

A Diary of the English Railway Strike

By W. P. CROZIER

The Sixth Day—October 2nd.

Hope is dashed and the outlook is black indeed. Negotiations have been broken off. The government statements are drastic and uncompromising; they breathe the spirit of those who mean to fight the battle to a finish, and are confident of the result.

The one chance of peace without a fierce, extended struggle lies in the other unions. It is supposed that they will see the Premier again in the hope of finding some basis for negotiation that will enable the railwaymen to return to work.

The efforts of these dozen trade unionist leaders who are acting as intermediaries are worthy of all admiration. Theirs is a tremendous responsibility and they are exhausting every effort to avoid on the one hand participation in the war and on the other the crushing of the railwaymen. The motor transport system improves, the number of trains running increases.

But the crisis approaches. If the intermediaries do not find a way of settlement their unions will have to take the fateful decision. If they decline to join in the war the railwaymen are lost. If they are divided, trade unionism is split from top to bottom. If they join in, England is faced with the prospect of the general strike and its incalculable dangers.

The Seventh Day—October 3rd.

A day of prolonged negotiations leaves the situation worse than it has been since the strike began. The conversations have broken down—finally, some say.

Just as there is an extreme element among the men which is out for "smashing capitalism" and promoting the Social Revolution, so there is an element on the other side which desires once and for all to "fight it out" with the trade unions.

In almost all trades Labor has gained certain definite advantages during the war, and it fears intensely that attempts will be made to compel a reduction, whether or not the cost of living falls substantially. Suppose now that the railwaymen are crushed and that thereafter some other union proposes to strike. "Strike?" says the state or a private Employer's Federation, "Strike by all means! The railwaymen thought to bring industry to collapse and the country to starvation. They were the most powerful of all the unions and we beat them to the ground. Strike, if you choose, and we will beat you too."

This is why even the most conservative trade union leaders—Henderson, Clynes and others—will next week advise the general strike.

The longer the strike lasts the more essential it becomes that neither side should be defeated.

There must be no knock-out blow. Now that we are on the verge of the precipice we can realize that it is monstrous the strike should ever have been allowed to come at all. There has been mismanagement on both sides from the beginning.

The negotiators should get back to root principles and recognize that the men are entitled to a living wage and to a substantial margin beyond.

For the first time now this country has discovered the solid worth and the statesmanlike qualities of the trade union leaders. They do not want the general strike; they foresee its consequences and they are against the class war; they are against the extremists.

The Eighth Day—October 4th.

It is clear today that the calling of the General Trade Union Congress for the next Tuesday is intended to create a breathing space in which a settlement may yet be reached. The lightning strike was the railwaymen's master-blunder. Many of the trade union leaders certainly did not approve of it and they will not imitate tactics so disastrous in their effect on public opinion.

The End—Sunday, October 5th.

The strike is settled and there is victory for neither side, though both sides claim it. The only real victory is for the moderate men among the trade union leaders and in the government. The defeat has fallen on the "fight-to-a-finish" men and those who regarded a bitter war between Capital and Labor as "inevitable" and thereby helped to bring it about.

The railwaymen keep all that they have obtained in increase of wages for twelve months, which is a round satisfying period, and they are promised a minimum wage of 51 shillings, which is at least a slight increase for a small proportion of their numbers.

The "lessons" of a war are always more important than its detailed operations.

The first is that the idea of "direct action" or the "lightning strike" has received a heavy blow. Society can defend itself much more efficiently than had been supposed against a sudden thrust.

It is apparent to all that the day of the motor and the roads has arrived. When Telford, the great English engineer, was laying down his roads they were intended to be the main channels of commercial communication. But just then the steam-locomotive was being born and the infant prodigy, growing enormously and fast, thrust Telford's work into the background. Now it emerges once more triumphant, owing to the sudden withdrawal of the railways.

The roads will never retreat into obscurity again. The war and the strike have been a lightning flash, illuminating their incalculable value. Already it is announced that, when all the railwaymen are back at work, the government will continue to use the surplus motor-lorries as a means of relieving congestion on the railways and at the ports. Unquestionably we are on the threshold of a new era in internal transport and it is this nine days' strike that has opened the gate.

