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DEVON AND THE GENERAL STRIKE, 1926¹

I

Rural areas have generally been ignored in recent studies of the General Strike of 3-12 May 1926 on the implicit assumption that its impact in such areas would be negligible. To see if this assumption is correct this article examines the course of the strike in Devon and reaction to it. The likelihood of militant action in Devon in part depended upon the structure of the occupied population. In 1921 16 per cent of the occupied population of Devon County and the County Boroughs was in agriculture, and this rises to 25 per cent if we take the administrative county alone. In Exeter 49 per cent of the occupied population was in commerce, the professions, public administration, defence and personal service; in Plymouth the percentage for this group was 52 per cent. Consequently even the industrial areas were likely to be relatively weakly organised. Once out of the County Boroughs the industrial population, apart from a concentration of railwaymen at Newton Abbot, was so scattered as to make organisation and co-ordination difficult.² There was no tradition of militancy in the county.³

II

besides these difficulties more formal opposition was to face the strikers. The first opposition body to form was the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. At a meeting of the Torquay Chamber of Trade and Commerce members were urged in January to join the OMS, and in May this was backed by the local newspaper, the *Torquay Directory*.⁴ OMS organisers in Dawlish were attacked by one Labour supporter as "the gallant knights, these would be trade union wreckers, these class war

¹ All dates cited refer to this year, unless otherwise specified.

² Census of England and Wales, 1921, County of Devon, pp. 54-59, Table 16.

³ M. Daly and E. Atkinson, "A regional analysis of Strikes 1921-36", in: *Sociological Review*, XXXII (1940), p. 223.

⁴ Chamber of Commerce. Council Meeting, 12 January; *Torquay Directory*, 5 May.

makers who have not sufficient moral courage to come out into the open". This provoked an indignant reply from Captain E. F. Studd of Starcross, the organiser for East Devon, and the secretary of the Dawlish Committee, Surgeon Commander H. A. Browning. After the strike Captain Studd claimed 972 members had joined in the area around Dawlish and Teignmouth.⁵ In Paignton it was claimed that the local OMS "had done much effective preliminary work in preparing for the emergency".⁶ Plymouth exhibited more variety of unofficial opposition. The OMS claimed a large response, as did the "Loyalists" organisation which opened an office on May 6th. Plymouth Rotarians discussed whether they should run an emergency transport scheme. It was also reported by the *Western Morning News* that Mr J. A. Jerritt, officer commanding the Devon County area of the British Fascists, had been instructed by HQ to render all assistance in his power to the local authorities and he was hoping to open a recruiting office.⁷ All OMS branches handed over their lists to the local authorities when the dispute began.

More formal opposition was organised by the Civil Commissioners (appointed under the Emergency Powers Act of 1920) and the local authorities. Earl Stanhope was the Civil Commissioner for the South Western Division of the five counties with an administrative HQ in Bristol.⁸ However, for our purposes more interest attached to the local authorities in whose hands was the day-to-day resistance to the strike.

It is possible to see preparations for the dispute in Plymouth as early as December 1925 when the Mayor, R. J. Mitchell, raised the question of making arrangements with the trade unions that their members give seven days' notice before coming out on strike. No further moves in preparation seem to have been made until April 1926, when the chairman of the Gas Committee and the Engineer were empowered to deal with all coal-supply questions in an emergency and the Watch Committee received a circular from the Home Office on the strength of the police. Immediately after the start of the strike, the Special Purposes Committee met on 4th May. The Town Clerk reported that under the Emergency Powers Act of 1920 a state of emergency had been declared, and that he had been appointed Food Officer for the district and the Mayor had given permission for the Guildhall and staff to be used. He was then appointed Coal Officer by the Committee (under the Local Authorities Coal Emergency Order 1926). An

⁵ Dawlish Gazette, 20 and 27 February, 13 March and 29 May.

⁶ Paignton Observer, 6 May.

⁷ Times, 3 May; Western Independent, 2 and 9 May; Western Morning News, 4 and 6 May.

⁸ British Gazette, 5 May.

“Emergency Committee” of three was established comprising the Mayor, Alderman J. W. S. Godding and Councillor Solomon Stephens with full powers to act in the emergency. The composition of this emergency committee led to protests from Labour supporters, who wished it to be composed of all sections of the community; they were heavily out-voted.⁹ The Plymouth Strike Committee News Sheet of 11th May called this a class war because a Council spokesman had said “that there were matters in connection with this situation which the Labour members of this Council ought not to know”.¹⁰ Councillor Mitchell made a moderate speech hoping for peace and reconciliation, but the appointment of Transport, Food and Volunteer officers and the movement of troops intensified the atmosphere of conflict.¹¹ Plymouth, however, had a comfortable reserve of coal stocks and supplies.

Exeter City Council, on 4 May, also held an emergency Council meeting and appointed a Coal Committee under the chairmanship of the Mayor, William Brock.¹² Coal stocks in Exeter were reported as “fairly large”; “ample” stocks were held at Newton Abbot electricity works and gas works, and Torquay had three months’ coal stocks and 6-8 weeks for gas. In North Devon the gas and electricity works were also well-supplied, and none of the coal officers in Devon appear to have anticipated much difficulty for gas and electricity works as stocks had been accumulated for some time.¹³

To operate the organisation of coal and food supplies the local authorities needed volunteers. It appears that Devon had far more volunteers than were needed. The estimates of volunteers in the local press vary considerably; the press was eager to encourage volunteers. In Exeter on 4 May the *Express and Echo* reported that volunteers were pouring in; in Plymouth the *Western Morning News* reported 2,060 on the 7th, 2,500 on the 8th, and on the 10th *The Times* reported 3,600 volunteers, a source of satisfaction to Vice Admiral Woollcombe, the Volunteer Officer. In Torquay there were said to be 300 volunteers, there were even 36 in Lynton in North Devon, where there were no strikers. University students unloaded at Exeter’s Queen Street station, Sir William Williams of Heanton, an

⁹ Plymouth County Borough Minutes, Gas Committee, 9 April; Watch Committee, 21 April; Special Purposes Committee, 4 May.

¹⁰ Quoted in Emile Burns, *The General Strike May 1926: Trades Councils in Action* (London, 1926), p. 44.

¹¹ *Times*, 3 May; *Western Morning News*, 3, 4 and 8 May.

¹² Exeter City Council, Emergency Council, 4 May; *Express and Echo*, 4 May.

