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“The Greatest Unanimity Prevails”¹: Southampton during the 1926 General Strike

The 1926 General Strike remains the most significant conflict in British industrial history. Although the stoppage lasted only nine days, from the 3rd to 12th May, the debates and emotions that the strike provoked remained prominent for many years. In certain areas, Southampton not usually included among them, the bitter tensions aroused by the strike left communities divided for decades.

A study of Southampton during the stoppage offers a particularly valuable microcosm of the nation during the nine day General Strike because the city was home to many people who shared ‘the same attitudes, beliefs and interests’. This was expressed ‘through social interaction’, and promoted what one could describe as an entrenched working class atmosphere.² Writing of a period some fifteen years after the strike Brad Beaven observed, with some qualifications, that ‘there is a certain tradition of local toughness, partly associated with the docks and the sea’.³ Indeed, it is the docks which gave Southampton its ingrained community atmosphere, and ensured that the city became a ‘trade-union stronghold’.⁴ Moreover, the feeling of ‘being governed by the fickle fancies of the shipping world’ at a time ‘when dock labour was hired and fired at will’ shaped the political outlook of large sections of Southampton’s working class.⁵ Finally, the fact that Southampton had an active and well established Labour movement by 1926 makes it ideal for assessing the actions of the Labour Party and other fraternal elements.⁶

This article will give a brief overview of Southampton’s labour movement in its formative years, before considering certain key themes surrounding the General Strike and its effect on the city; important among these are the key details of the strike in Southampton. The article will place particular emphasis on any conflicts within the town’s labour movement that these events promoted and as such will aid subsequent research on conflicts within the labour movement at the national level. Finally, it will consider if the majority of Southampton’s workers were ‘non-political’ in 1926 but became radicalised after the strike’s failure, or perhaps the leadership’s betrayal.

I will suggest that this was the case before arguing that the militancy and enthusiasm of Southampton’s rank and file increased in the 1930s because of the events in 1926.

Background

The General Strike saw almost one and three-quarter million workers from all industries come out of work in support of over one million miners. The majority of striking workers came from vital industries such as transport, electricity, building and

¹ *Southampton Strike Bulletin*, No. 7, May 11th, 1926

² J. Benson, *The Working Class in Britain: 1850-1939*, p. 118 (London: I. B Tauris, 2003)

³ B. Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain 1850-1945*, p. 219 (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Although, Beaven goes on to challenge this claim and suggests that such a stereotype, found in a Mass-Observation report, was groundless.

⁴ G. A. Phillips, *The General Strike: The Politics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 213, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976)

⁵ Southampton Museums Oral History Archive, (now SMOHA), C/00/34

⁶ D. Cairns, *Southampton Working People*, (Southampton: Southampton City Museums, 1990)

gas. Certainly the stoppage slowed the country down, if not brought it to a stand-still, and some even feared that the strike would escalate out of the TUC leaderships control and become a revolutionary situation. The strike itself was called in support of the one million miners 'who had been locked out on 30th April for refusing to accept lower wages', and worsening wage arrangements, once Baldwin's nine month subsidy to the coal industry had 'ran out'.⁷

A coal crisis, and resultant industrial strife, was brewing for many months before 1926. In 1925, Britain's return to the gold standard at the pre-war parity caused the price of British exports to increase, after which the mine owners were forced to respond to enlarged foreign competition by cutting 'back the limited improvements in wages and hours' which the miners had secured since 1921.⁸ This hardening of owners' attitudes happened alongside a leftward shift in the Labour movement. The latter of which was caused by the feeling that Labour's 1924 administration had failed to advance the cause of socialism. Within the industrial wing there remained a minority of syndicalist leaders, who continued to hold a belief in the possibility of direct action, potentially therefore taking the initiative.⁹ The ultimate crisis almost happened in 1925, when the owners 'gave a month's notice that they were terminating the National Wages Agreement'.¹⁰ The General Council of the TUC, unwilling to watch fellow workers receive a 25% wage cut, and still haunted by the humiliation of 'Black Friday', agreed to stand by the miners and place an 'embargo on the movement of coal' if miners' wages were tampered with.¹¹

The trade union movement was successful on this occasion and the event became known as 'Red Friday'. The Conservative government agreed to launch an inquiry into the coal industry and to subsidise the industry for nine months. However, the real victors were the government as the triumph split the labour movement. The Leader of the Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald, for instance, detested the 'appearance' of victory that, he believed, had been handed to 'the very forces that sane, well considered' socialists felt to be 'probably the greatest enemy'.¹²

Whilst these conflicts between the Labour Party and wider movement were stirring, the Tory government, which conceded the sum of £23 million on 'Red Friday', was 'preparing a showdown with [the] workers'.¹³ Baldwin's Conservative administration was well prepared for the struggle. Even in Southampton plans were put in place to 'strengthen the police force' in any 'exceptional circumstances'.¹⁴ In contrast, the trade union movement, both nationally and locally, found themselves distinctly unprepared for the dispute. During the winter of 1925-26 most labour leaders seemed content with organisation that amounted to, in A. J. Cook's infamous phrase, 'an extra tin of salmon for [a few] weeks'.¹⁵

⁷ See: K. Laybourn, *The General Strike of 1926*, pp. 1-5, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993)

⁸ R. Jenkins, *Baldwin*, p. 91, (London: HarperCollins, 1987)

⁹ H. Pelling, A. J. Reid, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, p. 55, (London: Macmillan Press, 11th edition, 1996)

¹⁰ J. Symons, *The General Strike: A Historical Portrait*, p. 19, (London: The Cresset Press, 1957)

¹¹ *Ibid.*; 'Black Friday': on 15th April 1921, the rail and transport unions felt unable to take industrial action in support of the miners. Thus breaking the 'triple alliance' and inadvertently causing the formation of the TUC General Council.

¹² D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 424, (London, J. Cape, 1977)

¹³ D. Renton, The man who turned his back on Labour – Ramsay MacDonald, *Socialist Review*, issue 203, (December 1996)

¹⁴ Letter to Chairman and members of the Watch Committee, 18th January, 1926, (Southampton)

¹⁵ P. Taaffe, *1926 General Strike: Workers Taste Power*, p. 36, (Nottingham: Socialist Publications, 2006)

As the final negotiations between the cabinet and the General Council, called to try and prevent a full-scale stoppage, disintegrated in the early hours of May 3rd 1926 one possible conflict, as Keith Laybourn suggests, was between the leaders of the movement ‘who wanted peace’ and the rank and file who were ready for action.¹⁶ Indeed, the former often regarded the latter as ‘the wildest Bolsheviks’.¹⁷ Of course, the leadership’s desire for negotiation emerged from their belief in parliamentary democracy, rather than treachery. However, it is true that leaders such as J. H. Thomas hoped for a settlement based on the miners accepting a humiliating wage reduction.¹⁸ The feeling that the leadership betrayed the strike before it had even begun, although sometimes unfounded, is important to the future development of rank and file politics.

