“No right to relieve a striker”: Trade Disputes and the Politics of Work and Family in the 1920s

In May 1926, the Trades Union Congress, the national organization of trade unions in Britain, called for a general strike in support of the Miners’ Federation dispute with employers, who sought to reduce wages and increase hours. The General Strike lasted nine days, during which time much of Britain’s transport and industrial base was shut down.1 Anticipating the large numbers of resulting relief applicants, the Stourbridge Board of Guardians held a special meeting to discuss strategies relative to the strike. The County Express reported that a “crowd of several hundred people gathered in the vicinity of the [poor law] institution” on the day of the meeting, and the board had about 900 applications for assistance. When the Reverend C.D. Banks-Gale asked how the board was going to handle applications from the men on strike, the clerk answered “that the Guardians were not dealing with the strikers at all, but with their wives and families.”2 As its minutes recorded, the Board of Guardians resolved “that the applications of strikers be considered as for, and on behalf of, the wives and children.”3 Two months later, with the General Strike over but the miners’ strike continuing, the Board of Guardians still faced “emergency circumstances.” In response to a complaint by a deputation of miners that the relief offered to strikers’ families was inadequate, the board noted that the law tied its hands. The board’s clerk assured the deputation that “the scale of relief being paid was more than the Guardians really ought to give at the present time. It was a scale which practically included the man – the striker – himself, and the deputation were aware that the Guardians had no right to relieve a striker.”4

According to the honest poverty work-welfare system, an able-bodied man who participated in a trade dispute compromised the conceptualization of masculine citizenship built around the willingness to work
and the maintenance of family. While state authorities might have wanted to punish striking men, whom they perceived as refusing to take available work, officials were not ready to extend this punishment to strikers’ wives and children, whom they regarded as innocent victims of the circumstances. Thus the Stourbridge Board of Guardians insisted that it was dealing only with the strikers’ wives and children, not with the strikers themselves. By denying public support, welfare policies marked striking men as agents of their condition: strikers chose not to work, so their unemployment was not blameless. Wives and children, by contrast, were seen as unable to choose their condition: they depended on husbands and fathers to provide for them and were therefore still deserving of assistance when men failed to provide. This was a major departure from the 1834 New Poor Law mandate that the families of able-bodied male paupers followed the husband/father’s condition.

Strikes were fundamentally a contest about the conditions under which the work imperative should matter. Men involved in industrial disputes did not see themselves as Weary Willies who were unwilling to work; rather, they argued that employers unmanned workers by forcing them to accept wages that challenged men’s abilities to provide for their families. As a deputation from the Miners’ Federation put it to the Prime Minister in December 1922, the government needed to make sure that miners were “properly paid, because an industry such as this ought to be able to pay wages which we, as citizens, have a right to expect, and we ask the Government that we should be paid as citizens and that we should be given an equal opportunity with other citizens.”

Strikes were a central means through which honest poor men sought to assert their rights as citizens. While these issues came into play throughout the period of this study, the conditions of the 1920s brought into sharp relief questions regarding aid to striking men. In particular, the national coal strike of 1921 and the General Strike and miners’ strike of 1926 created policy problems for the British government surrounding interpretations of honest poverty. Striking men challenged employers who used the work imperative and family liability to justify poor work conditions and low wages.

**Family welfare and the Merthyr Tydfil decision**

The 1921 coal dispute began when Parliament ended government control of the coal industry, giving mine owners the power to set wages district by district as opposed to following national scales. Coal mining had been taken over by the state during the First World War, and