¹³ *Mid Devon Times and Advertiser*, 8 May; *Torquay Times*, 7 May; *North Devon Journal*, 13 May; *Ilfracombe Chronicle*, 15 May.

undergraduate, acted as second guard on a train from Exeter to Ilfracombe. Seale Hayne agricultural college students also unloaded foodstuffs at Newton Abbot.¹⁴ Just before the strike terminated there were 24,000 volunteers in the South West District (compared to 25,000 in the North-East of England).

The forces of law and order were reinforced by the recruitment of special constables. There were 3,461 specials enrolled before the strike and an additional 3,066 were sworn in as a result of the strike. Out of the total 6,527 some 3,469 actually went on duty.¹⁵ There were, for example, a 100 specials in Ilfracombe, "at least 500" sworn in at Teignmouth, 80 at Dawlish, and 150 at Newton Abbot and "nearly 100" at Barnstaple.¹⁶

III

The railways were one of the most important sectors of the Devon economy affected by the calling of the General Strike, the two companies in Devon being the Great Western and the Southern. Sir Felix Pole, General Manager of the GWR from 1921 to 1929, took an active part in discouraging the strikers. After he had been informed by C. T. Cramp of the National Union of Railwaymen that NUR men would cease work on 3rd May, Pole sent a telegram to each employee:

Each Great Western man has to decide his course of action, but I appeal to all of you to hesitate before you break your contract of service with the old Company; before you inflict grave injury upon the railway industry; and before you arouse ill-feeling in the railway service which will take years to remove. Remember that your means of living and your personal interests are involved, and that Great Western men are trusted to be loyal to their conditions of service in the same manner as they expect the Company to carry out their obligations and agreements.

This was a nice blend of appeal to loyalty and threat of penalties if that loyalty was forgotten. A wall poster was also issued headed "Whom do you serve", which reminded the men that "The Agreement of Service provides that each man will 'abstain from any act that may injuriously affect the interests of the Company' and that 'seven days previous notice in writing of termination of service shall be given'."¹⁷

¹⁴ Torquay Directory, 12 May; North Devon Journal, 20 May; Western Morning News, and Express and Echo, 11 May; Mid Devon Advertiser, 15 May.

¹⁵ Express and Echo, 27 May.

¹⁶ Ilfracombe Chronicle, Mid Devon Advertiser, and Mid Devon Times, 15 May; North Devon Journal, 13 May.

¹⁷ Felix J. C. Pole, *His Book* (Reading, 1954), pp. 112-13; Times, 3 May.

Pole's call went unheeded by the bulk of the union men, as can be seen from the following tables.

GWR Train Services in May 1926

Date	4	5	6	7	8	9*	10	11	12	13	14
Passenger, milk and perishable, % of normal mileage	11	7	9	12	15	45	21	21	25	26	27
Freight, % of normal mileage	6	0.4	0.8	2	3	14	5	6	6	6	8

* Sunday

GWR Numbers and Percent on Strike

Date	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
No	95,131	94,742	94,751	94,900	94,784	94,595	94,301	93,936	92,207	92,256
%	81.8	81.4	81.4	81.6	81.5	81.3	81.1	80.8	79.3	79.3

Source: *The General Strike May 1926*, Great Western Railway (London, 1926), pp. 53-147.

The table of men on strike covers both railway and docks; those on strike in dock work never fell below 88.1 per cent. The average percentage also disguises the fact that the average per cent of clerical staff on strike was 25 per cent and supervisory staff 20 per cent. Engine drivers on strike, in comparison, never fell below 97.5 per cent, guards below 94.2 per cent or firemen less than 98.5 per cent.

The railwaymen's branches at Exeter and Plymouth were in favour of the strike, though in the case of the Exeter branch of the Railway Clerks they had to reverse their previous decision not to come out.¹⁸ On 4th May C. T. Cramp informed the TUC that a mass meeting of 1,000 railwaymen in Plymouth had demonstrated great enthusiasm for the dispute and that nearly 2,000 railwaymen were out. Weston-super-Mare and Teignmouth were reported "solid", at Paignton members were "answering splendidly" and all were out at Kingswear. On the 7th, E. J. Gardner, Secretary of Exeter NUR No 3 Branch, wrote on behalf of the Exeter Central Strike Committee that the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen reported that the strike had beaten all previous records, but that only 25 per cent of the Railway Clerks Association were out and that non-union clerks were blacklegging; the Central Strike Committee also

¹⁸ Express and Echo, 3-5 May; Western Independent, 2-3 May.

congratulated the General Council on the “statesmanlike manner they have dealt with the situation”. The *British Worker* claimed that at Exeter the railway authorities had asked the Central Strike Committee for men to run the meat and milk trains (though no evidence of this seems to have survived) and the Plymouth NUR reported the strike to be 100 per cent.¹⁹ Local newspapers carried reports on the state of the train services and most of these services were extremely limited. North Devon in particular was hit hard; Barnstaple did not see a train from Exeter until Friday 7th May, Ilfracombe was without until the 10th (Monday). At Plymouth passengers at the GWR docks had to handle their own luggage and the important Laira loco sheds were deserted. The BBC news reported few trains running in Devon.²⁰

GWR Number of Trains run in the strike period

Date	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<i>Exeter Division,</i> passenger, milk and perishable	5	13	18	22	21	24	49	59	61	65	65
Freight	—	—	—	—	2	2	2	4	3	3	9
<i>Plymouth Division,</i> passenger, milk and perishable	4	19	35	50	55	47	109	115	116	117	113
Freight	9	—	—	1	—	—	4	6	11	12	18

GWR Volunteers enrolled at Exeter and Plymouth

	No enrolled	From outside service	GWR servants	Retired GWR servants	Total
Exeter, utilised	625	135	34	44	213
not utilised		372	—	40	412
Plymouth, utilised	818	133	—	19	152
not utilised		642	—	24	666

Source: The General Strike May 1926, pp. 77, 94.

Attempts to man the trains by volunteers or to persuade strikers to return to work on the Devon railways do not appear to have met with success, the figures produced by the GWR itself show this lack of success. Nor was the

¹⁹ TUC file HD 5366 (hereafter cited as TUC); *British Worker*, 6 May; *Western Morning News*, 7 May.

²⁰ TUC; *British Gazette*, 8 and 10 May; *North Devon Journal*, 13 May; *Express and Echo*, 5 and 7 May; *Western Morning News*, 5 May.

campaign waged by the *Western Morning News* any more successful. That paper advised on 8 May railwaymen to return to work lest they found the unemployed taking their positions, printed the scales of pay to encourage this, and further threatened many with future unemployment because "It is notorious that the railways have been overstaffed just as the mines have been overstaffed in recent years." A few workers did return, 2 platelayers returned at Dawlish on the 10th and the Plymouth refreshment-room employees offered to return but were dismissed.²¹

In the mean time Sir Felix Pole's GWR had made plain its position on the strike and the terms it was likely to demand at the end.

