

THE GENERAL STRIKE: Important tool of the working class



All across Europe workers and young people face the austerity axe. And all across Europe there is a fight to defend jobs and services against governments who are determined to do the bidding of big business and the banks. **HANNAH SELL**, Socialist Party deputy general secretary, looks at the role of the general strike in these battles.

“WE ARE angry.” This was how nine out of ten Greeks described their mood. In the same poll 93% of Greeks called for corrupt politicians to be jailed. The rage of the Greeks is not surprising – the whole working class is having its living standards trampled into the dirt. And Greece is not alone, from Britain to Spain to Ireland, the governments of Europe are taking the Con-Dem road – and trying to smash public services and workers’ living standards.

They have been met with ferocious resistance. Greece was shut down six times in the first seven months of 2010 – as a result of powerful 24-hour general strikes. As yet these general strikes have not defeated the government’s austerity packages, but the government could be forced to retreat if the determination of the Greek working class is channelled into more decisive action in the coming months.

Workers in other countries are taking the ‘Greek road’. In Spain a 24-hour public sector strike in June has been followed by a magnificent 24-hour general strike of the whole workforce on 29 September, with an incredible ten million workers taking part in the demonstrations.

In Italy one million took to the streets on 25 June in the strongest general strike for many years. In France two and a half million took to the streets as part of a public sector strike against pension cuts on 7 June.

Beyond Europe the general strike is also increasingly back on the agenda – with the recent tremendous 13-day long public sector strike in South Africa and in India around 100 million people took part in the biggest general strike for many years.

General strike in Britain?

IN BRITAIN the question of general strike action is also beginning to be posed. The massive cuts that the government is going to announce on 20 October will dramatically lower the living standards of every working class person, and many middle class people as well. Unless you are part of the tiny minority who can afford to pay for you and your family’s healthcare, education and social services privately, these cuts will adversely affect you.

This year’s Trades Union Congress agreed to coordinate action against cuts. Brendan Barber, general secretary of the TUC, pledged that they would “support and coordinate campaigning and joint union industrial action, nationally and locally, in opposition to attacks on jobs, pensions, pay or public services”. Barber was anxious to make clear this did not mean a general strike. However, despite his best efforts, for workers watching the TUC at home, the idea of a general strike was unconsciously raised by the TUC’s pledges.

The majority of trade union leaders refuse to even talk about a general strike because of the fear of what it would mean in Britain. However, they also take refuge in the fact that in Britain, unlike other countries in Europe, the anti-trade union laws mean that generalised strike action

is virtually illegal. There are huge obstacles to even achieving a public sector general strike within the straitjacket of the anti-trade union laws. These laws, the most repressive in the advanced capitalist countries, were introduced by previous Tory governments and left intact by New Labour. We do not lightly support breaking the anti-union laws and thereby risking trade union funds, but this struggle – to defend the public sector from decimation – is too important to allow individual trade unions to fight alone. Coordinated action is vital, even if it means confronting the anti-union laws.

United strike action is inherent in the situation. As Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT transport workers’ union, put it: “If, for example, RMT members are balloting for strike action and so are the firefighters it is logical to coordinate the ballots.”

Given that every public sector worker’s pay and conditions will be directly affected by the cuts it could be possible to legally organise a public sector general strike in this way, if the national trade union leaders were prepared to do so. Particularly on the issue of pensions’ coordinated action across the public sector in response to the Hutton Report is likely to be posed.

Action of this nature was threatened in 2005, forcing the New Labour government to retreat from its attack on public sector pensions. In 2008, some public sector unions – the civil servants’ PCS, the teachers’ NUT and the lecturers’ UCU – organised coordinated strike action on pay.

Of course, as we have seen with the British Airways cabin crew strike and others, even when unions follow every dot and comma of the byzantine anti-trade union laws, the courts can still ban strikes. When this happens the trade union movement must be prepared to come to the aid of the union/s under threat by taking strike action in their defence.

We cannot allow these undemocratic laws to prevent workers taking effective action. In reality, if all public sector unions defied the anti-trade union laws and took simultaneous strike action, the government would be powerless to stop them and, in the process, the anti-trade union laws would be broken asunder.

Even without the anti-trade union laws, however, the leadership of the TUC would prefer none to as much as whisper the words ‘general strike’. General strikes obviously have varying characteristics but all general strikes – where the working class shows its strength by bringing society to a halt – are a very serious weapon in the armoury of the working class. General strikes, particularly when they are indefinite, pose the question of who runs society: the working class, which can bring the country to a standstill, or those currently in power, the capitalist class?

In Britain, general strikes have been far rarer than most countries of Europe, and there has been no experience of a complete one-day general strike such as has taken place in Greece and Spain this year. It has come close on many occasions, for example in 1972 following the jailing of the Pentonville Dockers, when a general strike began to develop from below and the TUC



photo Paul Mattsson

was forced to call one; but only after they were certain they would not have to act on the threat, because the Dockers were already being freed from prison!

In the coming months the demand for a one-day general strike, probably initially a one-day public sector strike, is going to be on the lips of workers throughout Britain. Despite their reluctance, the enormous pressure that will develop from below can force even the most right-wing trade union leaders to act. And given the specific history of Britain, even a one-day public sector strike would strike terror into the government and the capitalist class and would enormously raise the confidence and combativity of the working class for the struggles to come.

Revolutionary general strikes

SUCH A ‘warning strike’ would inevitably be centred on stopping the government’s onslaught. However, there have been many general strikes in history which have gone beyond defensive demands and starkly raised the possibility of the working class taking power into its own hands. Although not posed immediately, at least in Britain, we will see similar revolutionary general strikes in the future.

