

Lessons from Working-Class History

Marxism & the General Strike



MINNEAPOLISHISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minneapolis general strike, 1934. On 22 May, strikers disperse cops and scabs in 'Battle of Deputies Run'

The following is an edited version of a talk given by Tom Riley at a public meeting in St. Catharines, Ontario on 30 April 1998—the eve of a one-day “Day of Action” in that city.

The question of the general strike has often been a subject of controversy within the Marxist movement. One thing that complicates the issue is the fact that the term has been used to cover a wide variety of events—from mass insurrectionary upheavals to heavily bureaucratized one-day political protests. General strikes have been employed to win economic gains, to resist state repression, and to win or defend a variety of political and social gains.

In Germany in 1920, a workers' general strike aborted an attempted right-wing coup (the Kapp Putsch). The San Francisco General Strike in 1934 secured the union hiring hall for dockworkers. In Spain in 1936, workers responded to General Francisco Franco's attempt to seize power with an immediate general strike and a semi-spontaneous insurrection which initially overwhelmed the army. In Belgium, a country with a long history of general strikes, there were

two political strikes in the early 1950s: one in 1950, to oppose the reinstatement of King Leopold III, a Nazi collaborator; and another in 1952, to shorten the term that armed forces conscripts had to serve. In Quebec in 1972, workers carried out a semi-insurrectionary general strike in response to the jailing of three union leaders. There are literally hundreds of other examples that could be cited.

A general strike represents a major challenge to any regime because it poses—at least implicitly—the question of which class shall rule: the bourgeoisie, or the proletariat. With potentially so much at stake, both sides are often forced to choose between escalation or capitulation.

In some cases the capitalists have won by waiting out the strikers—after all, working people need to eat and cannot usually last long without incomes. In other situations the capitalists have crushed general strikes with repression or broken them through a combination of police pressure and the use of scabs (typically privileged petty-bourgeois elements) to drive the buses, unload the freight, and do every-

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thing else necessary to keep things going during a generalized work stoppage.

The massive deployment of state repression has often been sufficient to demoralize the strikers, but in some cases repression has backfired and resulted in a surge of support for the workers. In situations where the workers' movement is strong, and its cause popular, strikers have been able to disperse scabs and neutralize elements of the capitalists' repressive apparatus. When this happens, the bosses are usually anxious to make a deal.

Early Proponents of General Strikes

In discussing the general strike question, it is useful to know something about its origins and evolution. The first relatively modern advocate of the general strike was Jean Meslier, a rather unorthodox French priest, who was active in the early 1700s. Meslier has been accused of being an atheist, and he may have been the original "liberation theologian." He is credited with the pithy observation that so pleased Voltaire to the effect that humanity will only be free, "when the last king is strangled with the guts of the last priest." Meslier is also remembered for his observation that if the "small people" (or "commoners") were to stop working, the First and Second Estates (the nobility and clergy) would soon collapse under their own weight.

Echoes of Meslier's suggestion of conducting a general strike against the nobility were still floating around some 60 years later at the time of the French Revolution. Constantin Volney, a member of the National Assembly, published an influential book in 1791 which contained a dialogue between the "People" (composed of "every profession useful to society") and the "Privileged Class" (or "Men living in idleness at the expense of those who labour"), in which the People demand separation from the parasites:

"We toil, and you enjoy; we produce, and you dissipate; wealth flows from us, and you absorb it.—Privileged men, class distinct from the people, form a nation apart and govern yourselves."

—*The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, 1819

Such well known figures as Jean Paul Marat and Gracchus Babeuf mentioned the idea of a general strike. It was also picked up by the "English Jacobins"—a circle of radicals also known as the "London Corresponding Society" who translated and published Volney's book.

The first known attempt to actually carry out a general strike occurred in Scotland in April 1820 in response to government repression after the infamous Peterloo massacre the year before. Initially the Glasgow radicals had planned to join a proposed tax revolt in England, but in January 1820 decided:

"that there should be 'a Strike' of work everywhere upon the first of March following and to continue for some days which it was thought would effectuate an Insurrection."

—quoted in *Threats of Revolution in Britain 1789-1848*, M. Thomis and P. Holt, 1977

The objective of these insurrectionaries was to win "a Radical Reform, Universal Suffrage, and Annual Parliaments," and they made some attempt to arrange for simultaneous action in England. The strike lasted for a week and initially succeeded in closing down every enterprise in

Glasgow and the surrounding area. But its failure to spread further, allowed the authorities to soon gain the upper hand. The end came with the defeat of a small party of rebels after a shoot-out with some of King George's redcoats in what was dubbed "the Battle of Bonnymuir."