The word "victimization" has often been used in connection with strikes. [...] victimization *started* with the strike, the victim in this case being the Great Western Railway Company. [...] That thousands of men with no grievance against their employers should have been "instructed" to leave work, and that so many of them should have done so, passes all comprehension. It can only be explained on the ground that there was a deep conspiracy against the State. Thank God such a conspiracy cannot succeed, and can only result in the discrediting of its promoters and the disillusionment of those who have been used as pawns in the game.²²

The other general managers shared Pole's inclinations and "We were all determined that this time we would not allow the Government to settle or patch up a face-saving peace".

When the General Strike had ended on 12th May, Cramp wrote to the GWR to request that the men be allowed to return to duty. The company had no intention of taking back all the men and was eager to dispense with the leaders of the strike.²³ Consequently at large stations a poster was displayed which pointed out that "the injury to trade is believed to be so serious that for some time full pre-strike services will not be required". The terms of settlement reached between the unions and the companies on 14th May are well-known,²⁴ but they may be briefly summarised: 1) work will be found as soon as traffic offers; 2) the trade unions admit that in calling the strike they committed a wrongful act and the companies do not surrender their legal rights to claim damages arising out of the strike from strikers and others responsible; 3) the unions undertake not to strike without notice or support members who do so; 4) the company may find it

²¹ Dawlish Gazette, 15 May; Times, 8 May.

²² Pole, letter to press, 7 May, quoted in His Book, op. cit., p. 114.

²³ The General Strike May 1926, Great Western Railway (London, 1926), pp. 14-15.

²⁴ See Pole, His Book, pp. 117-20; Philip S. Bagwell, The Railwaymen, (London, 1963), pp. 488-91; The General Strike May 1926, op. cit., p. 116.

necessary to remove certain persons to other positions; 5) the settlement shall not extend to those guilty of violence or intimidation.

What was the reaction to these terms? On the 12th the divisional superintendent at Plymouth, E. H. Dannatt, had said that “The staff presenting themselves for duty will be taken on as the company require them.” The *Western Morning News* was delighted with the GWR’s stand: “There is good ground for saying that the Great Western Railway Company are to abide by the Government appeal for the honourable treatment of loyal members of staff and volunteers [. . .]. There will be a system of picking and choosing as to who shall return from the ranks of the enforced idlers who believe in precipitate strikes without regard to honourable agreements.” (13 May) Devon railway men had expected that at the end of the dispute all would be immediately re-instated. When the General Strike ended on the 12th, this was clearly not going to happen and pickets were maintained on the 13th at Exeter’s St David’s and Queen Street stations. On the morning of the 13th a meeting of some 2,000 railwaymen and strikers took place in the grounds of the Bishop’s Palace, presided over by Mr Isaacs. Sam Chilcott of the transport workers suggested that someone had blundered, this charge was repeated by Mr Powell of ASLEF, who said they must “fight to the last ditch and the last man” to prevent victimisation. The railwaymen demanded that all go back or none.²⁵ Other centres took a similar line and all were to be disappointed. At Newton Abbot large crowds assembled in Queen Street to see the railwaymen march back to duty. However, when a deputation met with the station master and the Divisional Locomotive Superintendent, they were informed of the GWR’s terms and the railwaymen resolved that all or none should return. At Plymouth there was a similar deadlock, and when the Southern Railway men at Barnstaple reported for work in the body, they were informed they would be taken on as required.²⁶

In the early evening of the 14th NUR branches received a telegram from HQ saying “complete reinstatement secured without penalties. All members should report to work immediately”. Local deputations recognised the optimistic gloss of this telegram and continued to seek clarification. They received from the GWR and the SR the promise that all men would be re-instated without penalties but taken back only as work permitted. One Exeter striker commented: “Better stay out for another week, we have been let down”, in Newton some were reported to be bitter

²⁵ Express and Echo, 13 May; Western Morning News, and Times, 14 May. Alderman W. H. Wilkey, in a letter to the author, 6 April 1974, recalled the bitterness felt among the strikers at Barnstaple.

²⁶ Mid Devon Advertiser, 15 May; Western Morning News, 14 May; Western Independent, 16 May.

at the settlement.²⁷ The *Express and Echo* rubbed in the salt in a leader commenting that the terms “make sorry reading for the local leaders who so confidently promised their followers that they would go back on their own terms”. On the 16th C. T. Cramp came down to Plymouth to defend the settlement, he reckoned that the strike had probably cost the NUR £1,000,000 and the railways £5,000,000.²⁸

The continuation of the coal strike meant that many services were not restored so that coal might be saved. A further national agreement on the 21st May suspended the guaranteed week for those who had struck and allowed the transference of workers to other stations or depots. In June 10% of the workers were still not re-engaged at Newton Abbot, and in North Devon excursion trains were curtailed and improvements in services won over the last two years were lost.²⁹ In Plymouth the GWR summonsed E. W. Perry, Councillor for Friary Ward and prospective Labour candidate for Tavistock. He was accused of intimidating employees at Kingsbridge by threatening those staff who were working with what would happen to them after the strike.³⁰

IV

As might be anticipated the unity of action was less in road transport. Only the municipal passenger-transport workers were well organised and were in the van of the support for the miners. At the May Day demonstration in Plymouth Mr Jasper Richards of the Transport Workers told the men there would be “a general scrap next week”, a resolution was passed in support of the miners and the *Red Flag* sung. The Plymouth corporation tramway and bus workers came out on the 4th and all were stopped.³¹ The *Western Morning News* pursued a daily campaign to encourage the Corporation to restore services, a campaign which was to lead to the Strike Committee demanding that the Corporation’s Emergency Committee cut off power to the paper, otherwise they threatened to call out the men at the power station.

On the 7th (Friday) the Plymouth Tramway Committee sent out notices for the men to return, and on the 8th, by 10 o’clock, 26 tram men had returned to run a restricted service. The result was a major conflict. A modified tram service (on routes 2, 6, 10 and 12) by drivers, inspectors and

²⁷ *Express and Echo*, 15 May; *Mid Devon Advertiser*, 22 May.

²⁸ *Western Morning News*, 17 May.

²⁹ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, op. cit., pp. 491-92; *Mid Devon Times*, 5 June; *Ilfracombe Chronicle*, 22 May and 19 June.

