

General Strike Slogan—What It Is and How to Use It Trotskyism & Tactics

Reprinted below are excerpts from an article, entitled “Why We Call for a General Strike in Britain Now,” that originally appeared in the 1 March 1974 Workers Vanguard (WV), newspaper of the then-revolutionary Spartacist League/U.S. From Italy and France, to Greece, South Korea and even Canada, the question of how a revolutionary propaganda group should respond when objective circumstances require a generalized proletarian response to a generalized capitalist assault is posed once again. As WV argued, it is quite possible to imagine “partially successful general strikes.” It is also possible that a general strike initiated over “limited, defensive aims” could develop in a way that requires revolutionaries to raise demands that will push the struggle onto the offensive. Today, the degenerated SL, in classic sectarian fashion, counterposes the call for construction of the “revolutionary party” to the demand for a general strike. In contrast, we stand by the Trotskyist position advanced in the following article.

A revolutionary policy for the current British crisis faces the following fundamental contradiction: since World War II, the ruling class has systematically pressed down the workers’ living standards to the point that they are now the lowest in industrial West Europe. The [Conservative Prime Minister Edward] Heath government has intensified this oppression with a direct attack on the most basic power of the trade unions, the right to bargain for wages, with a hard state wage control policy (Phase Three).... There is an overwhelming objective and felt need to mobilize all the strength of the well organized and combative British labor movement to defend its interests against a brutal, reactionary government. This means a general strike.

However, a general strike poses the question of state power and can easily lead to a revolutionary situation. Marxists do not play at revolution. Today the leadership of the British labor movement is consciously anti-revolutionary and will betray a general strike if it seriously challenges capitalist state power.... There is no way an insurrection could be victorious under the leadership of the current British labor tops...

Therefore we have a contradiction: the situation poses the need for a general strike, for mobilizing the entire organized working class to answer Heath’s attacks; a general strike poses the question of power and can easily lead to a revolutionary situation; and the present sellout union and Labour Party/Communist Party leaders will betray a general strike if it challenges capitalist state power. What to do?

Taking account of the objective need for a general strike and the treacherous present leadership of the class, we have called for a general strike for *limited, defensive* aims centering on breaking the state wage controls and reversing the measures decreed to enforce them (e.g., the Tory lockout). However, the ruling class

can force the issue of state power by using the armed forces to break a general strike for limited objectives. Therefore, there are no demands, no tactics and no strategy that can *guarantee* the victory of a general strike in Britain today. Its leadership will liquidate it if it attains insurrectionary potential and may well sell out even before that point is reached. However, it would be the worst kind of scholastic passivity to argue that the workers must accept, without struggle, whatever the Tories do to them because their leaders might betray a general strike that could win. And it is the worst kind of social-democratic parliamentary cretinism to channel the workers’ struggle against Heath mainly into electoral forms, as Gerry Healy’s Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) is now doing.

A Revolutionary Minority in a General Strike

The task of revolutionaries in Britain today is to maximize the possibility of winning a general strike (and thereby defeating the bosses’ attempts to load the costs of massive inflation onto the workers) under conditions where a successful insurrection is impossible given the strength of the reformist leadership of the mass workers organizations. This means trying to prevent the ruling class from uniting against the labor movement, neutralizing the middle classes so they do not act as strikebreakers and, most important, organizing the strike so that the rank and file can check and move to counter the class collaborationism of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and so that revolutionaries, however few in number, can maximize their influence on the course of events.

The British ruling class is by no means solidly supporting Heath’s hard line against the miners, which reflects as much (if not more) the immediate needs of his regime as the long-term interests of British capitalism.... The Liberal Party is not supporting Heath’s actions, and grumbling has been heard among numerous Tory backbenchers as well. Given the divisions within the ruling class, a demonstration of determination and unity by the labor movement might well isolate Heath and force the government to capitulate.

The British middle class does not, in general, support the labor movement. This is indicated by the solid electoral base of the Tories and Liberals. General strike strategy should be geared to neutralize the middle class, preventing it from actively supporting the government. The strike should concentrate on shutting down industrial production and should avoid unnecessarily discomfiting and, therefore, antagonizing the middle classes. This means that essential public services (e.g., urban transport, hospitals) should be maintained, along with the distribution of consumer goods, for essentially political reasons—and a general strike is essentially political. (In this respect, somewhat different conditions

apply than to a purely contractual dispute, where the emphasis must be to shut down as much as possible of the revenue-producing units corresponding to the immediate enemy. But at some point even in a limited, defensive general strike it may be necessary to call a total work stoppage, for instance as a show of force against government use of troops.)

