

The 'Spirit of Petrograd'?

The 1918 and 1919 Police Strikes

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THE REVOLUTION had begun: or so it seemed when the very sentinels of the State revolted in the late summer of 1918. "Spirit of Petrograd! The London police on strike!" cried a jubilant Sylvia Pankhurst, expressing the excitement of other British revolutionaries. "After that, anything may happen. Not the army, but the police force is the power which quells political and industrial uprisings and maintains the established fabric of British society."¹ There could not have been a worse time for this unthinkable strike to happen. The spectre of revolution haunted Europe as never before; the British working class was flexing its muscles; and the Great War still raged in Europe. According to one senior Scotland Yard official, the police were "mutinying in the face of the enemy".² Little wonder, then, that the sight of 12,000 furious Metropolitan constables marching on Whitehall sparked panic among ruling circles. According to one Government figure of the time, the supposed defenders of the status quo had surrounded Downing Street with "a very menacing attitude ... [and] made the occupants feel that they were really face to face with a revolution".³ Would the very heart of the British Empire be stripped of its defences at a time of such crisis?

So began the year-long struggle between the State and its supposed protectors, as the police threatened to defect to an increasingly assertive labour movement. Under the leadership of the National Union of Police and Prison Officers, militantly class-conscious policemen conspired to overturn their role as the subservient body of the State. The Union's president promised that the "the day when the Government can use the police forces as a tool against any other section of the nation is past".⁴ Instead, the police would form an alliance with the working class. However, the State had no intention of losing their main domestic organ of power, especially at a time when revolution seemed so firmly on the agenda. Lloyd George, the prime minister of the time, summed up the horror of Britain's ruling class, and their determination to crush police trade unionism forever. "Unless this mutiny of the Guardians of Order is

quelled", he solemnly told the Conservative leader Bonar Law, "the whole fabric of law may disappear. The Prime Minister is prepared to support any steps you make take, however grave, to establish the authority of social order."⁵

Indeed, the authority of social order was under attack all over Europe. The October Revolution and the horrors of war sent a revolutionary wave hurtling across the continent. Socialist revolution appeared as a distinct possibility not only in defeated countries such as Germany and Hungary, but also in victorious Italy. As labour historian Chris Wrigley wrote: "At the end of the First World War the old ruling classes of Europe felt that they faced the precipice. Winners or losers, the old social systems were threatened with being engulfed by the economic and social forces fermented by war."⁶ Britain was not immune to this bubbling discontent. An unprecedented mobilisation of an increasingly assertive working class had occurred during and after the war. Union membership, which numbered 2.6 million in 1910, had more than tripled to nearly 8 million by 1919. The growing organisation of the working class was accompanied by rising militancy. In 1918, around six million working days were lost to strikes, a figure that increased nearly six-fold in 1919. Those taking industrial action between 1917 and 1919 included miners, railway and transport workers, who threatened coordinated action under the banner of the Triple Alliance; as well as engineers, bakers, cotton spinners and munitions workers. Worryingly for the Government, the authority of moderate trade union leaders was undermined as local shop stewards took direct action. As Lloyd George's adviser Tom Jones explained in February 1919: "Much of the present difficulty springs from the mutiny of the rank and file against the old established leaders."⁷ Largely this was a consequence of the wartime industrial truce that bound the official trade union leadership, a truce that lost its support among rank-and-file trade unionists.

Discontent did not purely centre on short-term economic demands, but also resulted from dissatisfaction with the very structure of society. A

report presented to the National Industrial Conference by trade unionists in April 1919 stated that: "With increasing vehemence Labour is challenging the whole structure of capitalist industry as it now exists", rather than simply protesting the "more special and small grievances which come to the surface at any particular time".⁸ Furthermore, following the sacrifices of millions of British workers, labour expected to reap the rewards: "It must be remembered that throughout the war the workers have been led to expect that the conclusions of hostilities would be followed by a profound revolution in the economic structure of society."⁹ In the aftermath of conflict, this disenchantment escalated rather than subsided as the restraints of wartime patriotism lifted. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Walter Long, accurately summed up the mood of the time when told Lloyd George that: "There is no doubt that throughout the country – for aught I now, throughout the world – there is a widespread feeling of unrest which is not by any means confined to one particular class."¹⁰

Certainly, it is important not to overstate the nature of this unrest. For example, the Labour Party did not withdraw from the wartime Coalition until after the Armistice, and remained reformist in character and five years away from forming a Government. Even so, fear of revolution in the face of widespread industrial militancy and the spectre of Bolshevism was hardly groundless paranoia on the part of the British State. Kingsley Martin, who fought during World War I, believed that: "The only time in my life when revolution in Britain seemed likely was in 1919."¹¹ Movements such as the Clydeside general strike drew inspiration from Russia, and even "appeared to have some of the features of the soviets set up in Russia in early and mid 1917". Revolutionary sentiment was also prevalent in northern English industrial towns. An independent study of 816 working-class people in Sheffield in 1919 found that only one person denounced talk of revolution. One was even quoted as claiming: "The men want to have a complete revolution in the present system..."¹²

