

COMMENT

By Brendan O'Neill



TAKING ACTION

A MASSIVE GATHERING IN HYDE PARK FOR A MEETING DURING THE GENERAL STRIKE, 1926 – BUT HOW WILL 2011 COMPARE WITH THIS?

Striking differences

BOTH SIDES OF THE POLITICAL DIVIDE are getting overexcited about this strike: radical leftists predict it will signal the rebirth of old-style Labour politics, while fearful right-wingers fret that it will drag us back to the bad old days of unemptied rubbish bins and “winters of discontent”. David Cameron told *The Sun*: “I’m so angry that union bosses are ordering millions of public sector workers to strike.” The PM claims the day of action will cost Britain £500m.

But will November 30 really live up to left-wing fantasies about the return of union power and confirm right-wing fears that lefty troublemakers plan to take down the government?

There’s no doubting the strike will be big. In a national day of action coordinated by the Trades Unions Congress, two million workers will down tools to register their anger over government plans to overhaul the public-sector pension system. The government claims that, in the midst of a recession and with people living longer, the cost of public-sector pensions has become “unsustainable” – and so public-sector workers will have to chip in more to their pensions and/or work for longer than they had planned. It’s not surprising public-sector workers are angry – they’re being punished for recessionary trends that aren’t their fault.

Yet it simply doesn’t add up to compare November 30 with the General Strike, with one left-wing newspaper gleefully claiming: “Not since 1926 has there been any comparable move by so many unions to strike together on the same day.” Comparisons with 1926 only highlight how far the fortunes of trade unions have fallen in recent decades. Comparing today’s rather staged mass walkouts with the life-and-death, nine-day class struggle of 1926 only exposes the paucity of modern-day union activity.

It is the differences between 1926 and 2011 that are really striking. In the General Strike, millions of workers from many industries downed tools in support of miners who were striking against the imposition of wage cuts and longer hours. As a result, a whopping 162

million working days were lost in 1926 – but in more recent times, the number of working days lost to strikes has dramatically declined, reflecting a fall in union membership and union activity. In 1979, at the height of the “winter of discontent” strikes, 29 million working days were lost – a very high number, but significantly less than in 1926. Fast forward to 2009, and a mere 455,000 working days were lost to trade-union activity, an almost insignificant number in comparison.

As a BBC analysis pointed out last year, in comparison with recent periods we are currently living in an era of “breathless tranquillity” in industrial relations. Apparently there were fewer strike days in the whole past 20 years put together than there were in 1979 alone, despite the fact that there are now 4.5 million more people in the workforce today.

It isn’t only the numbers that have changed – so have the politics. In 1926, there was a pretty clear-cut battle between workers and bosses. The working classes had a greater sense of themselves – the lines were clearly drawn and most people knew which side they stood on. Today, such class politics seems like a distant memory. The working classes are not as organised as they once were and have far less clout.

This can be glimpsed in the decline of trade-union impact over recent decades, and also in the way the working classes are now talked about: where once they were taken seriously as major players in the public forum, today they tend to be written off either as feckless ‘chavs’ or as greedy workers whose demands for better wages, bigger houses and more ‘stuff’ is, apparently, unreasonable.

We certainly need some way in which working people can register their anger, and reshape public debate so it takes into account the needs of the mass of society. But that won’t happen on November 30, which feels more like it will be a loud and colourful PR stunt ultimately designed to disguise the fact that, in truth, trade unions are a sad shadow of their former selves. ●

Brendan O’Neill is the editor of political website Spiked – www.spiked-online.com



TheBigQ

WOULD YOU BUY CHRISTMAS GIFTS FROM A POUND SHOP?

As the High Street suffers from reduced footfall, we asked readers if they would consider purchasing presents from discount stores...

PAUL BRIDGER
43, site supervisor,
Banstead



For everyday goods I’d go to a pound shop. But I’m all for eBay and Amazon for presents.

ABBEY AMANUEL
35, mother, West
Hampstead



I go to pound stores for items like bleach, but not for presents. I’m going to buy for my daughter after Christmas, in the sales.

BRENT HUIE
22, hospitality,
east London



We won’t be buying anything – me and my mate just arrived from Australia and we’re backpacking. What’s a pound shop? Oh, we’d definitely go there.

BRIGITTA SOLET
21, student, Budapest



I’m going to go to flea markets and use my imagination. Why not go to a pound shop?

DAVE STILL
69, electrician, Bexley



Christmas shopping? Blokes don’t do domestic! It’s in the marriage certificate. I wouldn’t go to a pound shop unless for stocking gifts for the grandkids. ●