A general strike cannot at this point be organized in opposition to or over the heads of the TUC, the established union leadership. On the other hand it would be criminal for a revolutionary organization to accept, unchallenged, the leadership of the TUC—of proven, professional class collaborators—during a general strike. It is necessary to organize directing bodies for the general strike that would allow the masses to check and frustrate the policies of the TUC, that would go toward becoming a kind of dual power within the general strike movement.

A number of British left-wing organizations, notably the International Marxist Group (IMG), are calling for local councils of action that would presumably play that kind of role in a general strike. Unfortunately, councils of action, although they have appeared in past general strikes, at this time have no immediate prior existence, much less authority, in the British workers movement. A general strike cannot be based on organizations newly set up for that purpose by a handful of revolutionaries....

There do exist organizations within the British labor movement which are qualitatively more democratic and militant than the TUC and on which a general strike could be based. These are the shop stewards committees. In addition to demanding that the TUC should call a general strike, revolutionaries should agitate for a national conference of shop stewards committees in order to organize a general strike. Should a general strike occur, revolutionaries should seek to shift its central organizational base from the TUC to a national shop stewards organization, as well as calling for the formation of local shop stewards' committees to integrate the mass of the workers into the struggle. No less important than the fundamentally more democratic character of the shop stewards committees (as against the TUC) is that they are accessible to the cadre of a small revolutionary organization, whereas the TUC leadership is essentially selected from among demonstrated class traitors.

Insurrection and Leadership

In analyzing the British crisis in previous issues of *WV* we noted that the minuscule *Chartist* group is agitating for an insurrectionary general strike under the illusion that the existing leadership of the British labor movement could be pressured into leading it. The February *Chartist* contains a polemic against our article, "For a General Strike Against Tory Lockout!" (*WV* No. 36, 18 January [1974]), in which they assert that a general strike is inherently revolutionary and that our concept of a limited, defensive general strike is simultaneously reformist and adventurist. To prove their case, the *Chartist* quotes Trotsky in an attack on the French CP from *Whither France?* Trotsky writes:

"The entire history of the working class movement proves that every general strike, whatever may be the slogans under which it occurs, has an internal tendency to transform itself into an open revolutionary class, into a direct struggle for power.... Might not Thorez [head of the CP] perhaps retort that he had in mind not a real general strike, but a little strike, quite peaceful, just exactly suited to the personal requirements of the editors of *L'Humanité*?... The leaders of the proletariat must understand this internal logic of the general strike.... Politically this implies that from now on the leaders will continue to pose before the proletariat the task of the revolutionary conquest of power. If not they must not venture to speak of the general strike."

From this passage *Chartist* concludes that a call for a general strike is tantamount to a call for insurrection.

This passage is a polemic against the ostensibly revolutionary leader of a *mass* workers party. It is indeed criminal for the leadership of a *mass* party to call a general strike while ruling out the possibility of revolution, since the government may force the question of state power on the strikers. It would likewise be criminal for a small revolutionary propaganda group to call for a general strike initiated by the reformist labor bureaucracy if the strike were intended to be insurrectionary, or if no organizational measures were advocated to enable rank-and-file opposition to the TUC to check and move to counter the inevitable attempts to sell out the strike by the reformist misleaders. We call on the TUC to launch the general strike because we do not see this measure as a propaganda demand in the distant future but as the necessary tactic at this moment; today only the TUC could launch a general strike. And we call for a limited, defensive general strike, to be organized through shop stewards committees, in order not to guarantee in advance that the strike will be sold out by the treacherous TUC leaders. We obviously cannot guarantee that such a strike will be successful, only that it has a good chance of success.

Trotsky's most definitive analysis of the general strike is in his 1935 article "The ILP and the Fourth International." Here he deals with the general strike question from the standpoint of a revolutionary propaganda organization when the masses are firmly under reformist leadership, the situation of the French Trotskyists at that time. The views Trotsky presented here are quite different from the ones *Chartist* attributes to him:

"The working class masses want to struggle. But the leadership applies the brakes, hoodwinks and demoralizes the workers. A general strike can flare up just as the movements flared up in Toulon and Brest. Under these conditions, independently of its immediate result, a general strike will not of course be a 'putsch' but a necessary stage in the mass struggle, the necessary means for casting off the treachery of the leadership and for creating within the working class itself the *preliminary* conditions for a victorious uprising. In this sense the policy of the French Bolshevik-Leninists is entirely correct, who have advanced the slogan of general strike, and who explain the conditions for its victory." [our emphasis]

It is evident that Trotsky maintained the possibility of partially successful general strikes and the impossibility of a successful insurrection under reformist leadership. ■