There are also warning signs. The conduct of these wage disputes is still too often mismanaged and never more so in this instance.

Manchester, England, October—(By Mail).

THE English railway strike is the first instance on a great scale of the tactics with which Labor has all through the year threatened the government and the community at large. It has come abruptly, as the Labor leaders meant that it should.

These are the impressions which were made day by day on an English Liberal who, while sympathetic to the aims of Labor in both the economic and political fields, disapproves of a "lightning strike" of this kind as a revolutionary method fatal to the idea of an orderly and ordered society.

The Eve of the Strike—September 26th.

The strike begins at twelve tonight. It is a "surprise offensive" with a vengeance. The holiday-makers are streaming back hurriedly by the thousands from the seaside. The afternoon and evening trains are packed with those who must get away before the paralysis sets in. Telegraphs and telephones are crowded with the messages of those who foresee that tonight's mails will not get through.

The general feeling is not so much of fear as of uncertainty. We are back in the days of late July and early August, 1914. Just as for years men had talked often but without serious perturbation of a great world war, so since the armistice we have talked here of "direct action" and the general strike, prophesying its approach, yet scarcely believing our own prophecies. Now it is actually beginning on the railways, which are the arteries of the nation's life.

Is it the beginning of the much talked of and much dreaded Social Revolution?

There are questions that we can neither answer nor guide the events that will provide the answer. Again we are reminded of 1914. A movement of this size takes charge of its own future. It moves by its own weight.

Everything that the railwaymen say may be granted outright, and yet the form which the strike has taken—the sudden ultimatum, the lightning attack on the community—is unjustifiable.

This is an exact parallel to that mode of making sudden and violent war which the world is striving to abolish by means of the Covenant and the League of Nations. The violent, aggressive Power plans war at leisure and declares it suddenly in order that it may take its opponent at a disadvantage. The Covenant ordains a breathing space, a respite, of some months during which negotiations and inquiry may take place and the public conscience be invoked to avert violence. The railwaymen and the state had an interval of more than three months in which to compose their differences. But the railwaymen have refused the breathing space. They have launched the war suddenly, hoping to forestall the preparations of their opponents and to overwhelm them by the violence of unexpected onslaught. Their leaders profess to believe in the idea of the League but their practice is that of men who put their faith in force.

The First Day—September 27th.

The strike is almost complete. The railways are idle except for an occasional train run by non-union men which goes almost empty, because no one thought it would be running. Strict rationing is in force again.

In a struggle like this, food is the chief essential. When food runs short, there will be violence. Keep the supplies of milk and bread going and the government may pull through without grave disorder. Coal is the next essential, impossible to move in any quantity except by rail. There is talk of a miners' sympathetic strike but that need frighten no one. The miners can get up as much or as little coal as they choose; it cannot be delivered to the manufacturing.

The war of manifestoes has begun. Mr. George, as ever, is busy "raising steam." Mr. J. H. Thomas has retorted with a speech appealing to his pacific record; protesting against the tactlessness of certain ministers; declaring that the Prime Minister, if left to himself, would have brought about a peaceful settlement; and asserting with over-emphasis that he himself did not want to fight but if he does fight he will fight as hard as anyone. So rhetoric answers rhetoric. The charge which Mr. Thomas has to answer is simply this—why did he hurl a 24 hours' ultimatum at the country when he had three months for settlement?

All this is child's play. We are in the presence of an accumulated mass of discontent. It is partly economic. Partly it is political and is largely due to the bitter dislike of the government's Russian policy. For months it has been ready to explode.

The best that we have to hope for is that the railwaymen may gradually recognize in increasing numbers that they have been misled in striking without reasonable notice.

The Second Day—September 28th.

The mobilizing of the opposing armies grows. The government is moving troops about the country and is appealing for volunteers to help in organizing various services.

The conflict is hardening and as it hardens the task of the conciliator and the peacemaker becomes more difficult. The Premier's manifesto has not helped. When half a million men come out on strike as one man it is absurd to suggest that they are the tools of a few anarchists or Bolsheviks. The charge only exasperates them.

These are signs that the government will attempt to turn public opinion against the railwaymen and all who join them as anarchists and revolutionaries, which—to whatever end the strike may lead—the vast mass of them most certainly are not.