³⁰ *Western Independent*, 30 May.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2 May; TUC.

volunteers provoked a counter-demonstration. A crowd began to gather in Drake Circus and by 10.30 amounted to 1,500. By 11.30 about 4,000 people were packed into Old Town Street between Treville Street and Drake Circus. Then the real trouble began. A No 10 tram coming into town was held up by cross traffic and surrounded by a jeering crowd. A strong detachment of police came forward and four mounted the tram's platform as it moved off. Then, as another tram was driven amid the crowd a window was smashed, succeeding trams had their destination boards torn off, as did any Devon Motor Transport buses passing. The climax came as a No 6 tram, driven by an inspector, was leaving Drake Circus for the Theatre. There was a sound of breaking glass, 2 or 3 policemen rushed into the crowd and at once there was pandemonium. In 2 or 3 seconds 20-30 other constables started to use their batons on the people around them; a man and a woman were arrested. After the disturbance George Ebury, one of the strike leaders, marched the strikers to Guildhall Square and warned them of the danger a riot would have for their cause.

Dense crowds stayed in the area during the afternoon as the trams passed under police protection. Those riding in the cars were not always discreet, one woman stood on top of a car and thumbed her nose at the angry crowd. Later tram cars were attacked again and the police made three further arrests. Two of those arrested, George Richard Farnham and John Neagle, platelayer and labourer respectively, received six weeks hard labour for damaging a vehicle, disorderly conduct and obscene language. Vernon Bell was accused of obstruction and assaulting a policeman but the case was dismissed; his wife, however, was given one month hard labour for assaulting the police. Bessie Brimacombe was fined 10/- for disorderly conduct and obscene language. Mr Isaac Foot, prosecuting, roundly condemned the "mob law". On Sunday night telegrams were sent to each tramway employee, to arrive on Monday morning, requesting them to return to work. About 700 were employed and about 240 did return. By the 12th the majority (perhaps 85 per cent) had returned. The Tramways' Engineer assessed the lost revenue at £6,000.³²

During and after the dispute the Labour members of the Council attacked the decisions of the Tramways Committee and the Emergency Committee. On the Saturday they had challenged the Mayor to say why the Emergency Committee and the Voluntary Services Committee should have the use of the Guildhall and the Town Clerk. At the Council meeting of the 10th (Monday) Labour members attacked the "filthy Morning

³² Western Morning News, 8, 11, 13 and 15 May; Western Independent, 9 and 23 May; British Gazette, 13 May; Express and Echo, 10 May.

News” and said the press should be kept out of council meetings unless the public were allowed in to hear the proceedings. A vote on this was lost 55:15. Labour members said the Emergency Committee had deliberately created disorder by starting the trams.³³ At a meeting of the Council’s Special Purposes Committee on 20th May it was reported that the Emergency Committee met regularly, and took all steps for the protection of the public and the running of the tramway services and other corporation undertakings. The day before the Watch Committee had recorded its appreciation of the police and granted three days additional leave for all ranks. All this was too much for the Labour members, and at the council meeting of 7th June they tried to have the Special Purposes Committee minutes rejected, but lost by 16:45. Alderman Moses also moved “that all committees be requested to immediately reconsider the position of those employees who took part in the recent dispute, and who consequent thereon have been adversely affected, with a view to their immediate reinstatement without prejudice in the positions they held prior to the stoppage at their former rates of pay and conditions of service”. When it came to a vote 13 were in favour, 21 against, the Mayor did not vote and 42 were absent when the vote was taken.³⁴

The Plymouth tram riot caught national news, and so did the well-known football match between police and strikers on the same day. The match was suggested by the Chief Constable when three strikers came to him to arrange a march to the ground at Home Park. It was advertised in both the *Western Independent* and the *Western Morning News*, though the latter thought that the match “exceeds all reasonable limits” of fraternising “because of the gravity of the situation”. A crowd estimated at over 10,000 saw the strikers beat the police 2:1. Half time was enlivened by the Tramway Band. The *British Worker* published an account of this, as did the *British Gazette* after J. C. C. Davidson and the Cabinet overruled Churchill’s opposition.³⁵ The match was used as propaganda to illustrate the good relations between the police and strikers, but the tram riots were a rude contradiction of that image.

Affairs in Exeter were more placid. The main body of the Exeter Tramway staff ceased work without giving notice on the morning of the 4th May. On 11th May the Tramways Committee decided that no action should be taken, and the next day a deputation of the tramway staff met the manager

³³ *Western Morning News*, 11 May.

³⁴ Minutes, 7 June.

³⁵ *Western Independent*, 9 and 23 May; *Western Morning News*, 8 May; *British Worker*, 9 May; Robert R. James, *Memoirs of a Conservative* (London, 1969), p. 243.

and said they were willing to resume work on the 13th. The Committee decided that the bodybuilders and painters who had given due notice should be permitted to return immediately and "that the whole of the tramway staff who report forthwith are re-engaged subject to the exigencies of the service". Further that a 50-percent service be run for the time being with no Sunday service. In practice the men marched back to work in a body on the 14th and were signed on. The chairman of the Tramways Committee, Councillor Frank Chick, and the manager Mr Smith-Saville believed it best for future industrial relations that all should return and work short time until normality returned.³⁶

Outside the two principal cities road passenger transport seems to have been much less affected. Torquay Tramwaymen carried on as normal, Devon General buses ran as usual from Newton Abbot, and Devon General also ran a daily coach from Exeter to London, to Barnstaple and to Plymouth. Captain F. J. C. Holdsworth, Chairman of the Totnes Division Unionist Association, daily drove a bus between Totnes and Kingsbridge and a Great Western bus driver, Mr F. G. Spear, kept the Kingsbridge-Dawlish route in operation, for which grateful users gave him a gold watch. In North Devon Hardy-Colville's bus service operated as usual and also carried local supplies, for example French Polish for Shapland and Petter's Raleigh Cabinet Works and meat and food from London. The Mayor of Barnstaple supported a fund for the staff who ran buses in the strike.³⁷

V

The two other major trade groups in Devon most affected by the strike decision were the printers and the building workers. The printers, members of the Typographical Association, initially heeded the call to strike. On the 7th May, for example, the Exeter Central Strike Committee reported 95 per cent of the printers on strike. In Plymouth the Town Clerk was unable to send out Council minutes on 4th May. As might be expected the *Western Morning News*, directed by its proprietor, Sir Harold Harmsworth, took a strong line with its own men, whom it regarded as well paid and having no quarrel with the firm. It announced on 6th May that any employee who returned to work before 6 p.m. on that day would get his job back, thereafter no position would be held open. On the 7th (Friday) it was reported that most had returned and the few who had not were dismissed.

³⁶ Tramways Committee Minutes, 11 and 13 May; Express and Echo, 14 May.