Despite this initial experience, the idea of a general strike as a means of redressing social injustice remained popular. In the 1830s its foremost exponent was William Benbow, a radical cobbler and former Quaker preacher, whose popular 1832 pamphlet on the subject, entitled "Grand National Holiday and Congress of Productive Classes" was widely circulated. Benbow observed:

"All men enjoy life, but do not enjoy it equally....The only class of persons in society, as it is now constituted, who enjoy any considerable portion of ease, pleasure and happiness, are those who do the least towards producing anything good or necessary for the community at large."

Benbow asserted that all the mass of humanity lacked was:

"a knowledge of ourselves; a knowledge of our own power, of our immense might, and the right we have to employ in action that immense power."

—quoted in *Communism and the General Strike*, W.H. Crook, 1960

Benbow proposed to rectify the existing social inequalities by means of a "Grand National Holiday" of about a month's time, during which the workers would withdraw their labor. His plan had a few kinks that needed to be worked out—like how the strikers were supposed to feed themselves during the walkout—but it was nevertheless adopted by the Chartists, the most advanced and militant working-class movement of the time.

In August 1842, a strike against brutal wage cuts in the mines and textile mills that erupted in the north of England was spread by "flying pickets" across the region and into Scotland and Wales. This strike is often referred to as the "Plug Plot" because the strikers made a point of pulling the plugs of the steam boilers in every factory to ensure that production ceased. The Chartists supported this action, and though they did not lead it, their name is often associated with it. At its height, some 500,000 workers were involved, but the strike fizzled out after a month as they were gradually starved back to work.

In the 1860s, English members of the First International, who were active in the Reform League, threatened a "universal cessation of labour" to back demands for voting rights for (male) workers. This threat was taken seriously by the Tory government which promptly pushed through a reform bill to significantly widen the franchise.

Belgian General Strikes and the SPD

In 1891, on May Day, 100,000 Belgian workers, spearheaded by the Walloon coalminers, went out on strike to demand the vote. While they eventually returned to work three weeks later without winning their demands, the support for their action was sufficient to convince the leadership of the reformist Belgian Workers Party (POB) that a general strike could be an effective tactic. In 1893, the POB initiated a successful general strike. The government, which had not taken the threat seriously, was caught by surprise and was forced to grant a vote to male workers (although not an equal one, as extra votes were awarded to citizens on the basis of their property holdings, education or profession).

The victory in Belgium made a great impression interna-

tionally and sparked a wide-ranging discussion of the general strike tactic within the Second International, particularly in its largest and most influential section, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). There were three main tendencies within the SPD. The right wing, which was dominated by the official union leadership, was chiefly concerned with the question of legality. As “practical” bread-and-butter bureaucrats with comfortable positions to protect, they tended to view talk of using the mass strike for revolutionary purposes as foolish and possibly dangerous. They considered that a general strike should only be used to gain the franchise or to protect the unions’ legal status or other democratic rights. They were particularly concerned that any general strike have clearly delineated objectives, and be carefully controlled by the union leadership.

The SPD left wing took a diametrically opposed position. Their foremost representative was the brilliant Polish émigré, Rosa Luxemburg, who viewed the “mass strike” as a means to unleash mass popular revolutionary action. There was also a “center” tendency headed by Karl Kautsky, then regarded as the world’s preeminent Marxist. In opposition to the SPD right, Kautsky asserted that the mass strike could, hypothetically, be used for revolutionary purposes. He agreed, however, that it was primarily a defensive weapon which had to be directed and controlled by the official leaders of the workers’ organizations.

The divisions over the mass strike paralleled a broader debate over political strategy between the same three tendencies. Eduard Bernstein, the leading figure of the “revisionist” right wing, openly advocated a gradualist, reformist strategy. His position was encapsulated by his famous remark that: “The movement means everything for me and what is *usually* called ‘the final aim of socialism’ is nothing.” Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Leibknecht (who in 1918 went on to found the German Communist Party) represented those in the SPD who believed that revolution was an imminent possibility. Kautsky stood in the middle—agreeing with the left that socialist revolution was necessary and inevitable, but consigned it to the hazy future.

In 1902, the Belgian workers’ movement launched another general strike, this time to win an equal vote for all adults (including women). Participation was much higher than in it had been in 1893—some 350,000 workers took part, but this time the government was better prepared. They had organized scabs and also tightened things up in the army, which had been a bit unsteady in 1893.

