

May Day March 1926, courtesy Peoples History Museum



—A Contemporary Diary— The Key Actors In A Gigantic Drama By Dr. Jim Moher

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the key personalities in the General Strike and their part in it.

Two of the key players were Walter Citrine and Ernest Bevin - one in the 'background' but with his fingers in every pie of the Strike (Citrine), the other, nicknamed 'Napoleon' by his colleagues (Bevin), storming about on the foreground in a vain attempt to get the miners to reach a settlement. Bevin claimed a front-line role in the Strike on the basis of his experience as the dominant figure in a creation of mega-union, the Transport & General Workers Union in 1922.

The General Strike in Britain of May 1926, lasted nine days. It was a 'showdown' in which the many large and confident, British trade unions sought to assert their interests in an unequal capitalist society, with the 'cards stacked against' the ordinary worker and his union.

But the unions had significant battalions in its 'army': the miners (over a million of them), high hundreds of thousands in the road transport and general workers (T&GWU and NUGMW); the railway workers, operatives and train drivers (NUR and ASLEF); the engineering (AEU), shipbuilding

and allied trades unions eg electrical (ETU) and many others - old and proud craftsmen's combinations going back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Equally significantly, they were all now being marshalled as a disciplined 'movement' by a revamped industrial-focussed Trades Union Congress.

They also had a Labour Party as their political expression having just creditably formed their first, if short-lived government.

They were faced by a ruling class which had recently won a big war; held the largest empire ever - ruled and administered by a mix of aristocratic, middle and lower middle class (with significant worker support) who, for the first time, had just returned a united Conservative government with a secure majority.

No one in their right minds would confront that power who had strong armed forces and neither had the unions or TUC intended to.

Yet they found themselves in April/May 1926, doing just that! The TUC action and response of nearly two million of their members was in support of the coal miners, who had a special 'tug at their hearts'. For decades, the miners were a core part

of the trade union and labour movement with over a million members over a large part of the country, at the 'energy heart' of most industries.

The miners were facing sharp cuts in their wages (15 - 25%) or longer hours (or both), or loss of their jobs if they didn't agree to accept the coal owners' demands.

All, including the government, were mesmerised that so many workers answered the TUC call and stayed out so long. In their wildest dreams, even syndicalists around the world never dreamed of such a show of solidarity.

This year - 2026 - marks the centenary anniversary of the General Strike which is still attracting continuing interest and more books! The latest, 'The General Strike – Nine Days in May' by Professor Jonathan Schneer, a U.S. specialist in British labour history, is probably the most comprehensive (and readable) account.

But G.A. Phillips 1976 in depth study, 'The General Strike, The Politics Of Industrial

Conflict', remains a classic as the most in depth study of all sides.

My own biography of Walter Citrine 'Forgotten Statesman Of The Trades Union Congress' (first published in 2021), includes a chapter of his role in the General Strike and was based on research of the Citrine archives at the LSE.

This first and only British General Strike has been extensively researched and 'turned over' from many angles by serious scholars. Less has been done specifically on the personalities and characters, as they 'sparked' off each other.

This is an attempt based on the contemporary diary of a key player, Walter Citrine, later Lord Citrine of Wembley, who was General Secretary of the TUC for twenty years and an international union figure throughout the fascist and Second World War periods, who visited the Soviet Union six times and chaired the International Federation of Trade Unions from 1928 to 1946.



Miners Union leaders, Herbert Smith, Arthur Cook & W.P. Richardson, Downing Street, 1926

PERSONALITIES AND CHARACTERS

Walter Citrine (1887-1983), attended all the TUC General Council meetings, which were in constant session throughout the General Strike.

He took his own notes of the proceedings in his practiced short-hand. These he secreted away each night in case, as was feared, the police raided, arrested the General Council and seized them as evidence of illegality! They are now preserved in his autobiography, 'Men And Work' which he published in 1964 and is available in the LSE Library. So, this paper is based on that fairly accurate contemporary source.

As Acting General Secretary of the TUC, Citrine directed the administrative hurly burly (and, at times chaos), of the General Strike from TUC headquarters at Eccleston Square, Victoria. He allocated and oversaw a small (c35), but dedicated staff servicing the various committees which General Council members chaired or were secretaries to and nominally ran the Strike.

In fact, it was usually the regional joint union officials and lay representative who together directed things. In some regions, they were supplemented by the aid of Trades Councils, co-ordinating the activities of the more political local volunteering activists. The Trades Councils were then centres of Left and Communist focus, not to say control, often hostile to the official officers of the unions, but they all got on for this common purpose.