When negotiations finally ended the General Council and the Labour Party undoubtedly ‘attempted to ensure an honourable performance on behalf of the miners’.¹⁹ However, they were never fully committed to the principles and possibilities of the strike. This produced a conflict, perhaps not realised by all parties involved at the time, between the leaders and the rank and file. The latter, although not necessarily militant, were, in Southampton and other localities, braced for what would become ‘one of the momentous moments in British Trade Union history’.²⁰

Southampton’s Working People

Southampton of the 1920s had depressing differences from the town a century before. As Percy Ford states in his 1934 survey of the port: Southampton once ‘owned or controlled the immediate sources of prosperity... it owned its docks’ and controlled its annual revenue.²¹ However by 1920, because of decisions made by councillors whom, Ford believes, included ‘many members who were directors, shareholders and otherwise interested in the company’, Southampton lost direct control of her principal assets.²² As the twentieth century approached, the town became a poor area. Companies moved to Southampton in the hope of paying lower wages, and 21 percent of residents lived below the poverty line.²³

One St Mary’s resident, who lived in a typical two-up, two-down, remembers living with another family and sleeping ‘with somebody’s feet on your pillow’.²⁴ One must consider whether such intimate conditions contributed to a community atmosphere, and moreover if such working class commonality led to shared political objectives. Of course, not all Sotonians experienced this ‘community’ atmosphere, and one must not romanticise such appalling conditions. Nor were all residents of the town working class; the city did have a large service sector. However, 27 percent of male residents worked in transport or communication.²⁵ The fact that Labour candidates only gathered 7,000 votes in the 1918 election presumably demonstrates

¹⁶ K. Laybourn, *The General Strike: Day By Day*, p. 54 (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1996)

¹⁷ D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 424

¹⁸ R. Jenkins, *Baldwin*, p. 98

¹⁹ K. Laybourn, *The General Strike: Day By Day*, p. 57

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²¹ P. Ford, *Work and Wealth in a Modern Port: An Economic Survey of Southampton*, p. 11 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1934)

²² *Ibid.*, p. 15

²³ *Ibid.* p. 43, p. 45

²⁴ SMOHA C/00/24

²⁵ P. Ford, *Work and Wealth in a Modern Port*, p. 59

the apolitical or conservative outlook of the workers, rather than challenging traditional presumptions of the town's class demographics.²⁶

Indeed, Southampton's workers did seem deferential in political outlook. Many would go to church on Sunday in their 'best', even if some were short of vital clothing for the rest of the week, local news was obtained from the right-wing *Southern Daily Echo*, and the town eagerly celebrated Empire Day.²⁷ When one resident was asked to reveal something of life in 1926, he simply recalled 'we 'ad two Music Halls in Southampton...everyone was singing, shoutin' and yelling'.²⁸

Despite this, signs of Southampton's developing labour movement were beginning to reveal themselves. In 1915 the national anthem was 'booed' by dockworkers and, more shockingly, in 1917 the Bolshevik Revolution was welcomed by some, mainly intellectual, residents.²⁹ However, the bulk of residents remained unwilling to connect their living and working conditions to the political system, perhaps because both local and national newspapers encouraged a rightwing perspective. As one local remembered, almost sixty years after the strike, 'there was nothing radical published...so therefore you were satisfied because you didn't know any different'.³⁰ Whether it really was the *Echo* which kept the population docile and submissive is unlikely, but older readers remained loyal to the paper. What is clear is that in the years between the Great War and the General Strike 'Southampton was full of poor people', and the circumstances were ideal for the development of a militant labour movement.³¹

In order accurately to assess Southampton's role during the General Strike one must first survey the conditions for Southampton's largest single workforce, the dockers, and consider how such conditions led to the men being 'all out' during the 1926 stoppage.³² Percy Ford's assertion that 'the name "docker" immediately calls to mind scrambles for work, casual jobs, under employment and poverty', could easily be a description of Southampton's workforce, although not the company's 'preference men'.³³

One former dockworker remembered that the company would only take men 'on a daily basis' and men were 'paid off any hour'.³⁴ In order to find employment men would go to the 'labour box' at the bottom of Southampton's Dock Road. Every morning, another docker remembers, the employees would say "'I want forty men for this ship"...then there used to be fights and the whole shed used to end up...treading on one another's hands' when workers tried to pick up the tallies.³⁵ The problem was, as a unionised worker recalled, 'we never ran out of dockers, we ran out of ships' and

²⁶ In fact, two Coalition Liberals won; again the Labour movement was split. One group of trade unionists considered standing an 'Independent Workers' Candidate' against Labour's official candidate, who was anti-war and in the ILP; G. P. Heaney, *The Development of Labour politics in Southampton: 1890-1945*, p. 151, (unpublished D.Phil: University of Southampton, 2000)

²⁷ SMOHA C/00/14; Southampton Chamber of Commerce minutes of a meeting, 23rd March 1926, (D/com/1/12)

²⁸ SMOHA M/00/21

²⁹ SMOHA C/00/47; SMOHA C/00/61 (W) Indeed a 'Friends of the Soviet Union' group was later formed in Southampton.

³⁰ SMOHA C/00/15

³¹ SMOHA C/00/08

³² Letter from Southampton Trades Council & Labour Representation Committee (Tommy Lewis), to Walter Citrine, 5 May 1926, (TUC General Strike File)

³³ P. Ford, *Work and Wealth in a Modern Port*, p. 69; SMOHA M/00/16

³⁴ *Ibid.*,

³⁵ SMOHA M/00/52

therefore, to avoid unemployment, men would be ‘fighting like hell’ for even half a day’s labour.³⁶

Of course, in these conditions men who were known unionists would simply not be picked for work. Some would get their children to take their dues to Dan Hillman, secretary of Southampton’s Transport and General Workers Union, for fear that they themselves would be spotted and victimised.³⁷ Unions, particularly the TGWU, did organise in the town, and suggested removing the labour sheds and creating a ‘national authority...to provide a weekly minimum wage’.³⁸ Perhaps by 1926 men had realised that ‘scrambling on the deck’ was not the way to better conditions.³⁹ Indeed, many were prepared to try solidarity with fellow workers.