³⁷ Express and Echo, 5 May; Torquay Times, 14 May; Western Independent, 6 June; Mid Devon Advertiser, 15 June; Ilfracombe Chronicle, 8 and 15 May; Dawlish Gazette, 22 May; North Devon Journal, 27 May.

Following that success some men were transferred to Exeter to produce a morning and evening paper.³⁸ The *Express and Echo* printers in Exeter did not return until the end of the strike and were only taken back on an individual basis.³⁹ Printers on such papers as the *Mid Devon and Newton Times*, the *Mid Devon Advertiser*, the *Torquay Directory* and the *Torquay Times*, the *North Devon Journal* and the *Ifracombe Chronicle* all stopped work, but most papers managed to produce some sort of paper either by volunteers or their own non-union labour. The *Western Independent*, normally the most sensible of the papers reporting the dispute, went so far as to say that “Mussolini could have done no better”.

Apart from the *Western Morning News* the most affronted paper was the *Torquay Times*: “We have no quarrel with our printing staff, who are members of the Typographical Union, and usually very loyal men to us and good fellows too, whom we believe have the best of feelings towards us. But the fact is, such is the stranglehold of the Union, that within ten minutes of their receipt of a telegram from their secretary in Manchester on Monday evening, they all rushed out of the office in great haste.” The *Torquay Times* tried the tactic of the *Western Morning News* and the 7th announced that any employee who returned not later than 8 a.m. on Monday the 10th would get their job back; after that a new permanent staff would be recruited, “it is for them to consider calmly whether political controversy is more important than their means of livelihood”. The attack backfired. On the 14th the paper reported that whilst the *Torquay Herald* men returned unconditionally on the 10th, as had the men at Exeter, Newton Abbot and Totnes, none of their own men had responded to the advertisement. They blamed this on the fact that “without permission” the secretary of the local Typographical Association branch and the Trades Council was on their staff!⁴⁰ Later a deputation from the Trades Council failed to persuade the paper to immediately re-instate the men, they would only be taken as needed.

Journalists do not appear to have supported the strike very actively. The *Western Morning News* journalists decided to stay at work, and the Barnstaple Branch of the NUJ sent their union a telegram deploring intervention with the free press and concluding: “In our opinion present issue no longer Industrial one and Branch places country first.”⁴¹

The building-trade workers appear to have given a mixed response to the strike call. On 7th May the Exeter Central Strike Committee reported that

³⁸ *Western Morning News*, 6, 7 and 13 May; TUC.

³⁹ *Express and Echo*, 13 May.

⁴⁰ *Torquay Times*, 7 and 14 May.

⁴¹ *Western Morning News*, 8 May; *North Devon Journal*, 13 May.

the building trades were "solid" and in good spirit with the Woodworkers 100 per cent out. At Crediton "the whole of the builders stopped on Wednesday night". At Newton Abbot it was estimated that 250 were out, three-quarters of the Torquay builders and 100-120 in Paignton. At Barnstaple the carpenters came out but masons continued on house-building. Ilfracombe builders refused to come out on the grounds that they had not been balloted on the strike question. Bovey Tracey builders did not come out but levied themselves in support of the other strikers.⁴² The stresses which the dispute could place on a small branch are aptly illustrated by the Dawlish Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. There appear to have been about 20 builders on strike, chiefly employees of J. H. Lamacraft, then chairman of the Dawlish Urban District Council. The local ASW secretary Albert Pudner, had difficulty enough in interpreting his instructions on "housing" from HQ; then the president and treasurer of the branch decided to start work on Monday 10th, and resigned. "I am left without officers and cannot fill their places", the secretary wrote in despair.⁴³

VI

The Trades Councils assumed the responsibility of co-ordinating local action. The structure of the Plymouth Central Strike Committee is fully described in Burns and in Williams.⁴⁴ The strike committee was composed of about 50 people, a member of the strike committee of each union involved and a representative of each organisation affiliated to the council. The Council's chairman and secretary acted similarly for the committee. A twenty member Special Emergency Committee was given executive power. There were also Finance, Propaganda and Sports Committees. Relations with the co-operative societies were amicable, and although the Plymouth Society would not grant credit, the Transport group's committee made sure the Co-op received its fair share of supplies.⁴⁵ The Strike Committee issued

⁴² TUC; Mid Devon Advertiser, and Mid Devon Times, 15 May; North Devon Journal, 13 May; Torquay Directory, 12 and 19 May; Paignton Observer, 6 and 13 May; Ilfracombe Chronicle, 15 May.

⁴³ Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, Dawlish Branch, Correspondence and Minutes, May 1926, Devon Record Office, Exeter.

⁴⁴ Burns, *The General Strike*, op. cit., pp. 159-61; Harry B. Williams, *History of the Plymouth and District Trades Council* (Plymouth, 1952), pp. 22-24.

⁴⁵ Robert Briscoe, *Centenary History. A Hundred Years of Co-operation in Plymouth* (Manchester, 1960), p. 101; Burns, *The General Strike*, p. 61.

a bulletin, but none survive. As well as the famous football match, the Committee promoted daily services in St Andrew's Parish Church.⁴⁶

The Exeter Trades Council for almost a year had been critical of government policy. After the mining crisis of 1925 they had unanimously resolved that "This Trades Council appreciates the efforts of the Trade Union Congress General Council and [...] we pledge ourselves on any further occasion, to act on their instructions, until we win the Right to Life to be the first charge on Industry." December saw the Council registering "its emphatic protest against the persecution of the 12 members of the Communist Party. It expresses strong indignation at the unwarrantable violation of the rights and traditions of Free Speech, records its resentment at the severe sentences inflicted on the 12 comrades and demands their release".⁴⁷ On 1st March 1926 the Council empowered its Executive to take action if "urgent circumstances" should arise because of the mining dispute. In the absence of any instructions from the TUC the Executive Committee on 4th May (Tuesday) decided, in consultation with delegates from the strike committees of the unions involved, to set up a Central Strike Committee of two representatives from each of the unions involved and four representatives of the Trades Council who were themselves involved in the dispute. The Central Strike Committee obtained a rotary duplicator (for £10) and sought contributions to funds from union branches not involved in the dispute.⁴⁸ E. J. Gardner, secretary of the Committee, reported to the TUC that in Exeter "situation under absolute control and absolute order being kept".⁴⁹ When the confirmation of the end of the strike reached the Trades and Labour Hall at 5 p.m. on the 12th, it was received in silence by the strikers.⁵⁰ The Council's feelings were revealed on 5th July. Two weeks previously the Council had resolved in favour of an embargo on the movement of coal, and on the 5th, after considering the TUC's reply, resolved "that the TUC be informed that, this Council is fully alive to its own loyalty, and wish it could be as satisfied concerning the loyalty of the TUC."⁵¹

The strike does not appear to have had any dramatic impact upon the co-operative societies of the South-West. In the South-West region only 19

⁴⁶ Letter from P. H. Wadge to the TUC, TUC; *The Western Independent*, 2 May, said Communist pamphlets had been given to ratings at Plymouth.