The POB leadership, sensing that the government was going to offer serious resistance, immediately began to backpedal. The first thing they dropped was the demand for the female franchise. This was followed by a series of other concessions, but the more they conceded, the more intransigent the government became. As the POB retreated, the wavering middle-class elements increasingly went over to the government’s side. There’s a lesson here.

Finally, the POB leadership tried one last face-saving gambit. They asked the king to dissolve parliament, i.e., to dismiss the government. When the king, to no one’s surprise, sided with the government against the workers, the POB bureaucrats declared victory and called off the strike. In fact, the workers had won nothing.

The strike had been followed closely by everyone in the SPD. Rosa Luxemburg was impolite enough to point out that the strike had been defeated, even though a high percentage of workers had participated and the unions had



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Rosa Luxemburg

initially enjoyed a great deal of popular support. Luxemburg attributed the defeat to the POB leadership’s craven declaration at the outset that, whatever happened, they would obey the “law.” This signaled to the government that it could do as it wished, without fear of retaliation from the union leaders. There’s always a calculation to be made in such situations: sometimes repression works, but sometimes when you attack people, you enrage them. It can be a dangerous game. But when you are guaranteed, in advance, that *whatever* you do, the other side is not going to hit back, there is not much to stop you from whacking them.

And that’s what happened: at every step the POB’s timid legalism demoralized their followers and emboldened their enemies. Luxemburg’s observations were very acute, and clearly illuminated the reasons for the defeat.

Russia 1905: From General Strike to Insurrection

The next major discussion of the general strike within the international socialist movement was sparked by events in Russia in 1905-06. In tsarist Russia a feudalist/autocratic political regime rested atop a population that was overwhelmingly peasant. Yet there was also a very modern, and fully capitalist industrial sector, financed from abroad. Russian factories had state-of-the-art technology and a potentially powerful working class that was young, highly concentrated and subjected to savage exploitation. Workers had no political rights and often suffered physical brutality in the workplace.

There was very little room in tsarist Russia for the development of the layer of privileged labor aristocrats who pre-



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LABOUR HISTORY

British General Strike, 1926: workers stop scab truck trying to enter London docks

dominated in the Belgian, English and German workers' movements. In Russia anyone involved in union organizing risked jail. Under such circumstances, union leaders tend to be a different sort of person than we are used to here, where those at the top enjoy comfortable offices, expense accounts and substantial salaries.

The tsarist police routinely responded to strikes by attacking the workers: riding horses into them, beating, arresting and even killing them. Many strikes were broken and many unionists were jailed. Workers in one factory would often get upset when their friends and relatives, who happened to work in the factory next door, were being brutalized, and they would sometimes walk out spontaneously to help. This proved to be a remarkably effective way of curbing these attacks, because it put pressure on the owners of enterprises that were not directly involved in the dispute to demand that the police be reined in.

In these situations, when workers in a number of factories were out together, they would often gather to discuss the situation, and jointly plan their next move. These assemblies were the forerunners of the "soviets," or workers' councils, of 1905.

In 1904, the tsar got involved in a disastrous war with Japan that demoralized the army and discredited the regime. In January 1905, a strike broke out at the Putilov Iron Works, an important factory in St. Petersburg. It was led by Father Gapon, a priest and part-time police agent, who was anxious to keep the strike under control and avoid any escalation. At the same time, however, he was under some pressure to deliver the goods for the strikers. He therefore proposed that the workers petition the tsar at the Winter Palace. So the workers formed a large procession under

Gapon's leadership, and holding high religious icons and the tsar's picture, they marched off.

But the tsar had grown tired of all the strikes, and decided not to receive the petition. Instead, he had his troops open fire on the marchers. Eight hundred demonstrators were killed and hundreds more were wounded. The idea was that a show of force would demonstrate to the "little people" who was boss. But it didn't have that effect at all. This massacre enraged people throughout the country and produced a wave of strikes that, for the first time, swept right across the empire. Initially the struggle involved workers and students, but eventually in many areas, the peasants also revolted, burning down the manor houses and lynching the landowners. There were so many of these outbreaks, and they were so widespread, that the regime couldn't control them.

This popular disaffection also extended to the military. When army units were sent out to crush an uprising on an aristocrat's estate, the soldiers (most of whom were peasants themselves) would often end up shooting their sergeant or lieutenant instead of the insurgents. Sergei Eisenstein's 1926 movie, "Battleship Potemkin," depicted a famous naval mutiny that took place in June 1905.