There is not one date that marks the ‘birth’ of Southampton’s labour movement. Southampton’s Amalgamated Society of Engineers formed in 1851; David Cairns suggests the date is 1880; and the Southampton Trades Council was formed in 1890, a year that saw 3,200 unionised Southampton dockers clash with troops who were called in to break a strike.⁴⁰ In reality, as a long-time Northam resident remembered, the Labour Party did not truly have an impact on Southampton’s working class until 1918.⁴¹ Before then it was the Liberals who ‘did do a lot of good’ for the town’s working class, even considering standing a Lib-Lab candidate in 1890.⁴²

As Cairns notes, splits in the movement’s early history seem to be endemic. In fact, ‘divisions among Southampton’s workers were more evident than solidarity’.⁴³ The ILP, Social Democratic Federation and Fabian Society were all active in the town but, distressingly, seemed more eager to oppose each other than cooperate. In 1895, for instance, the secretary of the Trades Council, standing for the Liberals, was defeated in the general election after an ILP candidate from outside the area had split the socialist vote.⁴⁴ This was an early warning that a divided labour movement would be defeated. However, the lesson was learnt neither by local unionists nor the ‘outsider’, the young Ramsay MacDonald.

Unfortunately, most records of Southampton’s labour movement in the 1920’s have now been lost, causing any historical interpretation to be largely speculative, or rely heavily on oral evidence. Indeed, the Northam worker is probably wrong in his belief that Southampton was ‘hundred percent Labour’; there remained a high number of working-class Conservatives.⁴⁵ However, it is true that by the 1920s Southampton’s labour movement had grown. In fact, the town boasted 11 Labour councillors and Itchen boasted 12; with 70 branches affiliated to the Trades Council, and 12,000 members of the Co-operative Society.⁴⁶

³⁶ SMOHA M/00/21

³⁷ SMOHA C/00/34

³⁸ P. Ford, *Work and Wealth in a Modern Port*, p. 81

³⁹ SMOHA M/00/21

⁴⁰ D. Cairns, *Southampton Working People; The Southampton Strike*, (London: The Friends Quarterly Examiner, 1890)

⁴¹ SMOHA C/00/15

⁴² *Ibid.*; D. Cairns, *Southampton Working People*, pp. 9-10

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁴⁴ A. Morgan, *J. Ramsay MacDonald: Lives of the Left*, pp. 20-21, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987)

⁴⁵ SMOHA C/00/15

⁴⁶ D. Cairns, *Southampton Working People*, pp. 22-23, p. 29; *Southern Gateway*, Southampton Co-operative Society, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 32-33

Despite the increasing scale of the movement there were still conflicts between Southampton's workers. One dispute was between revolutionaries and reformers. Indeed this discord was apparent in the Seaman's Union split of 1925, which greatly affected the town.⁴⁷ Another was between leaders and the rank and file. This friction was epitomised by the Labour Party's Tommy Lewis, an archetype moderate, reformer and, until 1931, MacDonaldite.⁴⁸ Certainly, the conflict between the Labour Party and the wider movement would intensify as loyalties within Southampton's labour movement were tested. By 1926 it was clear that Southampton would play a significant role in the upcoming industrial dispute, and to the historian it is clear that conflicts within the town both reflect and deviate from tensions at the national level.

“Southampton Going Strong!”⁴⁹: During the nine days.

In order to understand the conflicts within the labour movement one must first comprehend events in Southampton during the nine day stoppage. One important part of the strike across different localities were the ‘Strike Committees’ or ‘Councils of Action’, whose role involved handling ‘picketing, distress, food, sport and transport’.⁵⁰ These councils have often been romanticised by socialist historians who mistakenly believe they resembled a ‘rival workers’ government’.⁵¹ Certainly, historians would be pushed to see Southampton's moderate Central Joint Strike Committee as such.

The committee comprised eight prominent local trade unionists: H. Vincent (NUR), Dan Hillman (Transport), Burden (Railway Clerks' Association), Blanchard (Building Trades), M. Connor (Plumbers), Long (Printers), Wright (AEU) and the Trades Council's secretary, Tommy Lewis (Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen).⁵² It is true that they played an extensive role during the nine days. For instance, 5,000 copies of a strike bulletin were printed daily.⁵³ This contained news from the area and headlines from the *British Worker*, which was probably unable to reach Southampton.⁵⁴ The bulletin was printed at Hobbs & Sons by volunteers from the Typographical Association.⁵⁵ It contained news of the many demonstrations organised by the Trades Council and ILP, and attended by many thousands, on Southampton Common; alongside reports of inter-worker sports matches, and pleas to maintain the ‘spirit of calm orderliness’ that had ‘characterised the dispute in Southampton’.⁵⁶

As G. Phillips highlights, when the strike began Southampton was one of a few notable areas where rank and file reaction was underwhelming.⁵⁷ Indeed, by the 4th May a small tram service was operating between Portswood and Shirley.⁵⁸ Tommy Lewis put this down to confusion over the ‘two-wave’ strike tactic. Certainly, some

⁴⁷ H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 385, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)

⁴⁸ D. Cairns, *Southampton Working People*,

⁴⁹ Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 11th 1926.

⁵⁰ J. Symons, *The General Strike*, p. 146

⁵¹ P. Taaffe, *1926 General Strike*, p. 2

⁵² Emergency Committee: Minutes of Proceedings, Wednesday 5th May 1926

⁵³ Letter from Southampton Trades Council & Labour Representation Committee (Tommy Lewis), to Walter Citrine, 7 May 1926, (TUC General Strike File)

⁵⁴ G. A. Phillips, *The General Strike*, pp. 169-170

⁵⁵ Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 8th 1926, Hobbs & Sons described as a ‘Trade Union Printers’.

⁵⁶ Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 10th 1926

⁵⁷ G. A. Phillips, *The General Strike*, p. 148, p. 213

⁵⁸ Southampton Borough Council, minutes of proceedings, Tramways Committee, May 11th, 1926.

ship builders at Thornycroft's stayed in work, believing that they should come out in the second week, whilst builders at Itchen Secondary School mistakenly downed their tools.⁵⁹ However, even with this confusion 98 percent of railwaymen and 80 percent of tram workers stayed out.⁶⁰

Perhaps this lack of enthusiasm, if it did exist, was due to the moderate nature of the Strike Committee. After the 5th May, when the committee's request to 'assist in the distribution of all essential foodstuffs' was rejected by the Town Council, the trade unionists were very much on the back foot.⁶¹ At another of the many meetings between the council's own Emergency Committee and the unionists, Dan Hillman agreed to 'abstain from taking any action' until after the matter had been submitted to the town council.⁶² Soon, the momentum and possibility for action was lost.

