

The Soviet Union and the British General Strike of 1926

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This paper addresses the Soviet analysis and response to the British General Strike of 1926 in the light of newly available documents. The recently discovered and published stenograms of Politburo meetings provide new information concerning Soviet politics and the political process. Previously, scholars have had only Soviet official documents and protocols of Politburo meetings, which only detail participants with a brief summary of decisions (*vypuski*) along with who received these summaries.¹ From the protocols, and other sources, scholars were aware that verbatim stenograms existed, some of which were published and distributed to Central Committee members and other party leaders with instructions for them to be returned after they had been read.² Amongst the ‘lost Politburo stenograms’ is the record of a lengthy, heated, discussion of the ‘lessons of the British General Strike’ on 3 June 1926.³ It is this that the current paper is chiefly concerned with, detailing the Soviet stance towards the General Strike, inconsistency in the Soviet analysis, the extent to which Soviet internal politics was linked to foreign policy, how as senior figures disagreed factions developed around divisions in policy, and the way in which the handling of the international situation formed a strand of the opposition to Stalin and the Politburo majority in 1926.⁴

The British General Strike ran from 4-12 May 1926. Although it drew British industry to a halt, and hadn’t been planned much in advance, there had been ample warning of a coming labour dispute, of which the British and Soviet Governments were well aware, although the Soviets had concluded that major action was unlikely

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¹ Kiril Anderson et al. (eds), *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.* (3 vols Moscow 2007), vol. 1, p. 19.

² Ibid. p. 27. Some enclosures from the appendix of the discussion of the General Strike were not circulated to as wide an audience.

³ Politburo Protocol no. 30, 3 June 1926, reproduced in Adibekov et al. (eds), *Politbiuro TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) povestki dnya zasedanii 1919-1952 Katalog* (3 vols Moscow, 2000-2001), vol. 1, p. 464.

⁴ Paul Gregory, “Watching Stalin Win,” *Hoover Digest*, 2007, no. 4, <http://www.hoover.org/publications/digest/10653636.html> on 13 August 2008.

and were taken by surprise when the strike was launched.⁵ On 1 May miners across Britain found themselves locked out of pits unless they would agree to a substantial wage decrease. This was the culmination of a situation that had begun brewing nine months earlier following a fall in the price of coal, in part caused by the Dawes Plan and the re-entry of German coal onto the market and the removal of government subsidies. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) had agreed on 'Red Friday' 31 July 1925 to an embargo on the transport of coal in the event of a lockout. On the afternoon of 1 May a conference of trade union executives, which had been meeting in London since 29 April, voted overwhelmingly to take strike action in support of the miners, and the strike went into effect on the night of 3-4 April. The General Strike lasted for nine days.⁶

The British General Strike was discussed by the Politburo from its outset. Discussion of the 'English affair' as it is referred to in the Politburo protocols occupied the first agenda point of the Politburo's meeting on 4 May 1926, the day after the strike started, with the General Secretary of the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern) Alexander Lozovskii, Secretary of the Executive Control Commission of the Communist International (ECCI) Osip Piatnitskii, and Foreign Commissar Georgii Chicherin involved in the discussion.⁷ By 6 May Grigorii Zinoviev, head of the Comintern, had become involved in the discussion along with Mikhail Tomsky, director of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS).⁸ The following day the Comintern Praesidium met to discuss the strike, with Stalin present at the meeting. Little action was actually taken by the Soviets at the upper levels of the Party machine, although it was agreed that a commission to discuss the strike should be established and that money should be sent in support of the strikers. For an issue about which so much has been made, according to Lev Trotsky, the discussion occupied a remarkably small amount of the Politburo's time, with only twenty minutes given to it on the first occasion and about five on the

⁵ Gabriel Gorodetsky, "The Formulation of Soviet Foreign Policy – Ideology and Realpolitik", in Gorodetsky (ed), *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-199: A Retrospective*, (London, 1994). pp. 37-9.

⁶ Margaret Morris, *The British General Strike 1926*, (London, 1973), pp. 3-4.

⁷ Politburo Protocol no. 23, 4 May 1926, reproduced in *Politbiuro TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) povestki dnya zasedanii 1919-1952*, vol. 1, p 456.

