3 The Defeat of the General Strike

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On 4 May 1926, in response to a policy decision of the T.U.C. General Council, workers in the railways, road transport, the docks, iron and steel, printing, heavy chemicals, building, gas and electricity supply, withdrew their labour in support of the coal miners, who were already out on strike. It was a massive demonstration of solidarity. By it, the T.U.C. hoped to force Baldwin’s Conservative government to alter its policy on the coal industry. The T.U.C. wanted the government to accept the union contention that, before the miners were asked to accept reasonable wage reductions, the government should guarantee that speedy and effective reorganisation of the capital side of the coal industry would be implemented. In effect, the T.U.C. were demanding equality of sacrifice in coal, and were serving notice that they would not let the miners bear the brunt of the adjustment necessary to restore the prosperity of the economically depressed British coal trade.

On 4 May T.U.C. leaders were confident of victory. The committee structure at T.U.C. headquarters was reorganised so as to control and co-ordinate the overall union effort. Union leaders talked of calling out additional workers in order to intensify the pressure upon the government to achieve a rapid victory. However, on 12 May, only nine days later, the T.U.C. ended their General Strike unconditionally, without securing terms either for the miners, or for the strikers in other industries. The government had achieved an outright victory.

This essay analyses the policies adopted, and measures taken, by the Baldwin government to deal with the General Strike of
1926. It concludes that the government’s policies and actions – its supply and transport organisation, its unconditional surrender policy and Baldwin’s conciliatory tone – both compelled and persuaded the T.U.C. to end their strike unconditionally so that in effect the government defeated the General Strike.

Before examining the reasons for the defeat of the General Strike it is necessary to look at the events which led up to it, in order to understand why both the government and the T.U.C. believed they were justified in resorting to the politics of confrontation. An analysis of these events shows that, ironically, the conflict of 1926 arose out of an attempt by the government and the T.U.C. to seek co-operatively a peaceful solution to the problem of the coal industry.

The dispute in the coal industry, which underlay the General Strike, had presented the government with a difficult problem in 1925. The insensitive and heavy-handed approach of the coal owners towards the miners’ living standards had offended moderate public opinion. Baldwin realised that in a fight between the owners, and the miners supported by the T.U.C., the government could not afford to appear as the ally of the owners. Therefore Baldwin sought a neutral position which would be acceptable to moderate public opinion. He appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the coal mining industry and subsidised the miners’ living standards for nine months. He offered to accept the Commission’s report if the owners and miners did, and throughout April he acted as conciliator between the miners and owners. Finally he strove with the T.U.C. to reach a last-minute coal settlement. Although in reality, Baldwin’s actions from March to May 1926 were less than expert, and perhaps were even unhelpful, they gave the appearance of being, and probably were, the work of a sincere; well-intentioned man striving to preserve industrial peace. In effect Baldwin defused the government’s coal policy as a political issue.

After the publication of the Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry on 11 March 1926, both the government and the T.U.C. had worked for a compromise coal settlement along the lines of the Report. Neither the government nor the T.U.C. welcomed all aspects of the Report, but both tacitly rejected the hard-line official policies of the Miners’ Federation and the coal owners’ Mining Association and agreed that some combination of reorganisation of the capital side of the industry and some reduction of labour costs offered the best hope of a compromise coal