One might then presume that a conflict existed between the deferential leadership and the rank and file. Indeed, the commitment of many of Southampton's workers should not be underestimated. One docker remembers picketing 'outside the main gates at four o'clock in the morning' for ten shillings strike pay.⁶³ Elsewhere, the ship repairers who had stayed in work felt the cold disapproval of their communities.⁶⁴ Finally, students from Oxford University were driven in by train to work in the docks, perhaps because locals were unwilling to work as blacklegs.⁶⁵ J. C. Masterman, the history tutor who orchestrated a party of Christ Church students to work on Southampton Docks, later admitted that 'his behaviour was ill-advised'.⁶⁶

However, Southampton's rank and file seem no more radical than their leaders. For instance, Margaret Bondfield, who travelled round the 'South-West of England to report what had happened in London', was impressed by the 'great reception' she received for the 'message from the General Council' from the town's workers.⁶⁷ Interestingly, she also reported hostilities between the transport workers and Trades Council, which she suggested was due to the workers receiving 'contrary instructions from two different executives'.⁶⁸ It seems that tensions were high due to the pressure of the situation, and conflicting personalities, rather than any great ideological divide.

Of course, some Southampton workers were ideologically motivated, and thousands attended meetings on the Marlands and the Common. However, one must question how many people attended these as a social occasion, or perhaps to watch the cricket and football matches afterwards, rather than for a discussion on socialism. Indeed, on the 10th of May the Marine Dept's 3-0 victory over the Dock Traffic workers was watched by an enthusiastic crowd.⁶⁹ Other strikers were less active still; one docker remembers that many workers would simply 'go home and sit down sulking', but even these men, he recalls, 'were all out'.⁷⁰

⁵⁹ Letter from Southampton Trades Council & Labour Representation Committee (Tommy Lewis), to Walter Citrine, 6 May 1926, (TUC General Strike File)

⁶⁰ Tommy Lewis to Walter Citrine, 5 May 1926

⁶¹ County Borough of Southampton, Minutes of Proceedings of Council and Committees: 5th May 1926

⁶² Ibid.,

⁶³ SMOHA C/00/37

⁶⁴ Tommy Lewis to Walter Citrine, 7 May 1926

⁶⁵ SMOHA C/00/37

⁶⁶ R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England: 1918-1951*, p. 58, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

⁶⁷ M. Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p. 266, (London: Hutchinson, 1949)

⁶⁸ Ibid.,

⁶⁹ Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 11th 1926

⁷⁰ SMOHA M/00/21

Southampton's Mayor, Councillor Silverman, was among the town's many citizens who were determined for life to carry on as normal during the stoppage. Indeed, the council and chamber of commerce did meet regularly during the strike. The latter, in behaviour befitting Robert Tressell's cruellest satire, spent much of their time during the strike discussing an 'additional reading room table...similar in design to the present [one]'.⁷¹ In fact, the town's businessmen had an additional reason to bemoan the date of the strike, as 6th-13th of May was to be 'Southampton Shopping Week'. The week of consumer activities, with its slogan 'it pays – ALL ways – to shop in Southampton', did still go ahead; but was, presumably, overshadowed by other events.⁷²

Finally, there was only one violent incident roused by the strike in Southampton.⁷³ This satisfactory figure was partly due to John McCarmac, the acting chief constable of the town's police force. McCarmac insisted that the police must remain neutral throughout. In fact, they were forbidden from even discussing the strike in private.⁷⁴ Of course, the real record might not be as glowing as that offered by the police themselves. However, Southampton does not appear to have generated the same animosity to the special constables, brought in to help the town's 208 policemen, which obviously developed in other areas.⁷⁵ Indeed, by the 11th May the Strike Committee was hoping to arrange a football, or even billiards, match against the police.⁷⁶

Conflicts within the Southampton Labour Movement

The Southampton Strike Committee was formed on the 3rd of May 1926 with 'practically all of the organised labour movement being represented'.⁷⁷ The committee comprised various unionists and Labour Party men, no women were present on the committee, and a study of its short lifespan could lead one to conclude that there were few conflicts between the party and the wider movement in Southampton. Certainly, the leaders of the town's Labour Party directed their energy entirely towards aiding the strike. For instance, there was no possibility of Labour councillors joining the Mayor's own Emergency Committee.⁷⁸

On the 2nd May the Independent Labour Party held a meeting, attended by hundreds of workers, where Ralph Morley spoke in terms of moderation and eventual victory.⁷⁹ This demonstrates that it still made little difference to the rank and file or the local leadership who had called the meeting. Indeed, in 1929 Morley would be Labour's successful parliamentary candidate. On the 9th May another mass meeting, this time attended by several thousand, was held on Southampton Common. The meeting was so well attended that two stages were constructed and two speakers

⁷¹ Minutes of a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, Tuesday 11th May 1926

⁷² Minutes of a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, general meeting of the chamber, 4th March 1926, and Retail Trades Committee, 15th June 1926

⁷³ *Southern Daily Echo*, p. 3 (5/5/1926)

⁷⁴ Chief Constable's Office, General Order, 4th May 1926, (SC/P2/3/9)

⁷⁵ *Annual Report of the Chief Constable for the year ending 31st December 1926* (Southampton: The Hampshire Advertiser and Echo's Ltd, 1927); A. Durr, *Who were the Guilty: General Strike in Brighton May 1926*, pp. 35-36, (Sussex: Brighton Labour History Press, 1976)

⁷⁶ Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 11th 1926

⁷⁷ *Southern Daily Echo*, p. 3 (4.5.1926)

⁷⁸ *Southern Daily Echo*, p. 3 (5.5.1926)

⁷⁹ *Southern Daily Echo*, p. 3 (3.5.1926)

addressed the crowds simultaneously.⁸⁰ Perhaps this very image symbolises the lack of conflict within the labour movement. In this instance, the priority for speakers and listeners alike was Southampton's Board of Guardians' deplorable decision to deny benefits to the dependents of those on strike. Both the leadership and rank and file were prepared to show moderation whilst they walked 'along the road to victory'.⁸¹

Of course, relations within the movement were not entirely harmonious. Not only were there 'endemic divisions' between men working on different trades, particularly between transport workers and the Trade Council.⁸² But, more interestingly, there was also a division, or certainly a fear of such a division, between the moderate Strike Committee who worked for 'the preservation of peace and order', and those men who hoped to 'incite the workers to disorder'.⁸³

The Strike Committee's constant assertion that they accepted 'no responsibility whatever' for men who preached extremism suggests that there were those in the town who did so.⁸⁴ Perhaps Frederick Jordon, who was charged by the police for physically assaulting a strike breaker, was among those advocates of 'a shorter, more direct route to socialism'.⁸⁵ Interestingly, G. A. Phillips suggests that the TUC General Council's urgency to sell the *British Worker* in various localities was 'increased by the unofficial printing of labour papers' in various towns, including Southampton.⁸⁶ Although no record now exists of this paper, it is safe to assume that it was not approved by the Strike Committee and was, presumably, more radical than Southampton's humourless *Strike Bulletin*.