Originally these upheavals were almost entirely spontaneous. Members of the various left parties in each locality took part, but there was no planning or central direction, which made them more difficult to repress. The informal assemblies of employees from different factories that had become common during earlier, smaller-scale confrontations with the employers and the police began to operate on a larger scale and, in many regions, played a central role in the struggle.

Rosa Luxemburg captured the fluid character of these events in her 1906 book *The Mass Strike*:

“The mass strike, as the Russian revolution shows it to us, is such a changeable phenomenon that it reflects all phases of the political and economic struggle, all stages and factors of the revolution....Political and economic strikes, mass strikes and partial strikes, demonstrative strikes and fighting strikes, general strikes of individual branches of industry and general strikes in individual towns, peaceful wage struggles and street massacres, barricade fighting—all these run through one another, run side by side, cross one another, flow in and over one another—it is ceaselessly moving, a changing sea of phenomena.”

The high point came with a national general strike which swept the country, beginning with a strike by printers in Moscow in September 1905. In October, Moscow railway employees walked out and were joined by rail, telegraph and postal workers across the country. Before long almost every other group of workers were also out in a general strike that shut down the national transportation and communication system. This paralyzed the regime’s ability to deploy, or even communicate with, its troops. The strikers’ demands became increasingly political: an elected government and basic civil rights.

The strike was coordinated by joint strike committees (soviets) in St. Petersburg, Moscow and other cities. These soviets, which included representatives from factories throughout a given area, began to take responsibility for ensuring food supplies and maintaining social order. This signified the emergence of an embryonic *workers’* government alongside the official one.

In a bid to regain control, the tsar made what appeared to be major political concessions in his “October Manifesto.” He announced that he had undergone a miraculous conversion and now saw the importance of “democracy.” From now on, he promised, there would be a parliament (a “duma”) and citizens would have freedom of speech, association and assembly. This was naturally very popular and most strikers soon returned to work thinking that they had won.

As the tide of struggle began to ebb, the government started to crack down. Punitive attacks were launched in previously rebellious areas. Martial law was declared in Poland, which had been one of the most troublesome regions of the empire, and the military began to court-martial leaders of the mutinies.

The left organizations responded to these new attacks by calling another general strike for November. As the strike movement once again began to build, the government made another tactical retreat—dropping the court-martials, lifting martial law in Poland and making a few other concessions. But as soon as strike preparations wound down, the authorities once again went on the offensive. This time the police arrested prominent workers’ leaders, including Leon Trotsky and other leaders of the St. Petersburg Soviet.

Once again the workers’ movement sought to renew the general strike. This time the authorities were able to keep the lid on in St. Petersburg, but in Moscow, and other areas of the country, the struggle was fought with a new intensity. It was obvious that winning concessions from the tsarist state was pointless, if the government reneged on their promises as soon as things settled down. So the Moscow workers, with the Bolsheviks in the lead, launched an up-

rising, which was defeated after several weeks of street fighting. Disturbances continued intermittently for another 18 months, but the autocracy gradually regained control.

The Moscow uprising was the first serious attempt to use a general strike as a bridge to insurrection. Fifteen years later, Lenin observed that without the “dress rehearsal” of 1905, the victory in 1917 would not have been possible. A broad layer of politically-conscious workers learned about the regime they faced and the impossibility of reforming it. The experience also taught the revolutionaries about the politics of mass mobilization, and some of the practical aspects of challenging the state power.

The experience of 1905 also illuminated the limits of the general strike. It had been powerful enough to dislocate the state power and to extract concessions, at least on paper, but ultimately, when the regime regained its balance, the reforms were rescinded.

Lenin had only been able to return to Russia in October, but he had followed events closely, and clearly understood the importance of the mass strike in paralyzing the government and rallying the masses of the oppressed and disaffected behind the proletariat. He also came to appreciate the importance of the soviets (an institution not foreseen by Marx, or any other socialist theorist) as a mechanism for the mobilization of the working class.

Leon Trotsky, the most prominent figure in the St. Petersburg Soviet, which had functioned as the leading center of the revolt, drew many of the same conclusions as Lenin from the events. It was not sufficient to paralyze the autocracy or even force some concessions—what was necessary was that the workers, at the head of the oppressed, suppress the tsar’s police and military, expropriate the landowners and industrialists, and establish organs of proletarian power.

Luxemburg’s views on the general strike broadly paralleled those of Lenin and Trotsky. She too recognized that by December 1905 it had been necessary to go beyond the mass strike to the seizure of power, and she saluted the Russian workers for their heroic attempt to do so. Luxemburg tended to place somewhat more emphasis on the capacity of the mass strike to unleash the spontaneous revolutionary energies of the masses than either Lenin or Trotsky, but she was correct that a general strike is not something that can be artificially decreed by the official leadership of the workers’ movement:

“the mass strike, as shown to us in the Russian revolution, is not a crafty method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, *but the method of motion of the proletarian mass*, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution.”