Ernest Bevin (1881-1951), was Secretary of the General Council's key Strike Organisation Committee as General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers Union, which he had helped create in 1922, (today now part of Unite The Union). The TGWU, was initially a merger of fourteen unions with a combined membership of 300,000.

Though only a recent member of the General Council, he was greatly experienced in running large mass union strikes (dockers, road transport and general workers).

It was his insistence that all unions be involved, in a General Strike, (not a political one). He had been involved with the miners' union in the Triple Alliance of unions in 1921, which had failed. In 1925 (Red Friday), the T&GWU and railway unions, (NUR and ASLEF), bore the brunt of the

coal stoppage which made the Government and coal owners retreat.

Bevin also wanted to be on the key TUC Negotiating Committee but those resentful of his pushiness – he was known as 'Napoleon' Bevin, - as a 'new boy' the General Council, blocked him.

However, 'Ernie' as he was known, found a way to 'get in on the negotiating act' later on, when the miners 'dug in' to reject all compromises offered by the Negotiating Committee leaders : J.H. 'Jimmy' Thomas, General Secretary of the operative railway workers (NUR) and Arthur Pugh, General Council chair and Steel & Iron Workers Union .

None of the leading union leaders saw themselves as revolutionaries seeking to bring down a democratically-elected government. They wanted to call it a 'National Strike' to avoid that connotation and it was Bevin's insistence that all unions be involved which made it 'general'.

It was Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, the Conservatives and the media's propaganda ploy to emphasise its challenge to constitutional government.

However, encouraged by Baldwin's retreat in July 1925, when a TUC-led coal movement stoppage action got a climb-down by the Government, many trade unionists mistook that truce for a win, hence the name 'Red Friday' (as the Labour paper, the Daily Herald, dubbed it).

In fact, it was a tactical retreat while the State prepared for the real thing in 1926. Citrine warned: "At the end of 1925, I began to get more and more uneasy at the lack of preparation on our side for the trial of strength which I felt lay ahead."

However, Citrine was too junior then to sway the seasoned Negotiating Committee, (of Thomas, Pugh, and Alonzo Swales of the engineers union) who lived in hope that it would all be sorted with the Samuel (a Liberal Lord) Commission Report as a basis.

So, despite a detailed eight-page Memorandum of Citrine's to the committee of senior TUC Councillors, this advice was ignored. Many experienced union officials anyway thought you couldn't plan such events, it being up to the mood of the workers, who would 'muddle through' and 'make it up as they go along', as they usually did with strikes, when the time came.

The TUC leaders (and some of the miners' leaders, like Herbert Smith), hoped the Commission of Inquiry set up by Baldwin under Lord Samuel, would provide a basis for resolving the underlying coal industry crisis. In April 1926, the Samuel Inquiry produced 'a curate's egg' – good in parts but failing to satisfy either the Miners Union, or the coal-owners, who were also up for a fight.

The coal-owners were determined to force through large wage cuts or longer hours on the miners and worsen other terms.

Bristling for a fight, they issued notices terminating existing contracts by an April 30th deadline. Steeled by the vigorous preaching style of Arthur Cook, the new militant miners General Secretary, who toured the country whipping up miners' fervour (which he was good at), the miners, who hated the coal-owners, responded wholeheartedly.

They began to gear up for one of their prolonged strikes. Agitators from the Communist-led Miners Minority Movement (MM) zoned in on many mining areas, particularly South Wales, to 'stir the pot' also.

In his diary, Citrine captures the humorous side of the changing demeanour and exchanges between these 'larger than life' union leaders who had 'pulled themselves up by their bootstraps'.

They all had their own deep union experience and character. He says sarcastically: "Today, Sunday [9 May], I was thinking how, amid all our distress, the Strike really has a lighter side. Take the personalities of our General Council for instance. There is Bevin, brawny of chest and broad of brow, swarthy of countenance, afflicted with the most becoming modesty. On the Saturday when the General Strike was declared, he suggested that he should be added to the Industrial Committee. But Jimmy Thomas and his fellow conspirators had decreed that it should not be so."

As officer to the Negotiating Committee, it was Citrine who was in regular contact with the miners' leaders of the Strike on behalf of the General Council Herbert Smith, Arthur Cook, and W.P. Richardson.

The evangelical Arthur Cook, ex-Communist from the militant South Wales Miners Federation, was Secretary. The dour but very straight chair of the Yorkshire region and Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), Herbert Smith, was chair with William (W.P.) Richardson, General Secretary of the Durham Miners Federation, was the Miners Federation (MFGB) Treasurer, who had oversight of all the funds coming to the miners – from as afield as the Soviet Union.