⁸ Politburo Protocol no. 24, 6 May 1926, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 456-7.

second.⁹ Additionally, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) received little attention in Politburo discussions.

Trotsky is to be taken with caution here, and Aleksei Rykov refuted the fact that discussion of the issue had been neglected. The Politburo did decide some course of action during the early days of the strike. The decisions of the meeting on 4 May 1926 were important, even if ultimately some were to find the way the Soviet Union handled the strike disappointing. Given the warnings that the Soviets had received from the British Government in the past regarding revolutionary activity, they could not be seen to be directly involved in exploiting the strike in pursuit of revolution. The CPGB was directed to engage in agitation, while a commission was to be established in Paris comprising Tomsy, Humboldt, Pierre Semard, Otto Braun, and Gaston Monmuss with support from the Comintern and Profintern to discuss aid to Britain.¹⁰ Two days later on 6 May, this commission was expanded to include Ernst Thälmann and Arthur Ewert. 250,000 roubles were to be sent immediately to Britain from the VTsSPS, with a further 2 million sent on 7 May.¹¹ Money and assistance was to be routed through the Anglo-Russian [Joint Advisory] Committee (ARK) via the Comintern and Profintern.¹² The offer of Soviet money caused disquiet within the British Government, who were suspicious that it was Soviet government money rather than money levied from the trade unions and there were cries of ‘red gold’.¹³ The TUC General Council refused the money, shocking the Soviets, but the Miner’s Union accepted the aid and asked for more later in May, receiving a further £270,000 of aid.¹⁴

The Strike was discussed at every subsequent Politburo meeting, although little was decided until after it was over and it is impossible to gauge how much

⁹ “Stenogramma zasedaniya Politbiuro TsK VKP(B) po vosprosu “Ob urokakh ahgliiskoi vseobshei stachki” 3 iunya 1926 g.” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro*, vol. 1, pp. 740.

¹⁰ Politburo Protocol no. 23, 4 May 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 3, l. 57-8, reproduced in Adibekov et al. (eds), *Politbiuro TsK rKP(B)-VKP(B) i Evropa. Resheniya «osoboi papki» 1923-1939* (Moscow, 2001), pp. 115-6.

¹¹ Monthly wages in Large-scale industry in Moscow for the first quarter of the fiscal year 1926/7 were approx 30 rubles. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, ch. 4.

¹² Politburo Protocol no. 24, 6 May 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 3, l. 60-3, reproduced in *Politbiuro TsK rKP(B)-VKP(B) i Komintern. 1919-1943 dokumenty* (Moscow, 2004), pp. 362-4.

¹³ W K and Zelda and Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943), pp. 229-31; *Hansard* 14 June 1926, col. 1960-1, cited in *ibid.*, p. 231; Soviet note to British Government, 15 June 1926, cited in *ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁴ James Klugman, *History of the Communist Part of Great Britain: Volume 2 The General Strike, 1925-1926* (London, 1969), p. 319-20. The total aid that came from the Soviet Union was £1.25 million (in contemporary terms this equals approx £50 million in the UK).

Tomsky's commission decided as details of the meetings were poorly recorded and then secured in 'secret files', which remain closed. On 13 May, the day after the strike was called off by the TUC, discussion of the 'affair' reappeared in the Politburo with Lozovskii dealing with it from the Profintern, and on 14 May the Politburo discussed matters with Zinoviev, Chicherin, Piatnitskii and Lozovskii in attendance.¹⁵ Until the end of May discussion continued sporadically, but it was on 3 June that the Politburo turned its attention towards the British General Strike and its lessons after Zinoviev had pushed for deeper discussion.