Little wonder that the Government discussed revolution as a distinct possibility. An alarmist Long warned Lloyd George, unless the Government took firm steps, "there will be some sort of a revolution in this country ... before twelve months are past".¹³ For members of the propertied classes, the combination of widespread labour unrest and the birth of Bolshevism was a lethal concoction that threatened violent revolution. As one editorial in *The Times* in early 1919 claimed: "The real meaning of the present disorders is that, under cover of an ordinary dispute between employers and employed, an attempt is being made to start the 'class war'", and that striking workers were being used by intellectuals "who desire to emulate Lenin and Trotsky and the 'Spartacus' leaders in Germany."¹⁴

The labour historian James Cronin is correct

to assert that, despite the troubles, the British "governing elite never lost the capacity or will to rule".¹⁵ However, this was not beyond the realms of possibility throughout much of 1918-19. Faced with progressively bolder attacks on the existing social structure, the State relied on the existence of a loyal police force capable of defending the status quo. As the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Edward Henry, warned a senior government minister as early as 1916: "Troublous times are ahead, and it is particularly important to keep the police happy."¹⁶ Because of its failure to provide an adequate living wage, the Government nearly lost control over the main arm of the state apparatus. Prior to the August 1918 strike, the wages of a policeman were "assessed on the basis of that of an agricultural labourer or an unskilled worker".¹⁷ Although the cost of living during the war had more than doubled, policemen had received an increase in pay of only three shillings since 1914, and a war bonus of 12 shillings. Even after the pay settlement that ended the 1918 strike, a Metropolitan constable with 5 years service who was married with two children received £3 7s, compared with an unskilled labourer who received £3 8s. This disparity triggered widespread resentment. As one City policeman put it during the 1918 strike, "we policemen see young van-boys and slips of girls earning very much more money than we get, and – well, it makes us feel sore".¹⁸

The impoverished police force was antagonised by the repeated failure of the Government to address the rapid decline of their real wages. Thomas Scott, NUPPO's London organiser, accurately summed up the frustration of many policemen during the strike: "We are sick of being messed about and being told that they are being considered, considered, considered."¹⁹ The Conservative Home Secretary, Sir George Cave, overlooked demands for increased pay from MPs throughout the war. Even a month before the strike, Cave told Parliament that although the question of a pay increase was "under consideration", he did not "expect to be able to announce [his] decision in the matter for some little time".²⁰ Despite declining real wages, duties expected of the police increased in wartime. Although denouncing the strike as a mutiny, the City of London Police Commissioner Sir William Nott-Bower conceded: "It was hard for many men to keep body and soul together, and as the War proceeded, these hardships became accentuated."²¹ Leave was restricted to one day a fortnight, and there were claims that some policemen worked an average of 96 hours for a week's pay.²² Although 1,200 pensioners were recalled for service and 30,000 volunteer Special Constables were enrolled, these were no replacement for over four thousand of the best policemen who had joined the armed forces.

Faced with poverty and deteriorating labour conditions, the police were inspired by the milit-

ancy of other workers. As *The Times* pointed out, “millions, doing less responsible work, have already received far larger advances than the £1”.²³ Successful industrial action served as an example to the increasingly impoverished police. In the words of NUPPO: “Slowly, economic pressure forced that stereotyped mind into realising that he would have to get a move on somehow; the industrial labourers were reaping big wages while his remained stationary.”²⁴ In other words, the traditional conservatism of the police (described by the Police Union as formerly “a somewhat conservative class”²⁵) was overcome as a result of their social and economic decline into the lowest sections of the working class. Telegrams sent by local superintendents as the strike gathered pace throughout the morning of 30 August 1918 demonstrate that insufficient pay was the main catalyst behind police militancy. For example, the superintendent of “M” division informed Scotland Yard that his constables “have refused to go out on duty on the grounds that they are not receiving a living wage”.²⁶ Reports written by the superintendents two weeks after the unrest concurred with this assessment. One police striker interviewed in “R” division underlined the extent of poverty facing the police, claiming that “it has been very serious for us this last few months going about trying to get food”.²⁷

Despite mounting discontent, there was no representative machinery through which the police could voice their demands. Even so, police trade unionism had little success before the force was radicalised by the privations of war. An early attempt to form a police federation attracted the interest of only around a hundred policemen. When Police Orders proscribed the Metropolitan Police Union in 19 December 1913, it enjoyed very limited support.²⁸ The Union had been formed in 1913 by a dismissed inspector, John Syme, who became a *cause célèbre* in the labour movement for his campaign against tyranny in the police force. However, his long-running campaign for reinstatement – which led to his repeated imprisonment for libel – was of little interest to the rank-and-file. Before his second spell of imprisonment in 1916, the renamed National Union of Police and Prison Officers had only around 200 Metropolitan police members.