—*The Mass Strike*

Varieties of General Strikes

Thirty years after the experiences of 1905, Trotsky wrote a letter to the British Independent Labour Party (ILP) in which he quoted Frederick Engels’ comment in 1893:

“the political strike must either prove victorious immediately by the threat alone (as in Belgium, where the army was very shaky), or it must end in a colossal fiasco, or, finally, *lead directly to the barricades.*”

Trotsky suggested that the October 1905 general strike in Russia, as well as the 1893 Belgian strike, belonged to the first of these categories—the government took fright and



DAVID KING

Moscow workers' demonstration, 1905. The lead banner reads 'Workers of the World, Unite!'

made concessions without a serious test of strength.

The second scenario, that of a "colossal fiasco," occurs when the government is well-prepared and has confidence in its troops, and the strike is a bureaucratic, top-down affair, "calculated not for decisive battles, but to 'frighten' the enemy." The capitalists usually make a point of being well-informed about such things, and are likely to become more aggressive—not more conciliatory—if they sense that the workers' leadership is not seriously prepared for struggle.

The third type of general strike "leads directly to the barricades." Among the factors that determine the victory or defeat of an insurrectionary general strike Trotsky lists:

"the class differentiation of society, the specific weight of the proletariat, the mood of the lower layers of the petty bourgeoisie, the social composition and the political mood of the army, etc. However, among the conditions for victory, far from the last place is occupied by the *correct revolutionary leadership and its clear understanding of the conditions and methods of the general strike and of its transition to open revolutionary struggle.*"

—"The ILP and the Fourth International,"

18 September 1935, emphasis in original

There are other possible scenarios—cases where revolutionists might call for a general strike without having the seizure of state power as an immediate objective. Trotsky analyzed the situation in France in 1935 in the following terms:

"It is precisely because the present intermediate state regime is extremely unstable, that the general strike *can* achieve very great partial successes by forcing the government to take to the road of concessions on the question

of the Bonapartist decree-laws, the two-year term of military service, etc."

—"Once Again, Whither France?"

Yet general strikes pose the question of power, at least implicitly, even when they are launched for more modest objectives:

"Whatever may be the slogans and the motive for which the general strike is initiated, if it includes the genuine masses, and if these masses are quite resolved to struggle, the general strike inevitably poses before all classes in the nation the question: *Who will be the master of the house?*"

—*Ibid.*

In his letter to the ILP, Trotsky discussed another type of "general strike"—one much closer to the recent "Days of Action" in Ontario. In this kind of "general strike," the union leadership:

"arrives at an agreement with the class enemy as to the course and outcome of the strike. The parliamentarians and the trade unionists perceive at a given moment the need to provide an outlet for the accumulated ire of the masses...In such cases they come scurrying through the backstairs to the government and obtain the permission to head the general strike, this with the obligation to conclude it as soon as possible, without any damage being done to the state crockery."

Such arrangements can be made explicitly or implicitly. It is the latter that we have been seeing in Ontario, but the essential point is the same: the union leaders are using these "Days of Action" mass mobilizations to make a political statement and to give their base a chance to blow off steam. The union tops want to give their members the impression that they're involved in a serious struggle while at the same time signaling to the capitalists in advance that they are not

really going to make any trouble. Trotsky made the following comment about a similar sort of “general strike” which the French unions called a week after right wingers attempted to launch a coup on 12 February 1934:

“Every class conscious worker must say to himself that the pressure from below must have been extremely powerful if Jouhaux himself [chief union bureaucrat] had to bestir for a moment out of his immobility. True, involved here was not a general strike in the proper meaning of the term, but only a 24-hour demonstration. But this restriction was *not* put by the *masses*, it was dictated from *above*.”

—“Once Again, Whither France?”

The Ontario “Days of Action” have been very limited, very tightly managed, and have, on the whole, had much more the character of a series of city-wide demonstrations rather than serious general strikes. The union leaders clearly intend these actions to be a means of pressuring, rather than seriously confronting [Conservative Premier Mike] Harris. Their objective all along has been to get a seat at the table so that they can have a say in *how* the Tory agenda is going to be implemented—where and when the cuts will come; which schools and hospitals will be axed, etc. The character of the mobilizations and the way they’ve been conducted reflect this intent.