The meeting of 3 June is of great interest in the history of the Soviet involvement in and reaction to the British General Strike of 1926, and it is from it that we can glean the most about the discussion of the topic within the Politburo. Convened at Zinoviev's insistence to address the 'lessons of the British Strike', the hotly debated six-hour session was stenogrammed, producing a verbatim report.¹⁶ Amongst those present were, Nikolai Bukharin, Kliment Voroshilov, Grigorii Zinoviev, Vyacheslav Molotov, Aleksei Rykov, Mikhail Tomsky, Lev Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, Dmitrii Manuilsky, and Georgii Chicherin. Significantly, Stalin was on vacation and not present.¹⁷ The latter fact was clearly important in Zinoviev's pressure to hold the meeting in early June, and in requesting the session be recorded in detail he was clearly hoping to use the distributed document to his advantage. There was nothing particularly unusual about this given the scale of the issue, although the debate over the General Strike marked a departure from the norm for Politburo meetings, with discussion of policy as if in a close circle of allies replaced by lively and heated debate challenging the general line.¹⁸ Speakers were even offered the opportunity to edit the stenographic record (the details of editing are shown in publication), in order to remove anything that could be harmful to state interests. With reference to the discussion of the General Strike Tomsky admitted

¹⁵ Politburo Protocol no. 25, 13 May 1926, reproduced in Adibekov et al. (eds), *Politbiuro TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) povestki dnya zasedanii 1919-1952.*, pp. 457-9; Politburo Protocol no. 26, 14 May 1926, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 459-60.

¹⁶ Politburo Protocol no. 30, 3 June 1926, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 464-5; RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in Anderson et al. (eds), *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 743-827. Tovstukha to Stalin (coded), 3 June 1926, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 3266, l. 3, reproduced in Lih, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, p. 112.

¹⁷ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in Anderson et al. (eds), *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1,

¹⁸ Alexander Vatlin, "Class Brothers Unite! The British General Strike and the Formation of the United Opposition," forthcoming in Paul Gregory and Norman Naimark (eds), *The Lost Transcripts of the Politburo* (Yale, 2008), p. 1.

that the participants in the debate had ‘thrown aside all restraints’ and approximately a month later Felix Dzerzhinskii, head of the OGPU, questioned whether such detailed records should be kept as they could be used as weapons in intra-party struggle.¹⁹

What unfolded in the Politburo session on 3 June 1926 shows the beginning of the cementing of the ‘United Opposition’ of Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev and the beginning of a duel between them and Stalin, Bukharin, Rykov and to a lesser extent Molotov. Zinoviev was extremely vociferous during the meeting, and it is clear that his involvement in the ‘united opposition’ went further than just an attack on the Soviet handling of the British General Strike. There was also a very clear tussle between the Soviet foreign affairs institutions in the form of the Comintern, Profintern and Narkomindel. Although Chicherin remained silent throughout the discussion, Soviet diplomacy with respect to Britain was attacked, but not to the extent to which Zinoviev launched an assault on the Profintern. There was more than just institutional rivalry at play here – this was a fight over ideology and revolutionary internationalism with respect to the Soviet relationship with the British Government, the British trade unions, the TUC, ARK, the Amsterdam-based International Federation of Trade Unions (ITFU), and the compromises that had been made in Soviet policy in order to preserve these relationships.

The oppositionists went into the debate believing that they had a better impression of the international situation than their counterparts. Zinoviev as head of the Comintern was well placed for this and was the major source of information on the Strike at the Politburo session on 3 June.²⁰ Zinoviev pitted his thesis on the lessons of the strike against the ‘counter-theses of Molotov, Bukharin and Tomsky’, and changed his own line from before the strike on the question of capitalist stabilization.²¹ He related the question over the strike to the position of the Comintern with respect to Soviet policy making, restating the fact that he had given timely warning of a coming struggle between British workers, in particular the miners, and their government and that Soviet policy had not been effective either during preparation for the strike or during it.²² He decried Soviet policy as a betrayal of revolutionary ideals, having aligned with a reformist trade union movement, rather

¹⁹ Anderson et al. (eds), *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo* vol. 1, pp. 22-6.

²⁰ Vatlin, “Class Brothers Unite!”, p. 2; RGASPI f. 17, op. 163, d. 687n

²¹ Grigorii Zinoviev, “Filosofia epokhi”, 1925.

²² RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in Anderson et al. (eds), *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 744-5

than attempting to mobilize more revolutionary elements amongst the British working class, and branded the TUC General Council as treasonous.