He never gave the inside account of how those funds were raised and used, but they continued to

flow until the end of the miners' Strike in November.

The TUC turned down a Soviet offer of £23,000 (c£3million today), in case they be accused of running the Strike on 'Russian Gold', but the Miners Federation took a large chunk of it.

Citrine had a soft spot for both Cook and Smith and was a keen left-winger then, trying to get the Negotiating Committee to prepare better for the coming confrontation! They appreciated that and to the end did not blame him for how the Strike went.

In the heady atmosphere of unity when all two hundred unions gathered at the Evangelical Memorial Hall in April 1926, the miners' leaders agreed to hand over control of the conduct of the negotiations to the TUC and abide by their recommendations.

'Old Herbert' Smith, the key miners' union leader, later backtracked from that pledge, saying it was only 'the negotiations', not 'the settlement', that they had agreed to hand over to the General Council.

Undoubtedly, he was one of the outstanding characters of this drama – 'our Herb' to his native Yorkshire people.

Then aged 64, 'the grand old man of British miners', he had been born in a workhouse and at age ten started work at Grassington pit, Hebden Moor, from which he rose to becoming President of the Yorkshire miners in 1906. This position he held all those years up to 1926, and he had also become chair of the national union a few years before. A Barnsley local councillor, he had tried for Parliament but was not successful. He was known for leading rescue efforts at mining disasters, since a dreadful one at Whitehaven in 1910. So, a revered old character.

It was Smith, not the left-wing Cook (who was equally intransigent but less blunt), who repulsed all TUC efforts to promote a compromise based on the Samuel Commission Inquiry recommendations. These involved a much-needed reorganisation (too many loss-making small pits), which all agreed to. But Samuel also recommended some short-term pay reductions as part of that re-organisation, which the miners were deadly suspicious about and staunchly against.

Although he complained at not being involved in some of the private discussions with Lord Samuel, when they took him along to meet the Liberal Lord, 'Grim Old Herbert' was 'not the slightest bit impressed'.

When they met the full miners' executive, Citrine reported that 'Smith was just as dour and dogged as ever'. This was towards the conclusion of the 'nine days' Strike, when the General Council chair, Arthur Pugh, the Iron and Steel Workers' leader, and by no means a right-winger, but a deeply religious man,

appealed to the miners' loyalty to the wider trade union movement.

He made what Citrine considered, "the most intense statement he has ever made. He [Pugh] had put to the miners whether they were facing their responsibility to the movement in not putting forward any alternative proposals". Pugh told them that "It had now ceased to be a matter exclusively for them" and that "they had to face up to their responsibilities to the rest of the trade unionists who had sacrificed so much for them and stood to lose their jobs."

But 'old Herbert' rose and said: "the miners were not going to accept a[ny] reduction in wages". He added, "our men in the coalfields have given us our instructions and we cannot depart from them"

This was the crux of the matter. The miners, unlike in most other trades or industries, gave their representatives little room for manoeuvre. They balloted at district level on most issues and the culture prevented officials from departing from the strict terms of the ballot paper.

In most other unions, there was far more flexibility of mandate, with it being expected that the officers, in the hard bargaining with employers used the judgement they were elected/appointed for, to Strike the best deal possible for all their often diverse, groups of members.

But it wasn't just Smith, there was a very strong Left and Communist-inspired faction within the miners' executive council, especially strong in South Wales (where Cook's base was).

They had been responsible for securing Cook's election to the Secretaryship of the MFGB and they now dominated the MFGB executive with Yorkshire and one or two other regions such as Durham, which Richardson represented.

They were also being 'egged on' by the Comintern in Moscow, who thought that the revolution had come in Britain and funded much of the continuing Strike. After the TUC withdrew, they denounced their erstwhile friends on the General Council (Purcell and Hicks).

Their funding enabled the MFGB to continue alone and they did so for five months more. However, in the end the Miners' executive had to concede and the terms proved worse than those originally on offer. There was much recrimination in that union at the end with Smith and the majority turning on the communists.

Citrine was also the link with the influential Cabinet Secretary, Sir Horace Wilson, and arranged the many meetings with the Cabinet in which the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin and his key

ministers, met the TUC and affected to want a compromise resolution of the mines' dispute.

Winston Churchill, though not part of the Cabinet negotiating team (Baldwin had sent him off to manage their British Gazette propaganda newspaper), at critical points seems to have had significant influence in hardening Baldwin's approach.