Perhaps the paper was printed by the small Communist Party that existed in Southampton during the 1920s. However, the organisation of the town's Communist Party branch was poor. As one future member recalled, the Communists in Southampton were very distinct from the communist movement within the docks and trade unions.⁸⁷ Even with the unofficial paper, Southampton offers no evidence to support David Renton's assertion that the CPGB was 'the back bone of the movement' in many provinces.⁸⁸ In fact, some dockers later decided to form their own CPGB branch.⁸⁹ Moreover, in many instances the Communist Party's tactics during the strike 'came from Moscow'.⁹⁰ Perhaps Hampshire's Communists were directed by their Comintern superiors to focus their energy on Portsmouth.

The unofficial paper remains mysterious, but it does reveal that there were conflicts between the Labour Party and the wider movement. George Tatford was a TGWU shop steward and Labour Party member who felt the brunt of this tug of war between the various factions. Speaking in the 1980s Tatford, who was considered a 'red' during the strike, recalled that he was 'accused by the communists of being an enemy of the workers and by the right-wingers and the Labour Party of being a fellow

⁸⁰ *Southern Daily Echo*, (10.5.1926)

⁸¹ *Southern Daily Echo*, (11.5.1926)

⁸² P. Renshaw, *The General Strike*, p. 217, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975)

⁸³ *Southern Daily Echo*, p.3 (4.5.1926); *The Hampshire Advertiser and Independent*, p.6, (8.5.1926)

⁸⁴ *Southern Daily Echo*, (4.5.1926)

⁸⁵ *Southern Daily Echo*, (5.5.1926); M. Morris, *The General Strike*, p. 173

⁸⁶ G. A. Phillips, *The General Strike*, p. 173

⁸⁷ SMOHA M/00/52

⁸⁸ J. Eden, D. Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920*, p. 27 (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

⁸⁹ SMOHA M/00/52

⁹⁰ J. Eden, D. Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920*, p. 29; For an account of the reaction to the British General Strike in the Soviet Union see: M. H. Cowden, 'Soviet and Comintern Policies toward the British General Strike of 1926', *World Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4, (Jul., 1953), pp. 503-529

traveller'.⁹¹ Despite a relative level of harmony during the nine days, Tatford's memories reveal that the Trade Council's claim that 'the greatest unanimity prevails' was anything but accurate.⁹²

Of course, with any intense struggle tensions were bound to arise. One dispute must have been between more right-wing elements within the Labour Party and the movement's revolutionary factions. Perhaps a further conflict existed between the leadership and ordinary members, but to no extent was this comparable to the national situation. Throughout the stoppage Tommy Lewis hoped to remind his comrades that 'your power is immense – while you remain one union...bound together, there is no possibility' of defeat.⁹³ Ironically, whilst in London MacDonald and Thomas were conceding defeat, in Southampton Lewis and Hillman were assuring thousands of workers that the second wave of strikers would secure victory.⁹⁴

It does seem to be the case that there was little distinction between ordinary Labour Party members and rank and file trade unionists in Southampton. Both sections believed that victory was imminent if moderation was retained. It is interesting that even this moderation was not enough for Southampton's Liberal Party, or indeed the Liberal leadership, once so encouraging of working class participation, who denounced the Strike Committee as 'revolutionary'.⁹⁵

Perhaps it is futile to imagine a scenario where Southampton's leaders were in charge of the national negotiations. However, there were differences between the two groups of leaders. Lewis recognised that the strike's defeat would mean that the workers would be 'down for the next twenty years'.⁹⁶ There were none of Thomas's tears of joy when Hillman and other trade unionists were forced to sign humiliating terms with the employers.⁹⁷ Furthermore, Southampton's leadership remained loyal to the labour movement in 1931. In light of this one could conclude that ordinary Labour Party members, united with trade unionists, were betrayed by the leadership in London. Alternatively, one could suggest that the General Council's actions do not constitute a callous betrayal but a realistic withdrawal on the best possible terms.

Southampton's non-political workers

In the 1980s Southampton's Oral History Unit conducted a survey of the town's elderly working class. Many interviewees, if they mentioned the strike at all, simply recalled 'all the hardship' of the period.⁹⁸ Indeed, rather than being remembered as a momentous political occasion the strike was said to epitomise a decade that was 'harder than ever'.⁹⁹ Perhaps the real concern for most people was not the London-centred conflicts but the food on their table and the roof over their heads. One resident recalled being evicted from his home during the stoppage for

⁹¹ SMOHA M/00/11

⁹² Southampton Strike Bulletin, No. 7, May 11th, 1926

⁹³ *Southern Dairy Echo* (11.5.1926)

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁹⁵ *The Hampshire Advertiser and Independent*, p. 7 (8.5.1926); The General Strike split the Liberal Party and in many instances drove Asquith's faction to the right: G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886-1929*, p. 156 (London: Macmillan Press, 1992)

⁹⁶ *Southern Daily Echo*, (7.5.1926)

⁹⁷ D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 440

⁹⁸ SMOHA C/00/08

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*,

failing to pay his rent. Despite this, neither of his parents, as he remembered, even contemplated blacklegging during the strike.¹⁰⁰

There is evidence that Southampton's working class regarded the strike as an industrial, rather than a political, conflict. For instance, on the first of May the town's police marched through the streets in an 'imposing procession'.¹⁰¹ This parade, albeit to mourn the recently deceased chief constable, was not met with the hostility that might have greeted a police demonstration in other areas.¹⁰² Moreover, during the strike Tommy Lewis' call for workers to contribute to a political fund was largely ignored.¹⁰³

Even Southampton Shopping Week was not a complete disaster. If the *Hampshire Advertiser* can be believed then the beauty and 'best babies' competitions 'fixed the attention of the whole town'.¹⁰⁴ Even the *Daily Echo*, which had moved away from its rightwing editorial to pursue a 'scrupulously fair' line printed more letters concerning the Shopping Week than the strike.¹⁰⁵ Of course, the *Echo* maintained its prejudices but it did, at least, tone down its line because it did 'not intend to betray our trust' among its working class readership.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps Southampton's working class really were prepared to visit the attractions as they remained loyal to those on strike.