That the General Strike should be turned to political, rather than economic, ends had been generally agreed by the Politburo, but Zinoviev denounced the alliance with the British trade union movement as a dangerous mistake, laying blame at Tomsky's feet and his commission and damning the Profintern for failing to form part of an international communist movement. The fact that Tomsky and his commission had been in France during the strike was part of it, Zinoviev argued, but he attacked the details of the commission's discussions, gleaning his information from 'one (the only) meeting protocol of Tomsky's commission'.²³ The attack on working with ARK featured prominently in the analysis, and detailed Tomsky's working against the Comintern's line, and going on to take issue with the theses on the strike from Molotov, Bukharin and Tomsky and the strategy that they had led to. Criticizing the strategy for deliberately ignoring a revolutionary communist mass and instead dealing only with reactionary trade unions, Zinoviev argued that Soviet policy had worked against British communists and international communism, and that the situation would continue while ARK continued to deal only with British communists through the trade unions. As he put it, this strategy was a 'quadrille with the dead' and a betrayal of the Comintern's principle of the 'united workers front', heralding a return to the Second International. He joined Trotsky in demanding that the Soviets disengage from ARK.²⁴

Kamenev joined the argument, pointing out that everyone had been ill-informed on the strike in Moscow. His attack, like Zinoviev's and Trotsky's, focussed on ARK's failure to achieve what it was established to do, and the fact that the strike had highlighted this. It had not presented itself as a body that was 'progressive, revolutionary, and opening a new path' in the British labour movement, but had pandered to the government and was inherently reformist. He also made a thinly veiled assault on ARK's role as an organ of internationalism, raising the question as to why Britain occupied pride of place in Soviet thinking as opposed to Germany, France, or Belgium. He concluded that ARK was ineffective and that the

²³ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 747-748; Protocol of the meeting of Tomsky's commission, 15 May 1926, RGASPI f. 17, op. 163, d. 686, l. 146-56 reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 901-3

²⁴ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 748-51, 770-1; Trotsky, *Voprosy britanskogo rabochego dvizhenia*, p. 229.

Soviets clung too tightly to an organisation that was inherently opposed to their ideological objectives, being an elitist body with no connection to the masses.²⁵ He portrayed ARK as opportunistic, made allusions to the Second International and to Menshevism, and accused Bukharin in particular of being a strike-breaker for supporting collusion with the TUC General Council through ARK rather than working with a revolutionary mass, and Tomsky for defending his own interests via the Profintern. These two direct accusations led to Mikhail Kalinin to propose closing the list of orators, meaning that the level of opposition was to be restricted, and showing that at least one of the majority had had enough of their rants by this stage (this is about 40 pages into the stenogram, approximately halfway through the session).²⁶

The Politburo majority fought back hard and accused the oppositionists of indulging in wishful thinking, based on poor information and the contravention of principles, and with an unrealistic expectation of revolution in Britain. Andrei Andreev, Commissar of Transport, focussed on two serious errors on the part of Trotsky and Zinoviev. Firstly Zinoviev was ‘shaking the foundation of the Comintern’s line on the question of [capitalist] stabilization’ in believing that the strike had ‘opened a new phase in the international labour movement’ and had ignored the situation in the wider world. Secondly, Trotsky and Zinoviev refused to acknowledge ARK’s significance as a means for pursuing a unified front with British workers and struggling against reformism, and as a component of the Soviet’s commitment to internationalism (he also portrayed the Profintern in a similar light). Stating that the oppositionists ‘left position at first glance [was] a very attractive’ one, Andreev concluded that if the Soviets were all to move to it then any hope of a unified workers’ front would be lost.²⁷

Tomsky took a firm line on the principles of working with the British trade union movement, claiming that in Britain, trade union unity could only be secured through ARK. While Tomsky was preserving the interests of the Profintern, he was not alone in holding to the line of alliance with the trade unions. Bukharin supported Tomsky’s line on ARK, stating that the CPGB had close ties with the trade unions, and he argued for continued Soviet involvement in ARK as a means of working with

²⁵ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 781-3.

²⁶ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 784.

²⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 778-9.

the CPGB to direct communist activity in Britain. Tomsy also attacked Zinoviev's and Trotsky's proposals to leave ARK as 'revision of Leninism on the question of trade unions', and of espousing a policy that would lead to a break with the unified front. He highlighted Lenin's reading that trade unions offered non-party mass organisations, and stressed that the Profintern and ARK had an important role in mobilizing these masses towards revolution. He even went so far as to brand Zinoviev and Trotsky with leftism.²⁸

Rykov was among the more persistent of the majority, and countered the line pursued by the opposition by drawing attention to the consistent thread in their attack. He queried why, in discussing Soviet tactics with respect to the strike, they were only talking about ARK and its failings when there were other matters to consider. He went on to point out that the Soviets had encountered difficulties with the CPGB through the Comintern during the strike, and that the Comintern had done little of a practical nature. The Soviets simply did not understand the political or cultural situation in Britain and were attempting to map their monolithic understanding of things onto the situation. This had led to problems, Rykov alleged, and was further compounded by the fact that Kamenev was guilty of being unable to distinguish trade unions from political parties, an allegation which Rykov used to seriously discredit Kamenev in front of the Politburo (Kamenev was editor of Lenin's works and had been a teacher and director at the Institute of Leninism). Rykov's point was that Kamenev (and others) had made grave theoretical and practical errors.²⁹

Rykov also attacked Trotsky over the section of his letter of 2 June 1926 to the Politburo in which he had attacked Soviet diplomacy for ignoring the working masses in Britain in the name of 'realism' in order to maintain a relationship with the British Government. He blamed Trotsky, once himself Foreign Commissar, for revolutionary adventurism, something which Leonid Krasin had always counselled against in Britain.³⁰ Trotsky and Kamenev, Rykov said, were woefully wide of the mark in ignoring the importance of the trade union movement in Britain, and clearly were unaware of the fact that the CPGB had pursued the line of 'all power to the [TUC] General Council' (this works much better in Russian with the phrase 'vsya vlast'

²⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 821-2.

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 784-8

³⁰ Trotsky to Politburo TsK VKP(B), 2 June 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 163, d. 687 reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 883; *The Twelfth Party Congress, April 1923* (Moscow, 1923), p. 113, as quoted in Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-67* (New York, 1968), p. 139.

General'nomu Sovetu', aping the slogan 'vsya vlast' Sovetam' of the Russian Revolution) and that the trade unions were the main organizational body that would carry the British working class to revolutionary victory.³¹

Indeed, it is here that Rykov hit on one of the more important factors in the debate on the lessons of the General Strike, and the manner in which the Soviets had been involved. Pointing out that the CPGB was young and not yet a mass organization he argued that it was only through the trade unions in Britain that the Soviets could have any proper connection with a revolutionary mass. Instead, however, of arguing that this was a fundamental weakness in the CPGB and the Comintern, he argued that it was necessary to use the trade unions rather than the CPGB until such time as the Party could replace the unions. In doing so he stated that this was the thrust of the theses of Tomskey, Bukharin and Molotov on the General Strike.³² The timing of such a remark is revealing, and shows that despite the theses of the Fifth Comintern Congress on the bolshevization of the Comintern in 1924 and the revolutionising of trade unions, the programme was not sufficiently advanced in Britain by the middle of 1926. This is also a striking admission on the part of Rykov, that despite the damning of syndicalism as a deviation that the Soviets had engaged in the past, and would engage in the future, they saw allying with the trade unions as acceptable in the instance of the British General Strike. In this we see the pragmatism of Soviet policy – much that should be ideologically unacceptable becomes policy when trying to achieve results. The Soviets had engaged with opportunists, which their ideology and organizational precepts forbade, but Rykov and others strongly defended such behaviour.