These “Days of Action” have been heavily dependent on the mobilization of the union apparatus. The unions have been hiring additional staff and paying the regulars a lot of overtime. They’ve also put resources into advertising and public relations. The union tops are neither willing to, nor capable of, politicizing the struggle, and they don’t want to encourage serious militancy. In general, they have been careful to avoid giving the impression that these are serious mobilizations against the bosses or even the Harris government.

The OFL [Ontario Federation of Labour] leadership has also taken a deferential attitude toward the “Pink Paper” unions which have sought to undercut even the very limited “Days of Action.” The leadership of the Steelworkers, Paperworkers, et al. almost seem to welcome the Tory attacks as a judgement on those who refused to vote for Bob Rae and his NDP union-bashers in the last election.

The union bureaucrats want to be able to turn the movement on and off like a tap. They also want to avoid being outflanked on the left by the emergence of more militant elements. As long as they’re able to maintain the degree of control that we’ve seen so far, it is clear that the capitalists aren’t going to face any serious inconvenience.

We’ve had quite a few of these “Days of Action” now and everyone knows what to expect. But at the beginning, no one was certain how it was going to play out. The first city shutdown took place in London [Ontario] in December 1995. Now London is not exactly known as a hotbed of labor radicalism, so it was a bit of a challenge. The business types invested in quite an aggressive advertising campaign encouraging the citizenry to stand up to the “union bosses.” The local unions made some preliminary attempts to mobilize support. They called a few advance rallies and were surprised at how strong the level of support was.

The most important confrontation took place outside the city limits at the Ford Talbotville plant. It’s a very large installation, and it makes a lot of money for Ford. The CAW [Canadian Auto Workers] declared that they would be shutting it on that day, but Ford did not want to lose a day’s production, and took the precaution of getting a court injunc-

tion prohibiting picketing. The company then ordered all employees to report to work or face serious consequences. The OPP [Ontario Provincial Police] announced that they were prepared to enforce the court injunction and would send in the tactical squad if necessary. Nobody was going to defy the law—the Ford plant was going to stay open. But Buzz Hargrove, head of the CAW, calmly responded that the plant would be shut.

It was all very dramatic. That night, as we were driving down from Toronto, we heard news bulletins on the radio every ten minutes. There was clearly going to be a major confrontation. But when we got to the site, we found the plant shut tight and no cops in sight. Instead, there were perhaps 150 well organized, disciplined CAW pickets who looked like they knew how to handle themselves. It was really quite impressive: “proletarian order.”

The CAW let it be known that if Ford were to pursue the legal remedies too aggressively, there would be a whole lot more lost production. Eventually, when the case finally got to court a year or so later, it was thrown out on some technicality. There is an important lesson here. Of course it was not widely advertised—just a little item buried in the business section, but it is an important example of the use of the kind of tactics that built the unions in the first place. On a small scale it provided a glimpse of what a real general strike would look like.

The high point of the “Days of Action” has been the Toronto shutdown in October 1996. As at Fort Talbotville, the capitalists threatened individual workers and the unions with punitive sanctions and court orders. And once again, the unions ignored the threats, and went ahead with the attempt to close down Toronto for a day.

The key was the transit system. The courts issued an injunction to keep the buses and subways running. The unions countered by dispatching 200 or 300 serious pickets to major transit installations in the middle of the night, before the crews reported for the day shift. These pickets were not sent to pass out informational leaflets, although they did provide a little hands-on education to the very few gung-ho managers and others who were unwise enough to try to report for work. So the would-be scabs were kept out, the injunctions were ripped up, and the transit system was shut tight. The police decided not to push things to a confrontation.

It had been widely predicted that if the TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] was shut down, downtown Toronto would be tied up with an enormous traffic jam due to all the transit riders driving their cars to work. But that morning, downtown Toronto looked like a ghost town. No one even tried to go to work. After months of bluster and intimidation, the capitalists decided not to risk a confrontation, and just closed up shop for the day. Toronto is, of course, the financial capital of this country, and it’s not a particularly strong union town. Initially, the OFL brass had been reluctant to try to shut Toronto, so this was an important display of union strength.

It’s quite significant that immediately after the Toronto shutdown, the pollsters reported a dramatic drop in support for Harris, and a surge in support for organized labor. Working people were saying to themselves: “Hey, we don’t have to put up with this—look what we can do!” And there was a lot of talk about the next step, which was generally assumed to be a province-wide “Day of Action.” This mood was widely noted, and elements of the Tories’ base began to worry that perhaps Harris had gone too far, that his

brass-knuckle tactics might turn out to be more trouble than they were worth.