On May the first 1926, only days before thousands would assemble on Southampton Common, a meagre few hundred socialists attended a Mayday rally.¹⁰⁷ One must ask what turned the crowd of hundreds into several thousand. Perhaps countless people attended later demonstrations, and remained on strike, not because of their political beliefs but because of a sense of class loyalty. Trevor Stalland, who moved from South Wales to Southampton in 1926, remembered the 'comradeship' and organisation of a strike in Wales in 1921, but admitted that 'what the issue was I wouldn't know'.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps a similar situation is true of Southampton; people came on strike with the community without knowing the intricate details of the dispute or problems of the economic system.

Even non-unionised workers joined the strike in Eastleigh and other areas.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps this, and the case of Conservative Party members joining the struggle elsewhere, shows that ones 'class loyalty proved to be greater than their party political allegiance'.¹¹⁰ Interestingly, in the railways and trams, workers in traditionally non-unionised jobs, for instance female cleaners, came out in large numbers whereas clerks and seniors defied their union's orders by remaining in work.¹¹¹ Certainly, the dockers seemed to accept students working in the docks, but when someone who was regarded as 'our own people' blacklegged then tensions invariably surfaced.¹¹² However, there was not the same ostracization that one might

¹⁰⁰ SMOHA C/00/24

¹⁰¹ *Hampshire Advertiser and Independent*, p.12, (8.5.1926)

¹⁰² *Ibid.*,

¹⁰³ *Southampton Strike Bulletin*; H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 407

¹⁰⁴ *Hampshire Advertiser and Independent*, (1.5.1926)

¹⁰⁵ *Southern Daily Echo*, (3.5.1926), (8.5.1925)

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, (3.5.1926)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰⁸ SMOHA M/00/52

¹⁰⁹ *Southern Daily Echo*, p 3, (4.4.1926)

¹¹⁰ F. Westacott, *Shaking the Chains: A personal and political history*, p. 51 (Derbyshire: Joe Clark, 2002)

¹¹¹ Emergency Committee, 22nd May, 1926

¹¹² SMOHA C/00/37

presume occurred in mining communities; and when the strike was over there was little hostility against the 'scab workers' who remained in the docks.¹¹³

It is true that in 1926 Southampton's workers were less politically aware than they were loyal to their community; although such a loyalty is itself complex and never universal. During the stoppage Reverend Arthur Boyce arranged for Southampton's Central Hall to be at the disposal of men out of work.¹¹⁴ Rather than demonstrating the town's long tradition of Christian socialism, this facility is probably evidence that many strikers chose to engage in non-political recreation. One must presume that conflicts between the Labour Party and wider movement mattered little to the many ordinary workers who spent the strike in Central Hall. Perhaps G. A. Phillips is correct in his assertion that 'the solidarity of the General Strike became more assured as one moved from South to North... [and approached] the great coalfields'.¹¹⁵ To some extent Southampton fits into this pattern. However, the town's class loyalties had never been tested to such an extent. Indeed, one must not underestimate the dedication of many Southampton workers during the strike.

Attempts have been made to downplay the nature of the strike in Southampton. *Southern Daily Echo* immediately took the line that there was complete calm and little change, whilst balancing this with reports of the strikers' meetings.¹¹⁶ In reality, men lost their lives or their limbs in the docks as unqualified men tried to work heavy machinery.¹¹⁷ Certainly, the strike is made no less significant because of the relative lack of political awareness in the town.

Margaret Bondfield was said to be impressed with 'the widespread understanding of the cause of the strike'.¹¹⁸ Undoubtedly, this was true of some Southampton strikers, who mainly discussed local matters in their meetings. Perhaps Ralph Miliband's claim that workers would listen with 'polite indifference' about the mining industry, but would greet any attack on the Government with 'wild enthusiasm', holds more truth than Bondfield's optimistic assessment.¹¹⁹

By 1933 the political situation had changed in Southampton. The town's dockers 'wouldn't load a lorry unless the driver was in the union'.¹²⁰ Indeed, by the late 1930s the town was bursting with leftwing political activity, but this was simply not the case in 1926. One must consider what caused so many people to become politically active. Perhaps it was the leadership's supposed betrayal in London, or the bitter aftermath of the strike in Southampton.

'We trust your word as Prime Minister'¹²¹: The strike ends.

On the 12th May 1926 the TUC General Council, supported by Labour's national leadership, ended the strike believing that the unofficial Samuel Memorandum, which offered future reforms of the coal industry in exchange for an immediate reduction in miners' wages 'would be the basis for settlement'.¹²² This decision has prompted much debate among historians and activists of the time, who saw the capitulation as anything from an ability to 'deal with the facts as they are' to a

¹¹³ Ibid.,

¹¹⁴ *Hampshire Advertiser and Independent*, p. 4, (22.5.1926)

¹¹⁵ G. A. Phillips, *The General Strike*, p. 216

¹¹⁶ *Southern Daily Echo*, (2.5.1926)

¹¹⁷ Ibid., (4.5.1926)

¹¹⁸ M. Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, p. 268

¹¹⁹ R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, p. 141, (London: Merlin Press, 1972)

¹²⁰ SMOHA M/00/52

¹²¹ P. Renshaw, *The General Strike*, p. 224

¹²² K. Laybourn, *The General Strike: Day by Day*, p.112

betrayal.¹²³ Henry Pelling and Alastair Reid, for instance, are adamant that the failure of the General Strike was ‘inevitable’ because ‘the great bulk of public opinion’ supported Baldwin.¹²⁴

Ralph Miliband, on the other hand, argues that the rank and file were betrayed by their reformist leaders.¹²⁵ Miliband is correct that many workers would have been surprised that the strike ended ‘within a matter of hours of calls for continued resistance’; indeed the second-wave of strikers were preparing to down-tools in Southampton.¹²⁶ In fact, the number of strikers actually increased by 100,000 as the strike ended.¹²⁷ Many people must have believed that an increasingly successful strike was betrayed by a frightened, or embarrassed, leadership, and this must have effected the actions of many people in the labour movement in the years following 1926.

The strike’s end also had an intense impact on the trade union leaders. It seems to be the case that the General Council genuinely thought, or let themselves believe, that they had reached an honourable settlement along the lines set out by Samuel. Indeed, the negotiating committee thought they had a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with the Prime Minister.¹²⁸ Ernest Bevin, by many accounts, was the first to realise that the General Council had been tricked, no honourable settlement would be reached and the strikers had ‘committed suicide’.¹²⁹ Thousands of members would be victimised.