Nevertheless, as conditions worsened, the Union attracted the sympathy of growing numbers of policemen. This was partly facilitated by a change of leadership and State repression. Syme was removed as Union secretary in May 1917, and for years would bitterly refer “to that weapon I was treacherously robbed of by Charles Duncan and a few similarly treacherous policemen”.²⁹ Thereafter, NUPPO was dominated by serving policemen such as James Marston (who became Union president) and Thomas Thiel. Both were committed socialists. As it expanded, NUPPO and

its membership faced relentless persecution from the police authorities. Modifications to Police Orders in November 1916 banned the propagation of any reports “likely to prejudice the recruiting, discipline” of the police, as well as the attendance of any meeting “held with the object of inciting Police Officers to insubordination”.³⁰ Several were dismissed as a result, including seven policemen in February 1917 for attending a NUPPO meeting. With support growing for NUPPO as the only organisation representing the grievances of the police, persecution of trade unionists only fuelled discontent. Moreover, repression failed to defeat the Union, which spread beyond London to the provinces. For example, by early 1918 a membership of three hundred was reported in the Manchester police force alone.³¹

The Union’s stated purpose, to “improve the conditions of the Services particularly in Pay and Pension” appealed to an increasingly impoverished force. Furthermore, its motto of “Tyranny is not discipline” appealed to those discontented with the arbitrary nature of police authority, particularly returning soldiers who, after being subjected to the horrors of the trenches, were less tolerant of authoritarian discipline. Around 40% of Metropolitan and Liverpool policemen who participated in the 1919 strike for union recognition were former soldiers.³² The dismissal of Constable “Tommy” Thiel for Union membership on 25 August 1918 was, as NUPPO stated, “the straw that broke the camel’s back”³³ in a force resentful of its impoverishment, lack of representation and its autocratic regime. The list of demands issued to the Government on 27 August 1918, including the increase of the war bonus from 12s. to £1 and its conversion to permanent wages, and a new war bonus of 12.5% (as had been granted to other workers) inevitably appealed to the rank-and-file. Despite this threat, the distance between the rank-and-file and the authorities was highlighted by the fact that two days before most of the Metropolitan Police went on strike, a meeting of superintendents “had reported that all was well with the force”.³⁴ By 31 August 1918, around 12,000 Metropolitan police constables were on strike.

Rather than settling the dispute, the terms offered by Lloyd George’s Government set the stage for a year-long struggle between police and State. Although the pay demands were largely conceded, and (with the exception of a conscientious objector) all policemen dismissed for Union membership were readmitted, the question of recognition was fudged. Lloyd George himself met the Union delegation the following day, but crucially informed them that he “could not in war time sanction recognition of a Police Union”.³⁵ Although the Armistice was only two months away, it was widely believed the war could last another year, and the Union believed the authorities meant that recognition would be granted in peacetime. The Pres-

ident of the London Trades Council even informed demonstrating policemen after meeting Lloyd George that: “the Prime Minister gave you recognition.”³⁶ In a typical illustration of the Union’s position on the issue, its magazine later wrote: “Policemen returned to duty last August under the impression – deliberately given to them – that official recognition of their Union was merely deferred for a time.”³⁷ The Union was not alone in believing it had been *de facto* recognised, for members of the British elite also saw it as such. A typical example was the Earl of Selborn, who stated: “They tell us that they have not recognised the union, but they have done something that is very difficult to distinguish from recognition...”³⁸

Although claiming not to have recognised the Union, the Home Secretary promised that “the men shall be entitled to join any lawful body which they may wish to join, including a Police Union. We do not desire to prevent or hamper them from becoming members of that body”.³⁹ The absence of persecution allowed the Union to flourish. Prior to the 1918 strike, only a small minority were NUPPO members, but as one superintendent observed, “by active canvassing, picketing, and in some cases intimidation the membership was considerably augmented”.⁴⁰ It was claimed that by January 1919, 346 out of Sheffield’s 366 policemen were members, while 90% of the Metropolitan police were members by March. In the May 1919 strike ballot, 48,932 members took part. Although the Government set up Representative Boards as an alternative mechanism to NUPPO, the Union’s Executive was duly elected, leading NUPPO to claim that the “name of ‘Representative Board’ is merely camouflage for ‘The National Union of Police and Prison Officers’”.⁴¹ Boosted by its growing strength, NUPPO was increasingly confident. For example, in January 1919, the Union informed its members that “recognition will follow as surely as the night follows day”.⁴² Naively, it repeatedly compared itself to other unions that “fought for years, and won. We shall also win”.⁴³

The Government recognised that the success of the Russian Revolution had depended on the defection of the enforcers of the wishes of the State and the consequent inability to maintain its rule. For example, Lloyd George informed the NUPPO delegation on 31 August 1918 that “the trouble in Russia had arisen to a great extent from the existence of the union of committees among the soldiers. He considered the police a semi-military force and that to a great extent the same conditions applied to them, and he would not have a repetition in this country of what had happened in Russia”.⁴⁴ The Government had reluctantly negotiated with the Union and conceded many of its demands simply because it lacked other options. Not only was it confronted with escalating labour unrest, but Britain was still at war and the capital had been left defenceless. That the Government even

feared a possible assault was demonstrated by the posting of hundreds of troops to Downing Street and the Foreign Office “to prevent any attack upon the residence of the Prime Minister”.⁴⁵