⁴⁷ Exeter Trades Council Minutes, 13 July and 7 December 1925, held by the Council.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 March and 10 May 1926; Executive Committee Meeting, 4 May.

⁴⁹ TUC.

⁵⁰ *Western Morning News*, 13 May.

⁵¹ Minutes, 21 June and 5 July. Newton Abbot also had a "Council of Action" on the same lines as Exeter and had dispatch riders to London. Burns, *The General Strike*, p. 151.

co-operative workers were involved and little difficulty was experienced in receiving supplies. Extra credit was not extended. Paignton Co-operative found the position satisfactory, and at Torquay the employees decided that the strike call did not apply to food distribution; in any case the local strikers' committee issued the society with a permit. The only difficulty experienced by the Plymouth Society was the disruption of printing, which delayed the issuing of the minutes.⁵²

Those then were the activities of the main participants. How were their activities regarded by churchmen, politicians and the press?

VII

During the dispute both nonconformist and Church of England clergy tended to plead and pray for moderation and after its failure, for reconciliation. In Plymouth the strikers held their daily service in St Andrew's Parish Church.⁵³ The homilies of the Bishop of Exeter set the tone. At the beginning of the strike he counselled moderation: "As we kneel to pray that God will keep us from the curse of industrial disputes, let us learn to prefer the interests of the community to the interests of the individual." That was said on Sunday just before the strike started. On the 4th Bishop Cecil was reported as saying that behind the coal strike was "the great red movement of Bolshevism". I have been unable to discover what was said by the Dean, Mr Gamble, but he upset the Exeter Trades Council so severely that in August 1927 they were to refuse to make their customary annual visit to the Deanery.⁵⁴ Thursday 6th May saw a march by 2,500 to a service in the Cathedral at the invitation of the Bishop, and the major meeting at the end of the strike was held in the grounds of the Bishop's palace. The Bishop, at the end of the nine days said: "I have been impressed by the Christianity of the men of Exeter during the strike. I am quite certain that, whatever may have been done in London, there is no Bolshevism here."⁵⁵

The chairman of the Barnstaple Coal Committee was the Rev. Albany Wrey; Rev. A. C. Vodden at Newport Church, Barnstaple, told his parishioners that eventually the unions would see that the Prime Minister had acted in defence of trade unionism. In Torquay the Rev. W. Rushby

⁵² Fifty-Ninth Annual Co-operative Congress, 1927; Paignton Co-operative Society, Special Committee Meeting, 8 May; Torquay Co-operative Society, Special Committee Meeting, 4 May; Plymouth Co-operative Society, Committee Minutes, 6 May 1926. The minutes of these co-operative societies are held by Plymouth Co-operative Society.

⁵³ Western Morning News, 6 May; TUC.

⁵⁴ Express and Echo, 3 and 4 May; Exeter Trades Council Minutes, 21 June 1926 and 12 August 1927.

⁵⁵ Express and Echo, 13 May; Western Morning News, 15 May.

pointed out that the strikers were the same men who fought in the war and were then regarded as heroes. In contrast Rev. H. M. Drake at Paignton parish church said: "The danger was frightful, and they might, if the worst came to the worst, go like Russia." At Dawlish the Rev. Robertson Dorling regretted that the Archbishop of Canterbury's appeal had been withheld; at Newton Abbot the Rev. C. A. W. Russell of St Paul's wanted to bind all classes together, while the Rev. R. C. W. L. Lamplugh, Vicar of St Mary Magdalene, Barnstaple, recommended co-partnership as a solution, saying his sympathies "lie to a great extent" with the miners as a reduction in wages would take some of them to grinding poverty, and concluded: "It is accepted that national warfare is a crime, and industrial warfare is a crime, and it should be possible to fasten the guilt of that crime on those morally responsible."⁵⁶

I have come across only one Roman Catholic sermon, and it was the only sermon reported verbatim in the *Express and Echo* (9 May): Father A. J. O'Loughlin of the Church of the Sacred Heart said that labour had no right to try and drive out the employer, and that while Catholic economists justified strikes this did not cover general strikes. The general strike was "a new and terrible ill" for "It is the use of a weapon against which the masters (whose wages have kept the workers alive for years) now have no defence of their own; a poison gas in the industrial battlefield, against which they have no mask." Furthermore, "to break living agreements is immoral, and no end, however good, justifies the use of immoral means to it". Parts of his sermon seemed close to an advocacy of military conscription and he expressed absolute support for the government.

VIII

The balance of electoral power in Devon meant that the predominant political view expressed by MPs and local party leaders was Conservative. The most active in pressing his views was Major Samuel Emile Harvey, of Totnes, particularly in his regular "letters" to the *Mid Devon Advertiser*, while Lady Nancy Astor made some contribution in volume but little in value. Labour parties were most dependent on outside speakers, such as George Lansbury or, more locally, Dr Christopher Addison, and their most active local candidate, Kate Spurrell.

Lady Astor is most famous as the first woman MP when she was returned for Plymouth in 1919, after her husband had gone to the Lords. After the General Strike she was to go to South Wales to learn at first hand the

⁵⁶ North Devon Journal, 13 and 20 May; Torquay Times, 21 May; Paignton Observer, 13 May; Dawlish Gazette, and Mid Devon and Newton Times, 22 May; North Devon Journal, 29 April.

conditions in which miners' wives and children lived.⁵⁷ In a speech at the end of the strike she bemoaned "the real pity of it all, the uselessness, the futility and the suffering of it", but betrayed no understanding of the issues other than regarding the result as a "tremendous triumph of the House of Commons" and requesting support for the Prime Minister. "She denied the statement that there was an attack by the Government on wages of the people of the country. That was a pitiful argument. Could any Government spend twenty-four million pounds to save the country from this strike if it had had as its motive an attack upon the wages of the people?"⁵⁸ This was a neat reversal of the "buying time" argument. Lord Astor also stressed, in addressing the Plymouth Sutton Ward Conservatives, the constitutional issue; "this body, the T.U.C., is not responsible to the tax-payers – it has no power to tax. Yet it tried to compel Parliament to pay out the tax-payers' money by continuing the subsidy for an indefinite period". He recommended the acceptance of the Coal Commission Report in its entirety. Nancy Astor was also to support actively the campaign to secure generous gratuities for volunteers, and was hopeful that "If they got the spirit of goodwill between masters and men and between all classes the strike would not have been in vain".⁵⁹