But the OFL leadership was even more worried. They feared that they had put something in motion that might soon escape their control. The growing self-confidence of the union ranks and the widespread anticipation that the counterattack on the Tories would be stepped up in the aftermath of the Toronto success, alarmed them. The union brass wasted little time making it clear that, as far as they were concerned, the unions had made their point, and there were no plans to escalate things further. So before long, the surge of militant sentiment abated and the Tories' standings in the polls returned to their previous levels.

Three Critical Points

Over the past three years there have been three obvious points at which a union counteroffensive could have delivered a serious blow to the Harris government. In each situation there were risks, but the odds were much better than even that the unions could score a major victory. The first opportunity came in March 1996, when 50,000 OPSEU [Ontario Public Service Employees' Union] members were out on strike. A lot of people in the labor movement were pleasantly surprised when the OPSEU ranks didn't just collapse—despite having a leadership that was about as bad as could be imagined.

The critical moment in this conflict came when Harris sent a unit of the OPP tactical squad to attack a few dozen peaceful picketers at Queen's Park right in front of a couple of TV cameras. People who saw the assault on the evening news that night wanted to know what was going on. These ordinary civil servants are peacefully picketing, and then, with no provocation, they are attacked by these riot cops dressed up like Darth Vader. It was a revelation for a lot of people out there in TV-land. There are lots of places in the world where this is routine, where cops don't bother much with democratic niceties, but in Canada people are supposed to have a few democratic rights.

Gord Wilson [then OFL head] threatened that if this continued, the unions would organize their own squads and start "whacking back." (Not a bad idea, but of course he wasn't serious.) But it was not just organized labor, there was a feeling of outrage at this display of thuggishness by Harris. Various priests, clergymen, rabbis and other eminent figures demanded an inquiry, and the Tory speaker of the house [provincial parliament] agreed to conduct one. Harris, caught off balance, had to go along with setting up some kind of investigation. Of course, nothing came of it, but at that moment, a class-struggle leadership in the unions could have delivered a powerful blow to the Harrisites by launching solidarity strikes with OPSEU against the Tories and their goons.

The next major opportunity came with the Toronto strike. Having successfully defied Harris, the courts and the bosses to close down Toronto, and having then organized a demonstration of 250,000 the next day—the largest ever seen in Canada—the unions were briefly riding a surge of popular support. All kinds of people suddenly became aware of the power of the working class and the power of its organizations. Harris and the Tories are mostly nasty, small people. The Toronto strike had shaken them and the big money interests that they represent. But the question for both sides was "what next?" As soon as it became clear that the OFL tops had no intention of pushing their advantage, the Tories regained their nerve, and in a

matter of a few weeks, it was almost as if the whole thing had never happened.

The third major opportunity was the teachers' strike last October [1997]. On some questions there has been a molecular evolution of popular/working-class consciousness in Ontario under Harris. This will not go on getting better and better, every day in every way, of course—particularly given the character of the union leadership. But it's extremely significant that in this province founded by the Loyalist refugees from the American Revolution, 125,000 traditionally conservative teachers went on a two-week political strike in an attempt to defeat Tory attacks on public education. The Tories denounced it as a dangerous, "illegal" attempt to thwart democracy. They also portrayed it as an attack on children. These themes were echoed by every major newspaper and television commentator.

Yet they couldn't sell it. They had big ads, focus groups, studies and lots of consultants trying to figure out why people seemed less concerned about the consequences of the teachers' contempt for the law, than about the Tories' educational "reforms." Law and order is supposed to be a hot button for the right wing—but it didn't work, despite the near unanimous condemnation of the strike by the capitalist media.

The fact is that the Harris government itself had done a lot to undercut popular illusions in bourgeois democracy and the "rule of law." By rejigging the rules to ram through whatever legislation they felt like, and marginalizing the role of their parliamentary opposition, the Tories undercut the legitimacy of the process in the eyes of much of the population. If the teachers were "breaking the law" in opposing Tory attempts to wreck the school system and widen the gulf between rich and poor, most working people decided that they were in favor of law-breaking, at least on this issue. This is a potentially highly significant development.

Support for the teachers remained firm and was even tending to rise as the action went into its second week. On the tenth day of the strike [5 November 1997] the traditionally Tory [Toronto] *Globe and Mail*—the pre-eminent mouthpiece of Canadian capitalism—advised Harris that his government:

"may be losing the battle for public opinion. The teachers' apparently illegal walkout is disrupting the lives of millions of students and parents, yet at this point Ontarians prefer the teachers' version of events to the government's."