According to historian T.A. Critchley, the events of August 1918 to August 1919 amounted to “a struggle between organised labour to secure control over the police in a way that would encourage their sympathy in industrial disputes, and the determination of the Government to preserve their neutrality”.⁴⁶ Police radicals, however, did not believe that the Government was struggling to “preserve their neutrality”, but rather to preserve their partiality towards State and property. NUPPO militants aimed to sever the connection between police and State in favour of the labour movement, which in of itself had revolutionary implications. Rather than being an “impartial adjudicator”, the Union believed that the police had “always been the tool of the employing classes, to defeat the just and legitimate claims of the worker”, and as a result, “the ordinary worker was forced to the conclusion that the policeman was his natural and avowed enemy”.⁴⁷ NUPPO radicals were marked by their class-consciousness. As the Union declared to its members: “we are recruited from the workers; and we shall remain workers, and united with them for the emancipation of the working masses...”⁴⁸ Ominously for the ruling class, the Union desired to act on this class-consciousness by refusing to accept the subservience of the police to the State. At the National Industrial Conference in March 1919, the Union President, James Marston, admitted that, “in the past Labour has had the right to look at the policeman with a not too friendly eye, owing to deliberate and persistent official misdirection in the time of Labour troubles”.⁴⁹ In front of the Prime Minister himself, Marston declared that no longer would the police be used to repress workers. As Thiel later wrote in a journal with revolutionary inclinations, the ruling class realised “that they were ... losing what has been in the past a tool that had for years been used for strike-breaking”. Moreover, “one of the reasons why the Union was set up was because the men themselves resented being forced to do this blackleg labour”.⁵⁰

In other words, one of the main purposes of the Union was to detach the police from their role as a tool of the capitalist State used to oppress the working class, in favour of alliance with the labour movement. There were good reasons for such a revolutionary position to gain widespread support among a body like the police. Because the State had ignored the deteriorating conditions of policemen and attempted to repress their sole representative organisation, they had little option but to seek the support of organised labour. As the Union put it: “Who drove the Services into the arms of Labour? Nothing but the callous indifference to all appeals, both in and out of the House

of Commons....”⁵¹ As a result, NUPPO affiliated to numerous trades councils, as well as the Trade Union Congress and the Labour Party. One appeal to trade unions declared that, “the Government, aided by the Capitalistic Press, has made a series of blows at the Trade Union movement of this country, the latest of which is an effort to smash” NUPPO. This explicitly placed the Police Union in the industrial fraternity, and attempted to manipulate fears of other trade unions that without swift action, the Government would also repress them. Furthermore, the appeal recognised that because the Union “declined to be alienated from the workers”, the State desired its destruction. Crucially, it also added that “unless the whole of Organised Labour act at once *energetically*” to gain recognition of NUPPO, “the opportunity of cementing the bonds of friendship which of late years have grown between the services and the workers will be irretrievably lost”.⁵² In other words, support was sought from the labour movement with the promise that, if the Union was saved, a police service would exist that was sympathetic towards the working class. If the Union were to be purged, then the police would revert to their traditional status as an enemy of the labour movement, or “a weapon wielded by the capitalist class in order to thwart the legitimate aims and demands of the workers”.⁵³

The State risked losing control of the police force to the labour movement at a time when working-class militancy was more threatening to the capitalist *status quo* than ever before. Between the first and second strikes, the Government was unable to rely on the police to repress labour unrest. Scotland Yard’s head of intelligence, Basil Thomson admitted in December 1918 that, “it would not take very much in the midst of serious labour disturbances, carried on with the sympathy of the Police, to do enormous damage to the credit of the country”.⁵⁴ In March 1919, General Macready – the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police force – informed the Home Office that “in case of labour trouble ... I could not depend on the force”. According to Macready, “the influence of the hostile Representative Board” – effectively the Union executive – “was still powerful enough to paralyse police action in the event of the force being called upon to quell labour riots”. In other words, the Union (which Macready described as a “Soviet”) had partially succeeded in stripping the police of its role as the chief arm of the state apparatus. As Macready added: “If the country had been free of labour unrest the question of the police would not have been so difficult to solve....”⁵⁵ In the midst of unprecedented working-class unrest, the existence of a loyal police force was crucial. The State could not even rely on the part-time Special Constables as substitutes. During the strike, “Special Constables with trade union sympathies were frankly on the side of the strikers”,⁵⁶ a claim

endorsed by numerous subsequent police reports which reported that, “had the strike continued, no doubt they all would have refused duty”.⁵⁷

The notion that police trade unionism was part of an attempt at a revolutionary seizure of power was common throughout the British elite. In a typical example, one *Evening Standard* editorial denounced the Union as “a sort of police Soviet” that was “like a Soviet system in the army ... the shortest cut to general disorganisation”.⁵⁸ The rise of Soviets in the Russian Imperial Army was fresh in the mind of the British elite who feared that NUPPO represented a very similar phenomenon, opening the way for the disarmament and subversion of the state apparatus. As *The Times* put it: “The police are the greatest obstacle to the promoters of disorder.... To get control of the police became necessary for their plans, and they have come pretty near success. They may succeed yet....”⁵⁹ Establishment figures such as Lord Whittenham could not believe that the police “would have taken the extreme step that they took” unless they had been driven on by “the enemy in the midst and Bolshevism”.⁶⁰