Rykov went on to attack Zinoviev and the Comintern, raising questions as to why the Comintern had seemingly supported the strike in a less than entirely committed fashion. In the same terms he attacked the Profintern, although he turned the blame away from Tomskey, shifting it to the Comintern. Rykov's argument was simple – support had not been forthcoming from across the Comintern and Profintern, with only the Soviet Party supporting the strikers in earnest. This played into the hands of the IFTU, and showed ignorance of the lessons of the German October when German Trade Unions had turned against Amsterdam and formed a united front with

³¹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in Anderson et al. (eds), *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, p. 785.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 785-6.

the Profintern. In response, Zinoviev accused Rykov of being puerile and spewing slogans fit for young pioneers.³³

The Politburo session eventually produced a document on the ‘lessons of the English Strike.’ This differed somewhat from the resolution on ‘lessons’ that Zinoviev and the ECCI had offered earlier, although it was agreed by the ECCI on 8 June and reported in *Inprecorr* on 17 June.³⁴ Zinoviev’s draft, produced about a week in advance of the session on 3 June highlighted what he, and by implication the Comintern, saw to be the lessons of the British General Strike. It stated that the strike heralded a new period in the international workers’ movement and that revolution in Europe depended on the fate of the British working class who had been quickly revolutionized by the strike and would realize their historical mission in the near future.³⁵ He portrayed the strike as a necessary stage in the evolution of the British working class towards revolution, drawing on Marx, Engels and Lenin. In his interpretation the General Strike had brought about the opportunity for a proletarian workers’ movement to replace a bourgeois movement. Certain things could be gleaned from this shift. Opportunism remained a challenge, and restricted the working classes, and was inherently linked to the trade unions, but more importantly to the TUC. It was, Zinoviev argued, necessary to break with the unions and the TUC – who represented the bourgeois and were in league with the British government – and push for a real revolutionary mass. It was here that he highlighted the role of the CPGB and what the strike meant for them. Acknowledging that the CPGB was young and relatively small, he made the case for the party being able to recruit in the wake of the strike and become a true mass party that could counter the trade unions and the Labour Party.³⁶ The CPGB was to step up agitation within the trade unions and the TUC and push to organize the working class en masse, acknowledging that the line of the unified worker’s front had passed its usefulness. He also pushed for working with the revolutionary minority of the trade unions in Britain in order to

³³ *Ibid.*, 787-9.

³⁴ *International Press Correspondence (Inprecorr)*, vol. 6, no. 47, 17 June 1926, pp. 765-72; ILS Curriculum History of the Comintern: Party Structure, 1st Course Task No. 4, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 30, d. 434, l. 100; Vatlin, “Class Brothers Unite!”, p. 20.

³⁵ “Uroki angliiskoi zabastovki”. Tezisy G. Zinov’eva dlya vnesehiya v IKKI”, earlier than 3 June 1926, reproduced in RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 844-59.

³⁶ CPGB membership rose sharply during the General Strike from 6,000 to 10, 730 and continued to grow through to the end of 1926.

create Sovietized trade unions. While much of this programme was exciting, Zinoviev made reference to the Comintern's weaknesses during the General Strike, namely that the CPGB was too young and too small to offer a counter to the TUC and its leaders, and that there had been little real support from other sections of the Comintern.

Comintern tactics in response to the strike, as outlined by Zinoviev, were to be: a move away from the unified front towards a more radical policy; to be more energetic and organized in creating an international trade union movement; to attack reformism within the British trade unions; to work with the revolutionary minority to build sovietized trade unions; and to recognise and deal with right and ultra-left deviations within the Comintern and its parties.³⁷ In a wider context Zinoviev hoped to use events in Britain, and the attendant shift in focus for the European Revolution, as a catalyst for adjusting the Comintern model. In this we see one of the biggest obstacles that the Comintern struggled with during the process of bolshevization – the notion that a single model could work and lead to success in all situations. If nothing else, the British General Strike made abundantly clear the fact that all situations were not equal, and the rash of comments in the discussion on 3 June as well as material produced afterwards made it apparent that the Soviets were aware of differences and that Britain presented certain aspects stemming from its politics and culture that presented challenges for the Comintern.³⁸

In laying out his views on what could be learned from the strike Zinoviev addressed one of the tenets of Soviet policy with respect to the pursuit of world revolution in the 1920s – the stabilization of capitalism – which was perhaps his undoing in the face of the Politburo majority. Flying in the face of the analysis of Bukharin, Tomsky, Rykov, Molotov and Stalin, Zinoviev's analysis was that the strike had left British capitalism 'standing on a volcano', and that the period of capitalist stabilization was over. He echoed this line in his speech during the meeting, directly attacking Stalin and disagreeing with Voroshilov's suggestion that the

³⁷ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 857-8.