‘Twelve Years of Socialist Endeavour in Southampton’.

As the news that the strike had ended reached the provinces, many workers, believing that they had been victorious, held victory celebrations.¹³⁰ Clearly, this was not the case in Southampton where many would have read the Mayor’s claim that ‘Southampton will resume its normal industrial life’.¹³¹ Indeed, the day after the strike collapsed, as hungry children gathered at the dock gates asking for the remains of strikers’ sandwiches, many must have felt that normal life had already resumed.¹³²

It is no accident that some of those interviewed by Southampton Oral History Unit believed that the strike lasted up to three weeks.¹³³ Simply, the strike did not end in the town. The Strike Committee remained in session to deal with victimisation, huge protests were held on Southampton Common and some workers even called for a completely renewed General Strike.¹³⁴ However, it soon became clear to the leaders that the defeat was total and humiliating. The Strike Committee, and TGWU, were told that ‘no useful purpose could be served’ by meetings with employers

¹²³ In Bevin’s words: P. Weiler, *Ernest Bevin*, p. 189, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993)

¹²⁴ H. Pelling, A. J. Reid, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, 56

¹²⁵ R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, p. 144

¹²⁶ M. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan*, p. 46

¹²⁷ R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, p. 147

¹²⁸ P. Renshaw, *The General Strike*, pp. 224-225

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Although such a realisation did not have the effect of radicalising Bevin, who later pioneered corporatism and the Mond-Turner talks: P. Weiler, *Ernest Bevin*, p. 189

¹³⁰ H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 410

¹³¹ Although most Sotonians would not have heard the Mayor’s words; *Hampshire Advertiser and Independent*, (15.5.1926)

¹³² SMOHA C/00/34

¹³³ SMOHA C/00/37

¹³⁴ *Southern Daily Echo*, (13.5.1926); (19.5.1926); (22.5.1926)

associations.¹³⁵ Indeed, nine tramway workers were soon told that they could not resume work and a further 68 were never reinstated.¹³⁶

The South Coast Engineering and Shipbuilding Employers' Association were not alone in deciding that 1926 was the time to change their 'working rules'.¹³⁷ The employers' terms, signed by a downtrodden union, stated that future disputes 'should in the first place be referred to the management'.¹³⁸ Even the TGWU was powerless to prevent victimisation; they 'agreed' that Southampton's workers should apply individually for reinstatement.¹³⁹ The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the proud oldest union in Southampton, signed agreements that 'dirty allowances' would no longer be paid to men working 'inside the crank cases of engines'.¹⁴⁰ With the trade unions powerless to prevent victimisation, and Tommy Lewis' Labour grouping striving to prevent the worst abuses on the council, it would be correct to presume that many Southampton workers turned to the Labour Party to protect their standard of living. Indeed, this is partly accurate, but many workers also increased their own rank and file actions.

Patrick Renshaw has argued that although 'the class war may have continued in the coal districts it faded elsewhere'.¹⁴¹ However, class, or perhaps ideological, conflicts seem to have increased in Southampton. The Mayoress, for instance, was known to flaunt her wealth whilst appealing to 'all classes of the community' to aid her charity work.¹⁴² Ross McKibbin, who argues that class conflict increased after 1926, is correct that the Mayoress was unaffected by the strike partly because 'the triumph of her class was merely a daily event'.¹⁴³

It is true that Labour secured a majority for the first time in Southampton's 1926 municipal vote.¹⁴⁴ Graham Heaney argues that Southampton workers voted Labour 'as a reaction to the General Strike'.¹⁴⁵ However, rather than voting Labour because of the negative memory of a failed industrial dispute perhaps many people in Southampton voted out of a newly confirmed 'allegiance to certain working-class traditions' and not because of any ideological position within the Labour movement.¹⁴⁶

Heaney is correct that many people involved in Southampton's Labour movement recognised 'that political activity probably provided the best means for furthering working class interest'.¹⁴⁷ However, the situation was dissimilar from that at national level because of the activism of rank and file Labour members in defending victimised tramway men and, as Heaney recognises, because of an

¹³⁵ Emergency Committee Minutes, 14th May 1926

¹³⁶ Emergency Committee Minutes, 22nd May 1926

¹³⁷ Letter from South Coast Engineering and Shipbuilding Employers' Association to National Society of Painters: Southampton District Committee, 15th December 1926, (D/SES/.162)

¹³⁸ SCE and SEA, *Working Rules and Agreements*, Southampton District, 1926,

¹³⁹ Agreement between Southampton and District Employers' Association and the TGWU, May 15th, 1926, (D/Ses./3/2)

¹⁴⁰ Agreement between SCE and SEA and Amalgamated Engineers Union, (not dated, 1926)

¹⁴¹ P. Renshaw, *The General Strike*, p. 250

¹⁴² *Hampshire Advertiser and Independent*, (22.5.1926)

¹⁴³ Quoted in a different context from R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 59

¹⁴⁴ G. P. Heaney, *The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton*, p. 224

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴⁶ R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party: 1910-1924*, p. xiv, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974)

¹⁴⁷ G. P. Heaney, *The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton*, p. 203

'Independent' Tory-Liberal alliance on the council.¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, there was not a simple shift 'from industrial to political activity'.¹⁴⁹ In reality, there was an increase in rank and file activism by ordinary party members and trade unionists and an increasing distrust of the leadership, especially after 1931.

After the failed strike national trade union membership dropped 'by more than 500,000' and funds dropped from £12^{1/2} million to only £8^{1/2} million.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, at the national level it was argued that MacDonald's reformism had been vindicated and in subsequent year's ordinary workers looked 'more upon the parliamentary party as the agent of their political struggle'.¹⁵¹ However, as one can see in Southampton, Labour was not simply regaining old votes, they were winning new ones. Perhaps this was because the party had gained the middle ground of politics, or perhaps it was an expression of the continued solidarity that emerged during 1926.

