the Government itself. It is that distinction which the General Council is trying to obscure. On its technical side, the political nature of the General Strike was equally obvious. Instead of the employers organising strike-breaking organisations and claiming the protection of the Government in so doing, the Government itself organised strike-breaking, and the General Strike could only be carried out by a struggle against the Government's strike-breaking organisations.

In the suppression of the Press and in the issuing of food and transport permits the General Council and the local Labour Movement were in effect putting into operation regulations as to who should be permitted to transport food and as to who should be permitted to publish newspapers, etc. This gave the General Strike, even on its technical side, a more definitely political character than any previous mass strike in British history. These are, however, minor blemishes, and we hope that the Party will do more than it has hitherto done to get the book into the hands of the largest possible number of workers.

Trades Councils and the Strike.

Comrade Burns' book deals with the work of the Trades Council during the General Strike and is of the utmost importance.

The book is somewhat defective in parts but it has also many exceedingly valuable qualities which will recommend it. The work consists of two parts, the first being an analysis of the work done by the Trades Councils and the lessons to be drawn from such an analysis, while the second part is composed entirely of the actual reports from the Trades Councils upon which the first is based. We believe, however, that on the basis of these reports a much fuller analysis might have been made.

One thing that strikes one in reviewing the book is the still great influence of sectionalism in the British Trade Union Movement. Many Trades Councils report their difficulties in inducing local trade union officials to work under Trades Council leadership in a co-ordinated fashion. In a number of cases the Trades Councils had to wage a struggle in order to prevent local officials from conducting the strike as a series of sectional parallel strikes. This was due to some extent to the General Council issuing the call through the various Union Executives but even this does not fully explain the sectional outlook of many of the trade union officials and the fact that this outlook existed in many districts right throughout the strike and prevented a strong central strike organisation functioning. This must be taken into consideration by all those who desire to view the strike as it really was and not as it might have been.

A strong pacifist tendency, even among the rank and file, can be discerned clearly in some localities. The case of Plymouth, which organised a football match between the Police and the Strikers, at which the Chief Constable's wife kicked off, caused much unrestrained merriment amongst our Russian comrades. We are afraid that there will be much more merriment when they hear that in the same place religious services were daily arranged for the Strikers!

In other cases it was reported that the Police were friendly and that there was no need to organise Workers' Defence Corps. That the Police were in sympathy with the workers in certain districts is true beyond doubt. But this is not the whole explanation as to why they were friendly.

A perusal of the reports show that the weakest section in the General Strike was that connected with local municipal tram services and with road transport generally. The Government had elaborated its road transport organisation months before the General Strike and it was essential to the success of the Strike that road transport should be stopped except such as was permitted under the regulations of the trade unions. To do that it was necessary to stop the functioning of the Government transport organisation. Yet it is safe to say that a study of these reports shows that, possibly with the exception of the North East Coast, the bulk of the workers in the Strike was not conscious of any Government machinery being in operation against them, though fully aware of the functioning of road transport during the Strike. The stopping of the road transport could only be done by keeping up the morale of the workers through bringing them out on the streets in mass demonstrations, by mass picketing on the road, and by taking steps to protect these demonstrations and pickets by organising Workers' Defence Corps. Where this is not done and where the Government machine was allowed to function, there was obviously no need for Police interference with the Strikers who could fool themselves that the Police were friendly!

We do not think that the book is sufficiently critical of those Trades Councils which did not have control of the streets and which advised the strikers to stop at home, and thus refused to participate in the Strike and make it a success.

One good feature of the book is the insistence on regional organisation for Trades Councils, and the setting up of regional Councils of Action with the officials of the districts of the various unions. In the last Strike, those Trades Councils which did engage in picketing, found it difficult to combat the Government organisation owing to the fact that they, the latter, were organised regionally, while the Trades Councils acted locally and often without any contact with other Trades Councils.

We think that any future edition of the book should carry the analysis further and that as a means to doing this should embark upon a more systematic research of the working of local organisations during the Strike. The questionnaire which was

sent out to the Trades Council secretaries was very restricted. Furthermore, Trades Council secretaries are very often overburdened and their replies could not be other than formal. To get a real picture of the local Labour Movement during the General Strike one should not go to the Trades Council secretaries who are in most cases delicately balancing between Right and Left but to the active men. In the meantime, however, the book is of great value as a basis for further study and should be in the hands of everyone who wants to understand the meaning of all that took place during the Strike.

Our Party members have a great responsibility of seeing that both these books get to the workers. The selling of literature is seemingly a lost art in many places, but it is an art that must be revived in order that we may ensure that political lessons reach the workers.