Although socialists such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Harry Pollitt were enthusiastic about the police struggle, others believed that the State would simply resort to using the army instead. *The Socialist Standard*, the organ of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, argued in August 1919 that even if the police gained recognition, “the simple and inevitable result must have been the increased use of bayonets instead of batons in industrial disputes. The masters have more strings than one to their bow”.⁶¹ However, the military was also increasingly affected by unrest. According to Kingsley Martin, soldiers “began to talk ominously, in whispers, about looking forward to shooting their officers when they go home”, and claimed that only the arrival of American reinforcements prevented British mutinies during wartime.⁶² After the cessation of hostilities, the British army mutinied at Calais and Boulogne, demanding swift demobilisation. Furthermore, the British elite feared growing radical consciousness in the ranks of the Army. During the Clyde strike in January 1919, General Childs warned the Cabinet that in the past, “we had a well-disciplined and ignorant army, whereas now we had an army educated and ill-disciplined”.⁶³

With Army unrest growing, the ruling class were concerned that a victory for police militants would encourage soldiers to follow suit. During the 1918 strike, soldiers sent to protect Government buildings fraternised with the thousands of striking policemen who had invaded Whitehall. For example, according to one newspaper account: “Strikers held the soldiers’ rifles as they dismounted, and there were hearty cheers.”⁶⁴ Lloyd George was even informed that the Grenadier Guards were openly declaring that they would refuse to obey

orders to disperse the striking policemen. Following the strike, one British Admiral predicted that the success of the Police Union would encourage a revolt of the Navy: "After the police, the next strike will be the Navy! I know the British sailor to his very core! ... the authorities will now have a mutiny as sure as fate!"⁶⁵ This fear was also prevalent at the highest echelons of the Government. Long informed the Prime Minister in late May 1919 that sailors were "watching the action of the London police very closely, and that any mistake made here would have very serious consequences among them.... This kind of thing is very infectious; I am sure I need not indicate to you how grave it would be if anything of the kind became really active in the Navy".⁶⁶

This unrest was alleged to be "previously altogether unknown".⁶⁷ The situation was so grave, Long believed, because if NUPPO were to gain recognition then sailors would demand their own Union. As the Russian and German Revolutions had demonstrated, the overthrow of the State was made possible by the defection of those responsible for enforcing its wishes and suppressing its enemies – particularly the Army. Thus, Long and his colleagues believed that the elimination of NUPPO was not only necessary to maintain control over the police, but potentially the loyalty of the armed forces.

Faced with a crisis of revolutionary implications, the authorities were always committed to the destruction of NUPPO. As Macready informed the Prime Minister in January 1919: "As regards official recognition, I can only say that, in my opinion, not only is it impossible but I believe to be quite impossible for the Union to exist ... if the country is to have an efficient body of Police on whom the Authorities can absolutely rely."⁶⁸ Regaining control over the police was far from simple. The Union was powerful, with around two hundred branches by January 1919. Although hostile to the Union, *The Times* was forced to admit in April 1919 that NUPPO's leadership, "no matter how much they have blundered, possess the confidence of their members, the numbers of which are increasing".⁶⁹ However, through a combination of repression, economic concessions, internal police divisions, and the absence of assistance from the labour movement, police trade unionism was permanently routed following the failed strike of July 1919.

General Macready had been appointed as Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police after the strike forced the resignation of his predecessor. Macready – who had previously been charged with repressing labour unrest in South Wales – recognised that police would think that he "had been selected in order to dragoon them into submission".⁷⁰ Between October and February 1919, a battle was waged between the "police Jacobins" of the Union (through the Representative Board's executive

committee) and the Commissioner for control of the police force. The Board passed resolutions that the General believed were beyond the remit of a force subservient to authority. For example, one resolution stated that "a further depletion of the Police Force would probably have an injurious effect upon law and order in the Metropolitan Police District", to which Macready responded: "The responsibility for law and order rests upon the Commissioner and this Resolution is not one that comes within the functions of the Board."⁷¹ Indeed, an important component of this struggle was over the very nature of the police force. Macready was adamant that the police force should be ruled by top-down military discipline, but the Union believed in bottom-up democracy. Newly elected Secretary Jack Hayes summed up the position of the Union on the form it desired the police to take when he called for the "democratisation of the police force, the ending of militarism in the Metropolitan Force, the full and complete recognition of the union, and the closely linking up of the police with organised labour".⁷² Calls for the ending of militarism were frequent, as was a demand for "a revolution of ancient and despotic methods in the Services".⁷³