If one studies the long term trends in the Labour movement after 1926, then one notices a shift away from activity centred around the traditional leadership. One example is the Southampton Labour Choir's endeavour to build a Labour Hall, despite opposition from local unions and Labour Party.¹⁵² Other examples are the strengthening of the Shop Stewards' movement, which took place immediately after 1926, support for the Spanish Republic among many dockers, and famously among intellectuals at University College, and the demonstrations against the British Union of Fascists, which attracted 6,000 protestors some years later.¹⁵³

Perhaps this grassroots activity, which involved Labour Party members, was a reaction to the fall of MacDonald's second administration. Locally, Southampton may have benefited from politically-minded workers arriving via the 'Juvenile Transference Scheme', 'under which youngsters from depressed areas' were given work in more affluent districts.¹⁵⁴ Although the influence of this scheme was probably minimal, there is certainly evidence of coal miners from South Wales entering Southampton and boosting the local Communist Party. Indeed, the CPGB branch grew to include fifty-five members: 'and there was always plenty going on'.¹⁵⁵ Southampton's Communists, directed by their national leaders, joined the local Labour Party in an effort to influence the movement.¹⁵⁶ Southampton Trades Council, more than many other areas, followed the TUC's demands in not supporting 'more direct protests', such as hunger marches.¹⁵⁷ Perhaps conflicts within the Labour movement became more localised and less cohesive in the 1930s. Finally, with the rise of numerous left-wing groups, it is hard to believe that a 'spirit of fatalism'

¹⁴⁸ S. Kimber, *Thirty-Eight Years of Public Life in Southampton*, pp. 220-221, (Southampton: Privately Printed, 1949)

¹⁴⁹ G. P. Heaney, *The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton*, p. 180

¹⁵⁰ C. Farman, *The General Strike*, p. 255

¹⁵¹ H. Pelling, A. J. Reid, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, p. 57

¹⁵² *Twelve Years of Socialist Endeavour in Southampton*, pp. 1-3, (Southampton: Hampshire Foodship for Spain, 1939)

¹⁵³ SMOHA M/00/52; South Coast Engineering and Shipbuilding Employers' Association, *Working Rules and Agreements*, (Southampton District, 1926); For a personal assessment of the impact of the Spanish Civil War at University College, Southampton, see: C. H. Guest, (ed.), *David Guest: A Scientist Fights for Freedom, A Memoir*, pp. 61- 69 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1939)

¹⁵⁴ F. Westacott, *Shaking the Chains*, p. 97

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵⁷ G. P. Heaney, *The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton*, p. 248

effected Southampton's rank and file, as Christopher Farman believes engulfed the whole movement after 1926.¹⁵⁸

Conclusion

If a study of the General Strike in the context of the Labour Party's first three decades proves one thing it is that the movement, as demonstrated by its major struggles, grew unevenly across different regions. Indeed, the development of Labour politics in Southampton, and therefore the town's experience in 1926, would have been different had the Liberals adopted an ILP-candidate in 1895.¹⁵⁹ It is important to remember that the very makeup of the Labour Party differed across regions before 1926; with various members of trade unions, ILP-ers, socialists and 'possibly an even greater number of anti-socialists' forming the party.¹⁶⁰ Thus, despite Henderson and Webb's unifying constitution in 1919 the Labour Party itself was not cohesive. Moreover, it is wrong for historians to label the leadership and rank and file as two homogenous, and conflicting, bodies.¹⁶¹

A study of Southampton during the General Strike certainly reveals that ordinary workers in the town, although perhaps not active trade unionists, were unconcerned by the ideological differences between the Labour Party and the ILP. Perhaps this was because ordinary workers responded to the strike call out of a sense of class loyalty rather than due to an ideological commitment to socialism, and were therefore not interested in Labour's internal conflicts. However, it is clear that these conflicts, predominantly between reformers and revolutionaries, were strained at every level during the General Strike. Indeed, the claim made in the *Southampton Strike Bulletin*, and expanded in the *New Statesman*, that 'a unanimity which has never before been known' existed during the General Strike, is largely inaccurate.¹⁶²

A study of the General Strike in Southampton also reveals that both interest in Labour politics, and thus conflicts within the movement, increased after 1926. This is partly because dissenting voices that had shown restraint in the early 1920s 'for fear of damaging the wider Labour cause' were less likely to hold their tongues after a major defeat.¹⁶³ Indeed, it was the ILP who seemed to be moving 'raggedly but unmistakably' in the opposite direction to Labour's leadership.¹⁶⁴ Perhaps ordinary workers had been politicised during the strike and could therefore contribute to the growing debate.

As the growth in rank and file activity in Southampton reveals; radicalisation occurred after the strike's failure, although it was often not immediate. Perhaps it took the downfall of MacDonald's second Labour government for ordinary workers to ask if there had been a betrayal in 1926. Of course, MacDonald's priority, shared by most party members, was to make Labour a viable – 'moderate, efficient and reliable' – alternative to the Conservatives.¹⁶⁵ This strategy, which certainly appeared rewarding

¹⁵⁸ Including Communist Party, Labour Party, Left Book Club, Young Communist League, Daily Worker Readers' Group; C. Farman, *The General Strike*, p. 300

¹⁵⁹ G. P. Heaney, *The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton*, p. 276

¹⁶⁰ R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. XIV

¹⁶¹ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, p. 220, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

¹⁶² 'Panic and Pugnacity', *New Statesman*, (15.5.1926), in. A. Smith, *The New Statesman: Portrait of a Political Weekly*, p. 226, (London: Frank Cass, 1996)

¹⁶³ M. Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, p. 100, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005)

¹⁶⁴ D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 450

¹⁶⁵ M. Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, p. 76

in 1929, and was adopted by subsequent Labour leaders, could not have been achieved had the General Strike been successful. However, many workers must have wondered why no realistic negotiation targets were set before the strike commenced, and why the stoppage ended as numbers, and arguably enthusiasm, were increasing. In Southampton, despite a notable return to work, many trade unionists hoped to prolong the strike out of a sense of solidarity with the miners that the national leadership could not comprehend. It is clear that conflicts between the Labour Party and the wider labour movement increased after 1926. Indeed, the ILP formally disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1932. Relations also cooled between the Co-operative Societies and the political wing of the movement. In the aftermath of the strike's failure many politicised workers turned neither to the Labour Party, the ILP nor to the trade unions.

In fact, as one can witness in Southampton, there was a growth in autonomous rank and file activity; often against the wishes of the district Labour Party or Trades Council. Although, Southampton Trades Council were more likely than most to stridently follow the rules of the TUC. In light of this increased activity, which took various forms across the country, it appears that there was no long term 'spirit of fatalism', nor did all sections of the working class sink into an 'overwhelmingly conservative mood' during the 1930s.¹⁶⁶

It has been argued that the General Strike was not a watershed because TUC militancy was actually going down after 1921. Although it is true that the number and intensity of industrial disputes were falling, a regional study of the General Strike proves that the event was still a defining moment. In Southampton, it brought the working class community together, although not universally. Hundreds of the workers who protested on Southampton Common subsequently became active in rank and file movements. Thousands more, who might have felt unaffected by the struggle at the time, soon became politicised to varying degrees or voted Labour for the first time.

¹⁶⁶ P. Renshaw, *The General Strike*, p. 247