Major Harvey found the issue simple; it was a red plot using the trade unions to break the constitution. "The Prime Minister", he said, "was amply justified in accepting the challenge". A week later, at the end of the strike, he wrote: "It was illuminating to hear some of the speeches from the opposite side and interesting to try and fathom the mentality of those who appeared to think that it was within any man's right to preach sedition, or to destroy railways, or power stations, to attain his desire." He believed the employees now realised "the futility of sympathetic strikes", that the "trade unions terrorised and forced them to leave their work – and now many of them found themselves without a job". They had failed to realise it was "an old standing political plot" financed by red gold.⁶⁰ The MP for Barnstaple, Basil Peto, contributed less to the debate. In Parliament he did object to a van labelled "Bermondsy Council of Action" being in Palace Yard and asked the Home Secretary, Joynson-Hicks, to "take the necessary steps to put an end to this body". In a speech to the Devon Federation of the Junior Imperial League he blamed the dispute on the miners, and said it was promoted "in order that certain fanatics could work upon the lines of the

⁵⁷ Christopher Sykes, *Nancy, the Life of Lady Astor* (London, 1972), pp. 282-83.

⁵⁸ *Western Morning News*, 15 and 16 May.

⁵⁹ *Western Independent*, 16 May.

⁶⁰ *Mid Devon Advertiser*, 8, 15, 22 and 29 May.

Russian revolution” and was therefore part of the plan for world revolution.⁶¹

Liberals tended to be less incendiary. Major Leslie Hore-Belisha, MP for Plymouth Devonport, thought the men were fundamentally decent and were loyal to their unions but had been misled by their leaders. In June he sought to have more coal released from the government reserve for use in Plymouth.⁶² Henry Vivian, prospective Liberal candidate for Totnes opposed the strike because it was not, in his opinion, an industrial dispute and quoted in support (as did Major Harvey) J. H. Thomas, Ramsey Macdonald and J. R. Clynes.⁶³

Labour politicians of national standing who visited Devon included George Lansbury, who spoke at Newton Abbot, Margaret Bondfield and Christopher Addison. After the strike Ramsey Macdonald addressed a county conference of party delegates at Newton Abbot. He asked strikers to withhold judgement upon their leaders until the leaders felt they could speak⁶⁴. The local labour banner was held by Kate Spurrell, who asked Torquay workers why the Prince of Wales should have a special train when the workers had to walk, and told Newton Abbot strikers “they were celebrating for the first time the unity of the workers of this country”.⁶⁵

IX

A crude division can be made between those local newspapers which took the Churchill line of a constitutional war and those which, in more moderate terms, attempted to sort out the issues behind the miners’ dispute and the General Strike.

As might be guessed from previous sections, the *Western Morning News* was among the most militant and during the course of the dispute its leaders became more strident. Initially the paper believed the miners’ aim was to force nationalisation so that the aims were political, not industrial. In their view cheaper production was necessary, but as the miners would give no help, it was the public’s duty to aid the government. On the 4th, “Today finds England at one of the most serious stages in its long history. It has to decide whether it will govern itself through its elected representatives or be ruled by a committee of the Trades Union Congress.” The *Western Morning News* believed the “country cannot submit to dictator-

⁶¹ House of Commons Debates, 17 May; North Devon Journal, 13 May.

⁶² *Western Morning News*, 27 May; House of Commons Debates, 1 June.

⁶³ *Mid Devon Times*, 15 May and 10 July.

⁶⁴ *Mid Devon Advertiser*, 8, 15 and 19 May.

⁶⁵ *Torquay Times*, 7 May; *Mid Devon Times*, 15 May.

ship” or the “tyrannical exercise of usurped authority”, and the “ruthless disregard of popular will”. Two days later, with its own printers out, the paper said: “Owing to the high handed action of the trades union leaders the ‘Western Morning News’ and its associated papers have been driven to take part in the struggle against those subversive forces which seek to bring ruin and misery on the country by paralysing national services.” The *Western Morning News* stressed the “illegality” of the strike, the dangers of unemployment and Germany’s delight, and on 11th May added vitriol to its ink:

With the usurpation of authority by a little junta of paid officials the trade unions have become a curse to the country. Instead of being their salvation they have reduced the working men to the position of serfs. One obvious lesson of the strike is that the power of the Trades Union Congress must be ended [. . .]. The Trades Union Congress is an anachronism in a free country and should be suppressed.⁶⁶

The Exeter *Express and Echo* also stressed the constitutional issue, but in addition had a taste for conspiracy. The workmen were criticised for handing their fate “blindly” to the General Council: “Ostensibly the struggle in which we are now involved is an economic one, intended to support the miners, but actually it is political [. . .]. The question is no longer one of wages and hours but the infinitely graver one – who shall govern the country.” Further, “If they win their battle to starve us into submission they will be rulers of the state.” The paper was doubtful if the men wanted to overthrow the constitution, but they were helping to precipitate revolution, “which in our case is another name for Civil War. [. . .] We use these ugly ominous words – Civil War – with a full sense of responsibility. Being attacked the nation will defend itself”. On the 6th and 7th the newspaper’s leaders claimed the strike was failing and the men returning: “As the days go by, the disorderly elements which were relying on this General Strike to prepare the way for their attack upon the nation, may get out of hand, but we have supreme confidence in the resources of the Government to deal with rioters.” When peace came the *Express and Echo* welcomed it as an indication that the Communists had failed and that the men were moderate, but it could not resist an attack on the railwaymen: the “men will settle when they realise the bugbear of ‘skilled labour’ has been exploded by their own act – the general strike broke the last delusion – such work can be done by totally inexperienced volunteers”. The final leader on the dispute came on the 15th and pointed out that the real aim of

⁶⁶ Western Morning News, 3, 4, 6 and 10-12 May.

the brains behind the dispute was the overthrow of Parliament and the introduction of Soviet rule.⁶⁷

In Torbay the *Torquay Times* and the *Paignton Observer* splashed their agitation across their pages. The *Torquay Times*, which described itself as “independent, non political and non sectarian”, led off on 7th May: “Never before in the history of this country has such an appalling condition of affairs taken place as this national strike, which threatens to undermine not only the foundations of civilised society, but the very existence of the constitutional government of the country.” “They were face to face with the possibility of civil war; Bolshevism must be killed.” At the end of the strike, on the 14th, the paper gave in a leader its assessment; it was a “decisive victory for the Government and the nation over the TUC and those who unfortunately became its dupes [. . .]. We must not forget that the General Strike has been zealously engineered for some years and that the miners’ quarrel was only an excuse.” Not only were the miners and railwaymen well paid and had no excuse to strike, but

It was a bold stroke to think that 3½ million Trade Unionists, many of them coerced against their will, could expect to conquer 40 million people and rob them of their democratic liberty [. . .]. We are not alone in our view that this great industrial upheaval was engineered by the communists of Europe and England. [. . .] The Communistic movement has been grossly underrated even by those in authority.