Faced with an intransigent Board controlled by a Union with a radically different conception of police discipline, Macready did not have long to wait for an excuse to move against his rivals. On 24 February 1919, after the Board's executive committee refused to accept one of his orders, Macready refused to deal with it any further, and drew up plans for the election of three different Boards representing constables, sergeants and inspectors separately.⁷⁴ However, NUPPO remained deeply entrenched in the police force. Due to a Union boycott, only around 50 per cent of the required representatives submitted themselves for election. As even *The Times* reported: "It is asserted in official statements that the Union has captured the machinery of the Representative Board, but it is clear in the minds of the members of the Police Force that the Union created the Representative Board and it is the authorities who are trying, indeed very hard, to gain possession of this form of representation."⁷⁵ In other words, the Union had won the right of representation for the previously voiceless police, and now the authorities were attempting to restore their domination. Following the dismissal of the Union-dominated Board, the policy of repression accelerated. On 17 March 1919, Macready informed the police that the War Cabinet had decided against recognition, and threatened to dismiss those who remained members. Constable Spackman was dismissed for advocating the election boycott, and when the Union threatened to take strike action, Macready stated that any policeman who did "will be forthwith dismissed from the Force".⁷⁶ The Government backed the Commissioner, with the Home Secretary

claiming on 28 May 1919 that “At present there is no policemen’s union”,⁷⁷ and insisting that if policemen retained Union membership, “they will then cease to be policemen”.⁷⁸ The natural climax of this mounting repression was the legal suppression of the Police Union; and on 8 July, the Government began to introduce a Police Bill that banned policemen from becoming “a member of any trade union”.⁷⁹ The prospect of losing secure employment terrified thousands of policemen, particularly those who risked a pension that they had only gained after years of toil. Anticipating the impending failure of the strike movement, one contemporary leftwing journal aptly described the gravity of unemployment for a policeman: “Bobby is a man with no other trade in his hands in the vast majority of cases. So the threat of losing a regular job has special terrors for him.”⁸⁰

Alongside repression, the Government offered generous economic concessions in order to regain control over the police forces. Following the recommendations of Lord Desborough’s inquiry into the pay and conditions of the police force, the Government announced considerable pay increases on 30 May 1919. A constable’s starting pay, for example, which had been £1 10s before the war and was £2 3s after the strike, was increased to a range of £3 10s to £4 10s.⁸¹ As one policeman told a newspaper during the failed strike of 1919: “We have had a great deal to complain about in the past, and I believe that the last strike helped us very much, but today we are being treated better than at any time since I joined the force. Our position is quite comfortable now...”⁸² Furthermore, representative machinery was to be established in the form of the Police Federation. Amounting to a sort of company union that was much more limited in scope than NUPPO, it was to be divided by rank and forbidden from discussing “questions of discipline and promotion affecting individuals...”⁸³ This certainly did not satisfy large numbers of policemen. Although the police forces of Sheffield, Manchester and Bristol declined to strike, they condemned the proposed Federation in August 1919.⁸⁴ Now that their conditions had been dramatically improved, policemen were “not prepared to endanger their positions and pension rights to secure recognition”, as *The Times* put it during the 1919 strike.⁸⁵

Divisions among the police – principally between conservatives, moderates and radicals – also contributed to the Union’s defeat. This partly reflected divisions between lower and higher ranks. Admittedly, one Union account is overly simplistic in claiming that: “The lower ranks are unanimous, whilst those in higher positions are simply sitting on the fence...”⁸⁶ However, the lower ranks were *more likely* to be attracted to the Union. The vast majority of those on strike in 1918 were Constables, and those Sergeants who took action, according to one superintendent report, were often “re-

garded by their officers as inclined to be unduly familiar with Constables and lax as disciplinarians”. Another report pointed out that: “The attitude of the whole of the Inspectors was complete opposition to a strike and the notion of a Union on Trade Union lines.” This is an accurate representation of the “conservative”, anti-Union faction of the police, which was largely confined to the higher ranks. The “moderate” faction supported the existence of a Union, but opposed affiliation to the labour movement and often opposed strike action. Once more, such a position largely drew its strength from higher ranks. According to evidence given by one Inspector from Leeds to Desborough’s inquiry: “There is, however, a fairly strong body of opinion in the Service averse from the affiliation of the Police Union with any outside organisation ... a great many do not join the Union for that reason.”⁸⁷ Although a Sergeant endorsed this claim, a Constable from Leeds claimed: “the men find that they cannot trust themselves to the authorities entirely and it is necessary they should remain affiliated to labour in order to protect their interests.”⁸⁸

During the abortive strike of 1919, it was moderates and conservatives who generally abstained. Conservatives had long made their position clear; a group of City policemen in May 1919 denounced moves towards a strike, which they claimed served “no other purpose than a political move to cause a revolution in this country”.⁹⁰ Many moderates opposed the Police Bill, but not to the extent of endorsing strike action to prevent it becoming law. For example, Bristol Police Union passed a resolution stating that: “although there are clauses in the Police Bill which do not meet with our approval, we are of the opinion that they are not of sufficient gravity to warrant us to withdraw our services, thereby assisting to plunge the country into the danger of a revolution.” A similar resolution was passed by Manchester, whose secretary added that: “If, in the first place, the authorities had met the officials of the union this trouble would never have occurred.”⁹¹ Thus, thousands of policemen remained opposed to the Government’s policy, but refrained from strike action because of the threat of dismissal, economic concessions and, occasionally, opposition to the Union’s alliance with the labour movement.