³⁸ Trotsky, *Lessons of the British Strike*.

stabilization phase would last 15-20 years.³⁹ He attacked Stalinist ECCI member Maniulsky for his article in support of Stalin's line in *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional* and drew attention to his own analysis of the revolutionary epoch in his own article "Filosofia epokhi", written in 1925.⁴⁰ He made the point that this shift could heralded not just a dawn of a new revolutionary epoch, but also created a risk of the rise of fascist movements.⁴¹ The Comintern and the Soviet Union must not abandon Britain simply because the strike had failed to bring the hoped for revolution outside of the Soviet Union. Zinoviev concluded that the revolutionary era was around the corner, not several years away as he had originally argued. This was perhaps the biggest shaking of the Soviet line. Given the issue of 'stabilization', Zinoviev espoused breaking with the TUC and ARK as remaining involved with them could only lead to further betrayal of the British working class and the revolution.⁴² He also reminded Bukharin and Rykov that ARK was 'simply a union of Russian and British trade unions, not a mixture of parties and trades unions, its duty to deal only with trade union questions'.⁴³ Trotsky supported this line, and made clear that the British situation relied upon a change in labour relations, rather than maintenance of an established bourgeois block.⁴⁴ For this Bukharin and Molotov branded Zinoviev a 'recallist', with Stalin going as far as to accuse him of liquidationism.⁴⁵ Zinoviev was before his time; what he was calling for was not that different from what would arise during the 'third period' from 1928, following Stalin's great break and left turn.

Molotov questioned why Zinoviev was challenging the line on stabilization, and why he thought the 'capitalist ship was now sinking'. Driving at Zinoviev's inconsistency, in the face of both Comintern and Politburo policy, Molotov harshly criticized Zinoviev's failure to support and follow the line that had been agreed

³⁹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 798-800.

⁴⁰ D. Z. Maniulsky, "Angliiskaya stachka I stabilizatsiya kapitalizma," *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, 1926, no. 5-6 (54-55) pp. 46-56; Molotov and Bukharin to Stalin (coded), 1 June 1926, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 1, d. 114, l. , reproduced in Lars Lih et al (eds), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925-1936* (New Haven, 1995), p. 106.

⁴¹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp.853-4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 853-5.

⁴³ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, p. 802.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 812-4.

⁴⁵ Recallist denotes a Bolshevik who refuses to work within a bourgeois institution such as a trade union. Molotov and Bukharin to Stalin (coded), 1 June 1926

upon.⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Bukharin insisted that the majority thesis was correct and must be accepted.⁴⁷ Zinoviev's thesis was rejected by the Politburo majority, and he was not allowed the opportunity to defend his position to the Comintern. Initially, Bukharin had suggested that rather than making a counter-thesis the Politburo should make corrections to Zinoviev's.⁴⁸ Fearful that Zinoviev and Trotsky were trying to rush a decision based on a flawed precept, Stalin was more aggressive, and suggested that Molotov tell the opposition to go to hell and reject Zinoviev's theses outright as liquidationist.⁴⁹ In the end a thesis from Bukharin, Molotov and Tomsy was agreed.⁵⁰ To a large extent this dealt with attacking Zinoviev's views on the stabilization of capitalism and the arrival of a new era, but it also addressed Comintern strategy. Zinoviev's push for the building of sovietized trade unions was not completely ignored – work with the minority was still recommended – but the major difference was that the accepted theses called for adherence to the unified front, and sustained work within trade unions. Above all, the maintenance of institutions was seen as important in working within the British labour movement, and in maintaining a Soviet foothold until such a time as the CPGB became a true mass party and the stabilization of capitalism had truly passed.⁵¹

The counter-theses of the Politburo majority, and the denial of Zinoviev's request to defend his position sealed his fate along with that of the other oppositionists. Stalin moved to force them out, highlighting to Bukharin, Rykov, Molotov and others that Zinoviev posed a serious threat to party unity because he understood how the party worked and because of his position as leader of the Comintern.⁵² Zinoviev was to be removed from the Politburo, which would also make his position as Comintern chairman untenable. This would also allow for the removal of the position of chairman of the ECCI and the formation of a new executive body, the political secretariat, to administer the Comintern. Zinoviev had clearly

⁴⁶ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 818-820.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 809.