This theme returned a week later: “after all is said and done, the late strike was a deep laid plan by communists of Russia, in alliance with their English comrades, to overthrow the constitution”. The dispute was a “combination of Trade Unions, rabid Red men, and dark, leering Bolsheviks looking on and promoting with glee”.⁶⁸

The last in this series of extremist critics is the *Paignton Observer*. Their “London Correspondent” thought the unions had been forced on by the “Reds and wild men”, and were “being made the pawn of the Bolshevik party”, for “this fight is the premeditated attempt by the Reds to impoverish and to wreck the trades unions as a prelude to bringing about that general discontent, starvation and poverty out of which revolution suddenly springs”. A week later the paper’s leader thought it was “a great pity that the extremists in London were allowed to [. . .] stampede the country into a general strike”. The strike was condemned, and “Now peace is happily restored, it will become a very important consideration for the nation as a whole, entirely apart from party politics, whether the Trades

⁶⁷ Express and Echo, 4, 6-8 and 12-14 May.

⁶⁸ Torquay Times, 7, 14 and 21 May.

Union Council, as now existant, should not be dissolved, so as to prevent any further interference with the liberties of the general body of subjects." Associated with this should be compulsory arbitration in all disputes.⁶⁹

In contrast the *Torquay Directory* appears moderate. It regarded the strike as a grave event but saw no reason for panic; furthermore, "In some quarters this national calamity has been hailed as a class war. This is a most unjustifiable and dangerous suggestion". After the dispute the paper thought there was cause for a degree of rejoicing, but that recrimination would be out of place. Fortunately, in their opinion, the spirit of law and order meant that "Moscow's methods of rule by an irresponsible minority would never be tolerated here". However, "there can be absolutely no question that the Trade Union Council, by their action, dealt the principles of collective bargaining – an excellent principle in itself – a most severe blow". It deplored the ignoring of union rules and "red" influence so that "trade unionism has become too greatly political and too little industrial in its aims". The remedy was to make agreements *legally* and morally binding.⁷⁰

A relatively sensible approach also marked the leaders of the *Western Independent*, which thought: "We need not take too solemnly the revolutionary talk which has begun. Its authors are the usual fishers in troubled waters." The General Strike, however, was "folly" and "a direct challenge to the state which will have to be met". On the 9th the paper's leader declared "No General Strike has ever succeeded anywhere. This one will fail like the rest. It is impossible to believe that the Trade Union Congress did not know this. It is impossible to believe anything but that they thought their threat would terrorise the Government" to an immediate settlement. But the Government was also to blame for it had delayed negotiation and placed impossible conditions upon the union leaders. Despite this

The mines issue has now disappeared. The only issue now is whether the country shall be governed by the Parliament which it elected to represent it, or by a camarilla of Dictators sitting in secret and issuing orders to the workers in the vital industries of England.

This note of stringency was toned down when "victory" was assured. "We do not believe in the policy of Trade Union smashing", said the *Independent* on the 16th, although "The Trade Union Congress ranged against it the whole sentiment of the nation." Even the majority of the strikers were, it believed, the reluctant victims of their loyalty to trade unionism.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Paignton Observer, 6 and 13 May.

⁷⁰ Torquay Directory, 5, 12 and 19 May.

⁷¹ Western Independent, 2, 9 and 16 May.

Conflict with Government was inevitable as a strike of this size was bound to conflict with the Government's duty to maintain services, thought the *Dawlish Gazette*. "Worse still, the situation gives opportunity to extremists on either side to work their ill-intentions, which on the one side are a menace to the constitution and on the other bode no good for the working man." Finally, "If, as an outcome of this blundering, trades unions will look economic facts in the face, cease to become political agencies dominated by agitators and resume their legitimate functions of looking after the true welfare of their members, then indeed good will come out of evil".⁷² The *North Devon Journal* thought the dispute a "tragic mistake" and "the designs of no section of the community ought nor can be permitted to over-ride the will of the whole nation". The Government was much to blame for the events leading up to the strike but thereafter it was a constitutional issue.⁷³

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the Devon press responded to the emotion of battle rather than a rational consideration of the industrial and political issues at stake. Indeed they found it convenient to concentrate on the "constitution" rather than seek an equitable solution to the coal industry's economic difficulties.

X

The evidence suggests that within the limits of its industrial structure Devon trade unionists responded to the unions' decisions to support the miners, and did so in a particularly hostile climate of opinion and in a county which was difficult to organise. They continued their support in other ways after the failure of the General Strike. The coal miners stayed out for many more months and Devon trade unionists appealed for financial relief for the miners, in particular for their wives and children. During the continuation of the mining dispute the Women's Central Committee for the Relief of Miners' Wives and Children Fund appealed for money and, for example, Exeter Trades Council organised collections for miners at the local cinemas and via union branch secretaries. Male-voice choirs and concert parties also toured Devon under the sponsorship of the trades councils; for example the Caerphilly Male Voice Choir, the Penybryn Choir and the Ystrad Mynach Miners' Choir, and concert parties from Abertillery and the Rymney Valley. Several choirs wished to sing and make street collections, but were refused permission by the Exeter Watch Committee (as a result the Trades Council decided to seek to secure the

⁷² *Dawlish Gazette*, 8, 15 and 22 May.

⁷³ *North Devon Journal*, 13, 20 and 27 May.

election of two representatives on the Watch Committee). The Admiral Superintendent of Devonport Dockyard banned collections for miners. Despite the unsympathetic attitude of some authorities respectable sums were raised to help distressed miners. A few examples will show this. By 6th August the Exeter Miners' Distress Fund had reached £150; the Abertillery concert party raised £35 in one week, a concert party in Newton Abbot, presided over by Kate Spurrell, raised £28, a flag day in Torquay raised £90.⁷⁴ Such collections, however, were by way of a postscript to the main dispute. Devon trade unionists, like their fellow strikers in the rest of the country, had been dismayed that their sacrifice had not secured an equitable settlement for the miners nor even for themselves.

⁷⁴ Exeter Trades Council Minutes, 1 and 22 June, 19 July, 16 August, 13 September, 1 October; Mid Devon and Newton Times, 19 June; Torquay Times, 25 June; Western Independent, 23 May.