Blunders on the part of the Union leadership also contributed to its destruction. A strike ballot over recognition, improvements in pay, and the reinstatement of Constable Spackman resulted in a vote of 44,599 in favour of strike action, and only 4,324 against. However, at a demonstration at Hyde Park on 1 June 1919, Secretary Hayes declared that the Union would suspend strike action, claiming that Macready expected action and had “brought their Guards Regiment to London and got them ready to put in the police stations, if we strike”.⁹² This demonstrated weakness, and sub-

sequent economic concessions and successful repression ensured that the mood moved swiftly against a strike. Macready believed that the postponement of industrial action was instrumental in allowing him to emerge victorious, stating: "they committed a tactical error in postponing it for eight months, when the loyalty of the force enabled me to cope with it without recourse to the military."⁹³ The authorities had long prepared for a showdown for the Union. Macready had held a conference with other Chief Constables in December 1918 on possible measures to be taken, while the Commissioner of the City Police prepared to use the military to nullify a strike's social effects. The Union was no match for the combined resources of the British Empire.

Recognising its weakness in a confrontation with the State, the Union had relied on the labour movement to come to its rescue. The Police Union received enthusiastic support from the rank-and-file of the labour movement. Prior to the strike, delegates at the National Union of Railwaymen passed a resolution urging "all workers to render all possible support to the police in their effort to secure justice", while the Labour Party Conference of 1919 denounced "the policy of repression adopted by the Government" and called for "full and frank recognition of this Union".⁹⁴ Buoyed by promises of sympathetic action by other unions, NUPPO believed that it had "unlimited influence on our side".⁹⁵ However, the leadership of the labour movement was less radical. For example, during the 1919 Liverpool police strike, the local Labour Party was active in "taking all steps possible to bring out all the trades", and called on the Party Executive Committee "to exert the full power of Labour on the side of the Police".⁹⁶ Such support was not forthcoming, for the national Labour leadership opposed action and had advised NUPPO "not to proceed with the threat to strike, because it was felt here that the Government was too strong" for the Union.⁹⁷ A meeting of trade unionists in Liverpool also declared "common cause" with the police and called for workers "to cease work at once, owing to the attack made by the Government against Trade Unionism".⁹⁸ Once more, the opposition of the national leadership ensured that no sympathetic action took place. The sole example of sympathetic action was in London, where five hundred railway workers at Nine Elms struck in support of the police. The general secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen described the action as a "grave mistake", and without support from the leadership, the strike soon fizzled out. The leader of the Miners' Federation would also later clarify that the Triple Alliance leadership opposed strike action by the police and had been unwilling to offer help.⁹⁹

The conservatism of the labour movement's leadership was not the only factor preventing the rescue of police trade unionism by organised lab-

our, however. Many workers had long resented the police for their role as strike-breakers and subsequently lacked an appetite for taking sympathetic strike action. For example, future Communist leader Harry Pollitt described an attempt to gain workers' support for the police strike as "one of the hardest jobs I ever undertook", as London dockers asked: "how can you stick up for the coppers? They batoned us down in the Dock Strike in 1912."¹⁰⁰ Similar feelings existed in Liverpool, where memories of police brutality against a demonstration in support of striking transport workers on so-called "Bloody Sunday" in 1911 were still raw.

The failure of organised labour to take sympathetic action sealed the fate of police trade unionism. As a result, some police abstained from strike action. As one police report admitted on 4 August 1919, "there are a considerable number of waverers, sitting on the fence waiting to see what action Organised Labour will take".¹⁰¹ Secondly, it ensured that the combined power of labour was not used to save the Police Union. Even a month after the strike, the Union optimistically believed that: "Organised Labour in Great Britain pledged itself to support the Union, and unless that pledge is broken, the Union cannot go down."¹⁰² Only by late October 1919 was the Union accepting that there were "considerable doubts as to whether Organised Labour will rally to the effectual assistance of our comrades on strike".¹⁰³ With the Union abandoned by labour, the full power of the British State could successfully extinguish police trade unionism forever.

The combination of economic concessions, repression, Government outmanoeuvring, Union blunders, police divisions and the failure of organised labour to support the police ensured the failure of the 1919 strike. Industrial action represented a last-ditch effort to save the Union as the Police Bill – which proscribed trade unionism in the police force – was read by Parliament. Only 1,081 Metropolitan policemen went on strike out of force of over 20,000, and even some members of the Executive failed to strike. By the second day, the Metropolitan authorities were sufficiently confident to declare the strike "as having been a complete failure".¹⁰⁴ Although 118 Birmingham policemen also joined the strike, only in Merseyside was the strike a success. According to Macready, this was because of "the presence of many Irishmen in the force, a class of men who are always apt to be carried away by any wave of enthusiasm".¹⁰⁵ In reality, the fact that Liverpool policemen were still paid less than ordinary labourers, the fact the Chairman of the Watch Committee "was dictatorial and hated by the force", and that the Head Constable was similarly unpopular encouraged observance of the strike.¹⁰⁶ Half the Liverpool police force took industrial action, triggering widespread looting on the part of hundreds of the impover-