As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1925, by returning Britain to the Gold Standard at too high a price, he had made coal exports uncompetitive in the world market. This could be said to have triggered the crisis which pushed the coal-owners into demanding major wage-cuts.

Jimmy Thomas MP, had good contacts with Tory ministers from his days as a minister in the previous Labour government. He was convinced that Churchill was a malign influence generally in the Strike. He referred to him as the 'Mussolini' who was driving the Cabinet to confront and defeat the unions. Arthur Henderson MP, told Citrine that 'he had discovered the cause of Baldwin's [changed] attitude towards us'. It was that Churchill and four other 'hawks' had given the Prime Minister 'an ultimatum' in threatening to resign to stiffen Baldwin's approach to the talks with the unions.

Mild in his manner, Baldwin appeared to succumb to this pressure and instead to 'call the TUC leaders' bluff'. So, they broke off the negotiations when they seemed to be getting somewhere, after Churchill stormed in to bring the news of the Fleet Street printers' unofficial action in refusing to print a scurrilous attack on the union leaders.

This outraged the union delegates gathered at the Memorial Hall into almost unanimously backing the General Council's recommended Strike call.

But Baldwin was no 'patsy', easy to manipulate. His prevarication with the TUC leaders, was instead to position the Government's public image of reasonableness.

They had set up the Samuel Inquiry, given nine more months of subsidy to keep miners' wages paid, only to find the miners as intransigent as ever, with the TUC browbeating the government to again concede their demands. In a word the unions were threatening an elected government with unconstitutional, even revolutionary means.

Together with Lord Reith the new BBC Director-General, he broadcast in a 'fireside manner' with suave dulcet tones, very successfully, so the velvet glove was always to the fore. However, a different side was shown to Citrine as he drove past Wellington Barracks with Thomas on the way to Downing Street 'to grovel for the miners' as Pugh put it to him.

On the way there, "he saw troops drawn up on the parade ground. Some were practicing with machine guns; others had gas masks on, while some were in full marching kit. A number of tanks were being overhauled, with their guns grinning ominously outwards on the public."

They had opened the Port of London from the grip of the dockers and many other displays of the iron fist were made, selectively but decisively, around the country.

The Home Secretary, Joynson-Hicks ('Jix') and his key mastermind civil servant, John Anderson, were well pleased with their control of the situation.

Jimmy Thomas was also a mercurial character. One minute he was telling the General Councillors that they would all be arrested and jailed – causing real fear, as even Bevin urged them to destroy any incriminating notes or documents which might later be used against them in court! But Citrine kept his short-hand notes secreted away!

As a former Cabinet Minister in the previous Labour Government and Privy Councillor still, Thomas had access to amazing members of the establishment, including the King. He was always 'dropping names' to impress colleagues.

However, he was rated by Ramsay MacDonald, who considered him for Foreign Secretary until the Clydesiders threatened 'to kick off'. He was a serious, if a bit shady, (dabbling in shares, unsuccessfully, on the outcome of the Strike, with his son, a stockbroker), but substantial rail union and political leader of many years standing and regarded as a shrewd and successful negotiator. He had led the railway workers to a successful ten day Strike in 1919 and so was on the Negotiating Committee.

Why?

But why did the TUC get dragged into this battle? First of all, its leaders had a bad conscience, having allegedly let down the miners in their previous fight in 1921.

That 'failure' of the railway workers - Jimmy Thomas of the NUR and TUC was especially singled out for censure and his reputation was (unfairly) traduced - (unlike Bevin, who 'came out of it smelling of roses', blaming the miners' leaders for failures to consult the other unions of the Triple Alliance).

That defeat of the miners would come to be known in the labour movement as Black Friday. It put significant pressure on a left-minded TUC leadership not to be seen 'to let the miners down again'! So, they fully backed the Miners Federation (MFGB) using the same rail and road transport unions to stop coal movements in June/July 1925. This proved a winner.

It forced the government to 'rein in' the coal-owners from their plan to impose severe wage-cuts by continuing government subsidies. It also gave the miners' union a sympathetic Commission of Inquiry led by Liberal, Lord Samuel, to examine how the industry could be re-organised in everybody's interests.

Thus emboldened, the union delegates and TUC leadership at their TUC Congress that September at Scarborough began to think they had found a powerful lever for future dispute purposes. Many 'fire-breathing' motions were passed at that Congress. This caused great pressure on the General Council to involve itself more in such actions.