With things starting to run out of control, the *Globe* editorialists provided Harris with a list of concessions to make to the teachers. And then, after the editorial page was set, a late-breaking news flash arrived which ended up on the front page of the same issue: "Teachers may end walkout." The union leaders had lost their nerve.

So, there it was—a classic case of the crisis of political leadership. The teachers wanted to struggle and all that stood between them and victory was the political character of their leaders. It was a huge opportunity thrown away.

Lessons of the Ontario 'Days of Action'

There are some important lessons to be drawn from these "Days of Action." The first is that the organized working class is the key to any successful struggle against social oppression. That's pretty widely recognized now. The flip side is that for the workers' movement to emerge victorious in a major confrontation with the Tories, they must be seen to champion the interests of all the oppressed: the disabled,

the sick, single parents, aboriginals, immigrants and refugees, racial and linguistic minorities, victims of police brutality, welfare recipients and every other social group the Harris government has gone after.

The third obvious lesson is that the existing union leadership is profoundly conservative and fundamentally pro-capitalist. The labor bureaucracy is a petty-bourgeois social layer which functions as the “labor lieutenants of capital.” But they also embody a certain contradiction, because their existence depends on the preservation of the organizations of the working class. In certain circumstances, in limited ways, elements of the bureaucracy are prepared to go beyond the framework of capitalist legality if they feel enough pressure from below and they feel that their own interests are somehow threatened. We’ve seen some of that, and it’s important to recognize.

Another very important lesson of these “Days of Action” is that rank-and-file unionists and other working people *will fight* if they’re given a lead. If they feel that there is something important at stake, and if their organizations are prepared for struggle, the ranks have shown, once again, that they will run risks and to do what needs to be done. That’s important.

Finally, it should be noted that due to the timidity of the union leadership, the “Days of Action” have done very little, if anything, to stay the Tories’ hand. Yet they have nonetheless provided some very important object lessons for the people who participated in them, and even for those who merely witnessed them. This is a bit intangible, but it may be quite significant in the future. These limited actions, if nothing else, have shown that the working class has real social power and that a general strike *could* work. That is now very clear to literally millions of people in Ontario.

After the teachers’ unions pulled the plug on their strike, they held one last rally at Queen’s Park. Perhaps 50,000 people turned out (mainly teachers). You could just feel the frustration felt by many at their leadership’s capitulation. During the speeches from the bureaucrats on the platform, half the crowd expressed their disgust with angry chants of “General Strike! General Strike!” That was their way of saying that they didn’t want to fold the action—they wanted to *expand* it. They wanted to turn it into a general strike—to get rid of Bill 160 [the Tory bill attacking public education] and bring down Harris.

General Strikes & Revolutionary Leadership

Now, some left groups (for example, the comrades of the Trotskyist League [TL—Canadian affiliate of the Spartacist League/U.S.]) think that it is wrong to call for a general strike to bring down the Tories at this point. They argue that such a development would necessarily pose the question of social revolution and for that, they tell us, you need a mass revolutionary workers’ party.

It is conceivable that a revolutionary situation could develop out of a mass strike to bring down the Harris government, but when we have raised the general strike slogan during the previous “Days of Action,” this is not how we have posed it. Rather, we were calling for something that was on the immediate agenda—the logical next step in the struggle. We are, unfortunately, a bit further away than that from a socialist revolution at the moment.

The experience of the workers’ movement internationally shows that mass strikes can achieve a great deal, even



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in situations which are not immediately revolutionary. What is required is bold and skillful leadership and proper preparation (in both a technical and political sense). A mass strike can present major opportunities for revolutionary organizations, even very small ones.

For example, in Minneapolis in 1934, a handful of Trotskyist militants initiated struggles which led to a series of aggressive truckers’ strikes and ultimately resulted in a city-wide general strike that turned Minneapolis from an open-shop town into a union stronghold and gave the Trotskyists a powerful base in the Mid-West labor movement. If the TL comrades want to wait until they grow into a mass party before raising the general strike slogan, that is their business—but this is not how Lenin, Trotsky or Cannon [James P. Cannon, the historic leader of the American Trotskyist movement] approached the question.

The role of Marxists in the unions is to advance a program representing the historic interests of the working class. Instead of trying to pressure the trade-union bureaucrats to be a bit more militant, revolutionaries seek to expose their fundamental loyalty to the capitalists and the necessity to create a new kind of leadership, one that is not committed to playing by the bosses’ rules, nor to attempting to make this irrational social system work. ■