The nation has no cause to be grateful to those who turn this strike before its time into a struggle between order and revolution.

The Third Day—September 29th.

It is a fair fight so far, but we are only at the beginning. Some other unions are anxious to join in, but the leaders of the railwaymen have held them back. They know that if the strike spreads it will become more and more difficult to control and more and more will take on the character of war.

The N. U. R. complain of the military and naval movements as provocative, but what can the government do?

So far the railwaymen have not desired the other unions to come out because they recognized the danger and hope by their own hand to force the government to yield. But if the days pass and the government does not yield, the N. U. R. will be driven inevitably to extend the strike. "Get everyone out and end it quickly" will be their cry.

There are no signs that the government will yield. The strikers have made it difficult for them to do so. The longer the strike goes on, the heavier the defeat of the side which gives way.

The organization of motor transport by the government is more successful than had been expected. It is a strong point against the strikers. Had they forgotten the motor? The government has now at its disposal hundreds and thousands of motor vehicles and trained drivers. So has industry. It may prove to be the deciding factor. The impossibility of getting coal to the factories is the chief point on the other side.

The public is surprisingly cheerful and lighthearted—too much so, some would say. It is inconvenienced, but as yet not injured. It bears its troubles the more lightly because it resents the sudden launching of the strike and wants to see the railwaymen defeated. It has, like all the Anglo-Saxons, a saving sense of humor which relieves the strain of the outside world.

The Fourth Day—September 30th.

It is the evening of the fourth day and the news shows that we have reached the end of the first stage of the struggle. Hitherto Mr. Thomas has been holding back the other unions which were willing to join in the strike. Now he announces that he will no longer do so. He will accept their aid. A second and more serious stage is about to open.

The first four days have, of course, been a disappointment for the railwaymen. It is not that a few trains are being run; that counts, but its effect is chiefly moral. It is that the government and the community are much better prepared for the attack than anyone had supposed. For once the government had laid its plans in time and the existence of quantities of motor transport has given them their chance.

Of course the railwayman should have a far higher standard of real wages than before the war; he is entitled to it. The government, however great the provocation of the strike, should admit that the workmen has this right and explain, in terms of money, why they cannot accept the railwaymen's demands. Already the country has lost far more by the strike than the demands of the N. U. R. would have cost it over a period of many years.

This is the moment when a statesman would not let himself be controlled by events but would control them. Mr. George might still act. It is not he whom the railwaymen distrust, but the brothers Geddes, especially Sir Eric Geddes, the Minister of Transport, whom they denounce as harsh and dictatorial. Once again Mr. George is the only man to whom the country can look in its emergency.

The Fifth Day—October 1st.

A day of apprehension passing into hope and ending in uncertainty.

Four days have shown that the railwaymen, left to themselves, are likely to be badly beaten. The government plans have been too well matured and—it cannot be repeated too often—there are too many motors. The greatest strike in English history is being defeated by the motor cars.

But a crushing defeat of the railwaymen would be a grave blow to trade unionism. It would mean that both the state and the private employer would pluck up courage to resist the weapon of trade unionism—the strike. The world of capital and labor would recognize that if the greatest and strongest of all the transport unions, the railwaymen, with its half million members, had been beaten, then there exists no force in trade unionism that could win in a similar struggle.

That is why not only all the transport unions but so many of the other great unions also have been debating today whether they, too, should strike. They fear that they would suffer by the defeat of the railwaymen and so undoubtedly they would.

But they have not decided yet to go on strike. They are more conservatively minded than the railwaymen. Mr. Henderson and Mr. Clynes, who are among their leaders, certainly do not believe in the "lightning" tactics of the N. U. R., almost certainly they would condemn them if they could speak their mind. They know well that the general opinion of the public is against them.

It has been a day of conferences. The trade unionist leaders have seen Mr. Lloyd George first without and then with the railwaymen. The government insists that it cannot begin negotiations again until the railwaymen return to work.

Mr. Thomas speaks hopefully of the necessity of finding an agreement now that the two sides have come together again, but there is no word of any real approach toward agreement. Still, the conversations will continue tomorrow.