ished slum-dwellers. One newspaper claimed: "central Liverpool ... represents a war zone",¹⁰⁷ while another account described it as "rather reminiscent of early occupation days in some of the Cologne districts".¹⁰⁸ Liverpool was put under effective military occupation as tanks patrolled the streets and three thousand soldiers seized key public buildings and brutally restored order. Many were injured by baton-charges, and one looter was shot dead. Demonstrating the extent of Government fears, a battleship and two destroyers were sent to Liverpool. Public declarations by trade unionists that looting simply played into the hands of the State fell on deaf ears, underlining the lack of influence wielded by organised labour over the city's lumpen elements. As in London, all striking policemen were dismissed and replaced within days. As local branches throughout the country dissolved themselves within days of the strike, and the Police Bill was passed by Parliament despite the half-hearted opposition of the Labour Party, it was evident that the Union was utterly defeated.

One key result of the strike was the dismissal of the most radical faction of the police force. Little wonder that a key figure in the shop stewards' movement of the time, J.T. Murphy, believed that the "strike was provoked by the Government for the purpose of ridding the police force of radical elements".¹⁰⁹ There is ample evidence that the State intended to purge such elements to ensure the future loyalty of the police. On the second day of the strike, Macready believed that the reputation of the Metropolitan Police would only increase now it had been "purged of these discontented elements",¹¹⁰ while in a future report he claimed that "the result of this strike was an undisguised blessing to the Force, as the extreme element disappeared, and from that moment the Force has steadily improved in efficiency and discipline".¹¹¹ The City Police Commissioner also welcomed the dismissal of "the whole of the dangerous agitators",¹¹² while bourgeois newspapers such as *The Times* concurred that the movement represented "a purging of the Metropolitan Force of a troublesome element of discontent rather than a strike".¹¹³ By providing generous economic concessions prior to proscribing the Union, the authorities were aware that only the most militant policemen would take industrial action. Their dismissal represented the elimination of the radical leadership of the police.

Because the constitution of the Police Federation stated that it would be "entirely independent of and unassociated with anybody or person outside the police force",¹¹⁴ links between the police and the labour movement were forever shattered. As historian Stuart Bowers wrote: "Their segregation from the trade unions was not enforced without difficulty, but it was achieved completely."¹¹⁵ Further separating the police from the working class was its dramatic improvement in pay and

conditions, which were now standardised across the country. Rather than pay being "assessed on the basis of that of an agricultural labourer or an unskilled labourer"¹¹⁶ as was previously the case, the police joined the aristocracy of labour. By 1924, constables on maximum pay would receive 55-60 per cent more than the earnings of the average male worker in industry.¹¹⁷ As a result of the newly privileged economic and social condition of the police, the purge of the radicals, and its separation from the labour movement, the modern police was created as a force entirely subservient to the British State and separate from the working class.

Britain's rulers were optimistic that the defeat of police militancy would prove a setback for an increasingly militant labour movement generally. The Lord Mayor of Liverpool described how Lloyd George "looked on the Liverpool police strike as perhaps the turning-point in the Labour movement, deflecting it from Bolshevist and Direct Actionist courses to legitimate Trade Unionism once again. Had Liverpool been wrongly handled, and had the strikers scored a success, the whole country might have very soon been on fire".¹¹⁸ The British elite generally shared Lloyd George's optimism. For example, *The Times*, in an August 1919 editorial entitled "A Turning Point", claimed that now strikes had begun to fail, "a change has set in".¹¹⁹ However, labour militancy continued with a similar intensity over the next two years. Although eight million days less were lost to industrial action in 1920 than 1919, over twice as many were lost in 1921 as 1919. Even so, during the industrial action of 1919-1921, and especially during the General Strike of 1926, the British State could rely on a loyal police force in its dealings with the labour movement. The State has maintained this achievement to this very day.

The hundreds of policemen who went on strike in 1919 paid a heavy price. The State stayed true to its word and ensured their permanent dismissal from the police force, without any pension rights. Some had been only weeks away from claiming their pension. Poverty awaited them. By 1924, out of 2,400 strikers, only 200 had found employment suitable to their qualifications. Hope was kept alive only by the solidarity of the labour movement, and the promise of repeated Labour Conferences to immediately reinstate the strikers as soon as a Labour Government was elected. This hope was cruelly disappointed upon the election of Ramsay MacDonald's minority Government of 1924, which betrayed these promises. Although the former Secretary of the Union, Jack Hayes, was elected as a Labour MP and continued to lobby on behalf of the policemen within Parliament, the strikers had lost their battle. However, they remained self-described "stalwarts of the socialist movement", united by the memories of a struggle that had sparked panic among the rulers of the British Empire. On 30 June 1953, the Association of Lon-

don Police Strikers issued its last report: "Although perhaps we do not wish to record the fact, it still remains that it is 34 years since we first took the plunge for freedom and the right to organise and we have grown old. We must not forget to bear that truth in mind and dedicate ourselves to the help of others in need through age and infirmity, so that when the last shall come we shall be gratified in the thought that we stood by each other to the end."

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