The response to the TUC's call from May 4th was phenomenal and far greater than the Government expected. Nearly two million workers from most industries and throughout the country walked out in sympathy with the miners. But the government plans for defeating the impact of the Strike were by then beginning to 'kick in' most effectively.

Hyde Park was commandeered as a nerve centre to receive and deliver tons of milk and other essentials all over London and the Home Counties and similarly in every major city. The docks and other crucial points of distribution were gradually brought under the control of the government's organisation.

Volunteers from the largely middle-class colleges and schools were harnessed, even to drive trains (with some disastrous results), though in some regions like Newcastle, the unions' operation worked more effectively.

As the Strike went into its second week, it was the TUC and union leaders like Thomas (and Bevin) who started to worry. Lord Samuel returned from Italy and offered to help broker a settlement on the basis of his report, but now Baldwin and the government showed no interest.

They now had 'the bit between their teeth' and became more determined to see off the unions' challenge. For their part the TUC leaders latched onto Samuel in the hope they could persuade the miners' leaders to compromise. But Samuel's insistence for there to be some wage reductions (not the low-paid miners, but some of those earning higher rates), as part of his re-organisation recommendations, remained.

Even those on the General Council on the Left, like Albert 'Alf' Purcell of the furniture makers union, George Hicks of the building trade union, John Bromley of the train drivers union and even Ben Tillett the legendary dockers' leader, who had swayed the General Council to call the General Strike in support of the miners, now became increasingly

disenchanted with the miners' leaders' intransigence. So, on the General Council they lent their voice (unanimously) to call it off after nine days.

To their immense embarrassment, Baldwin would have nothing to do with the latest Samuel proposals. Instead, he demanded that the TUC call off the Strike before any talks could resume. Having no alternative, they did so on 12th May, but in some disarray as striking workers all over the country were victimised and many lost their jobs.

Citrine and the TUC leadership called an inquest after the miners went back, in January 1927. This was a two-day conference of executive members from all the unions. There they 'had the drains up', with Cook, Smith and others berating the General Council. Citrine defended the General Council's conduct of the dispute, point by point in answer to Smith and especially Cook.

But he admitted that the Strike had been called off in confused circumstances. The TUC leaders had been led to believe (or convinced themselves) that Baldwin had 'tipped the nod' to Samuel and that his compromise would have been acceptable, with renewed negotiations to settle on reasonable terms. Also, that there would be no recrimination against the returning millions of workers. But Baldwin denied any such understanding and demanded that the call it off immediately.

There was much bitterness on the General Council by the way they had been pilloried as betraying the miners.

The General Council's Report was carried by 2,840,000 to 1,095,000 (of which 800,000 was by the MFGB).

Citrine defended the General Strike in 1964 as a 'sympathetic Strike on a national scale' with "I did not regard the General Strike as a failure. Nor do I today. It is true it was ill-prepared and that it had been called off without any consultation with the unions who took part in it.

CONCLUSION

This account of the General Strike, 'through the eyes' of the key personalities and characters, is not meant to be a comprehensive or detailed account of all the twists and turns of so many actors. However, it will hopefully raise questions which will enable us to zone in on the main issues today.

This paper is a follow on to Christine Coates' (formerly of the TUC) excellent outline of the course of the General Strike in a talk given at the LSE Library in London.

Dr Jim Moher, 10.09.2026

FURTHER READING:

'Nine Days In May The General Strike of 1926'
by Jonathan Schneer

'Walter Citrine, Forgotten Statesman Of The Trade Union Congress' by Dr. Jim Moher



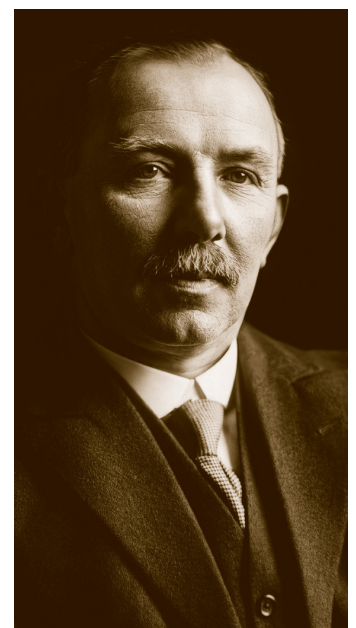
*Walter Citrine,
Acting General Secretary,
TUC*



*Ernest 'Ernie' Bevin,
General Secretary,
TGWU, Transport &
General Workers Union*



*A.J. (Arthur) Cook,
General Secretary,
Miners Union*



*J. H. 'Jimmy' Thomas,
General Secretary, NUR,
Railway Workers Union*