1968 was a year of mass movements across the globe. In May of that year ten million workers in France occupied the factories in a month-long general strike in what was, at least until now, the greatest general strike in history. As they occupied the factories the French working class hoisted the red flag and discussed how they could run society. The French president, Charles de Gaulle, fled the country. The London Evening Standard declared: “The situation today can be summed up in a few words: it is

a revolutionary situation of an almost text-book kind.”

In essence, the only reason that the working class of France did not take power in the general strike of May 1968 was because the leadership of the working class, above all the Stalinist Communist Party, betrayed them and was as frightened by the movement as the capitalists. In Britain, as well, the leadership of the trade union movement has a history of quailing in the face of a determined mass movement of the working class, which has then allowed the capitalist class to defeat the movement.

In his book, *1926 General Strike – Workers Taste Power*, Peter Taaffe, Socialist Party general secretary, explains what happened during the last British general strike. In 1919, in the run up to the heroic nine-day general strike of 1926, the then British prime minister declared to the trade union leaders: “If you carry out your threat and strike you will defeat us, but if you do so have you weighed up the consequences? A strike will be in defiance of the government of this country, and by its very success, will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. For if a force arises in the state, which is stronger than the state itself, they must be ready to take on the functions of the state or withdraw and accept the authority of the state. Gentlemen, have you considered, and if you have, are you ready?” The reaction of the right-wing miners’ leader Robert Smillie was: “From that moment on we were beaten and we knew we were.”

When the general strike took place seven years later, the trade union leaders betrayed the strike because they were not prepared to mobilise the working class to take power. In the aftermath of the strike the capitalist class, terrified by the power the working class had demonstrated,

power themselves, and beginning to build a new socialist society, was not posed in the minds of the majority of even the most combative sections of the working class, at least at the beginning of the struggle.

This is starting to change on the basis of workers’ own experience. Already, according to opinion polls, 48% of the Greek population supports nationalisation of the banks and a third supports a call to ‘cancel the debt’; a demand that Xekinima, the Socialist Party’s sister party in Greece, was the first to put forward. Intrinsically linked to the development of socialist consciousness will be the building of mass parties with a socialist programme. Without its own political organisation the working class is fighting with one hand tied behind its back.

Workers’ committees

ANOTHER CRUCIAL aspect of the general strike is the development of workers’ committees. In France 1968 action committees sprang up around the country in workplaces, universities and neighbourhoods. The committees began to link up, initially to organise the strike, but inevitably also to begin to organise society. The same process began to develop in parts of Britain in 1926 – with motor vehicles requiring signs ‘by the authority of the TUC’ before they were allowed on the roads. Such organisations of struggle reached their highest level in history in Russia 1917 when the Soviets (workers’ councils) went from being the means of organising the revolution to the basis for building a new socialist society.

While in Greece there is enormous distrust of the official trade union leaders (the general secretary of the TUC no longer dares to speak at the general strike rallies after being physically hauled off the stage on one occasion and, on another, pelted with yoghurt!) there is not yet the widespread development of workers’ committees to direct the struggle. Socialists have an important role to play in raising the need for such committees.

Each country is different, but for these reasons it is – at this stage of the struggle across Europe – generally correct to call for warning general strikes – of 24 or 48 or even 72 hours – sometimes combined with other sectional strikes, depending on the stage of the struggle, rather than all-out general strikes. Such warning strikes can play a vital role in increasing the confidence and cohesion of the working class and preparing the ground for decisive action to defeat the capitalists in the future.

However, general strikes do not, in themselves, guarantee victory. To be fully effective they need to be built for, and part of a programme of action, not just an outlet for the working class to ‘let off steam’.

Britain’s struggle begins

HERE IN Britain the struggle is at a particularly early stage. To some extent we are still in the ‘phony war’ where the cuts have not yet all been announced, and even those that have been announced remain abstract in the minds of many workers. However, in the coming months, as millions face very concrete threats to their jobs, pensions, wages and public services, Greece will start to come to Britain.

We have demanded that the first step in Britain should be a massive trade union-led national demonstration, mobilising hundreds of

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thousands or more against the cuts. This would immediately raise the confidence of everyone who participated, preparing the ground for a 24 hour public sector general strike. As a result of the pressure from left unions the TUC has now said it will call a national demonstration. This is to be welcomed but the proposal for a demonstration in March 2011, six months after the comprehensive spending review, is far too late.

The London regions of the RMT, PCS and the firefighters’ FBU unions and of the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN – see www.shopstewards.net) have taken the initiative to call a regional demonstration in London on Saturday 23 October, immediately after the comprehensive spending review. Up and down the country other local demonstrations will also take place on that day. These should be a springboard for a national demonstration before Christmas.

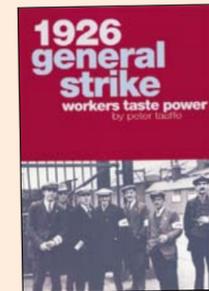
There are many other forms of struggle that will need to be employed in the war against the ‘austerians’ who want to wipe out rights and better conditions that have been won by the working class. 2010 will go down as the year that general strikes came back on the agenda. Used correctly, the general strike is a potentially enormously powerful weapon. As a result of the working class’s experience of struggle, we will increasingly see, not only the ‘defensive’ general strikes of today as the working class tries to hold back the offensive against them, but also general strikes where the working class sees the potential to take the power and begin to build a new democratic socialist society.



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