⁴⁸ Molotov and Bukharin to Stalin (coded), 1 June 1926

⁴⁹ Stalin to Molotov (coded), 2 June 1926, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 3263, l. 1, reproduced in Lih, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, pp. 107-8.

⁵⁰ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 830-44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 843-4.

⁵² Stalin to Molotov, Rykov, Bukharin and other friends, 25 June 1926, reproduced in Lih et al (eds), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, pp. 117-8.

overstepped the mark, and his theses on the lesson of the General Strike were to go unheeded and be swept aside despite his and Trotsky's protestations.⁵³

The Comintern was also brought to heel, and none of the 'Russian comrades' were present at the Comintern Praesidium meeting the day following the Politburo session on the strike. On 8 June the Politburo resolution 'on the lessons of the British strike' was approved by the ECCI. Bukharin delivered the report, with Zinoviev present, to foreign communist parties who then duly duplicated the decision. Only one dissenting voice was heard, that of the Czech Viktor Stern, who was accused of 'dragging in the tail of the German ultra-leftists' when he spoke up in support of the oppositionists.⁵⁴

The stenogram of the Politburo session on the lessons of the General Strike on 3 June reveals hitherto unseen details. The 'united opposition' of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev was undoubtedly emerging at the time, and the issue of the strike crystallized the three men into a block that stood against the Politburo majority. The meeting also shows other details, notably in the discussion of ideology and its relationship to Soviet policy. Zinoviev called for a change in policy, at a Soviet level and in the Comintern. His theses were sidelined, but in essence he was arguing for the policy shift that would come a few years later following the 'left turn' as the Comintern adopted the tactics of the third period. Zinoviev jumped the gun somewhat, not necessarily because the international situation was more stable in 1926 than it was in 1928, but because the climate in Soviet internal affairs, particularly with the leadership struggle ongoing, was not ready for such changes to be launched. In the final analysis, Zinoviev's great failing during discussion of the British General Strike and the issues surrounding it was his failure to recognize that the time was not right for there to be a reorientation of the Soviet position.

One of the key reasons behind the lack of impetus for such a decision lay in the Soviet desire to preserve diplomatic and trade relations with Britain. Having weathered the crises of the Curzon Ultimatum in 1923, the Zinoviev Letter in 1924, and now the General Strike, the Soviets were not ready to unleash a new revolutionary phase within Britain. The situation in 1928 would be greatly different,

⁵³ Zayavlenie L. D. Trotskogo k stenogramme zasedaniya Polibiuro ot 3 iiunya 1926, g., 16 June 1926, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.*, vol. 1, pp. 889-90; Doplnenie G. E. Zinov'eva k stenogramme zasedaniya Polibiuro ot 3 iiunya 1926, g., 19 June 1926, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 889-90

⁵⁴ RGAPSI, f. 495, op. 2, d. 73; Vatlin, pp. 21-22.

following the rupture of relations with Britain in 1927 and Stalin's consolidation of power. It would be overly harsh to state that the Soviets refused to support a British revolution in 1926, but they were wary. Once the British had broken relations in 1927, and in Soviet eyes threatened renewed encirclement, they had little to lose.

The British General Strike had a profound effect on Soviet policy, and on the Soviet government. At a time when the Soviets were unwilling to embark on a new course the Comintern, despite Zinoviev's arguments, did not enter a new militant phase in 1926, but rather entered into a transitional phase as a prelude to the left turn of 1928. By November 1926, Bukharin had outlined the 'third period', although it was almost another two years before the 9th Plenum of the ECCI adopted the doctrine. Zinoviev called for change too early, pushing for a line that was too radical for the majority until Stalin had consolidated his position. Zinoviev could not be allowed to be right, not least because he was allying with Trotsky, and Bukharin and Rykov were becoming sucked into a fickle alliance with Stalin that would last until the 'right deviation' was discredited and they too fell from favour. As such, Soviet discussion of the 'lessons of the British General Strike' featured prominently in the machinations surrounding Stalin's rise to power.