

# The strike that shook the Empire

May 1919: A large crowd turn out to hear the speaker during the Police demonstration in Trafalgar Square

**The Government's interference with the Police Arbitration Tribunal's pay award angered the entire service and provoked demands for the police to have the right to strike. Tony Judge recalls the dramatic London police strike ninety years ago.**

During the afternoon of 27 August 1918, a letter addressed to the Commissioner of the Metropolis, Sir Edward Henry, was delivered by hand to Scotland Yard. The writer was PC John Crisp, the secretary of the National Union of Police and Prison Officers. The letter was an ultimatum. Unless the authorities conceded, by midnight on 29 August, a substantial increase in police pay and wartime bonuses, the immediate reinstatement of a PC who had been dismissed because of his union activities, and the immediate recognition of the Union, it would suspend its "no strike" rule, and "hold the authorities responsible for any situation that might arise".

The Commissioner was on holiday at his home in Ireland, so it fell to an Assistant Commissioner, Sir Frederick Wodehouse, to deal with the matter. That morning, aware of press reports of mounting unrest within the force, he called a conference of all the divisional superintendents. They all insisted that morale

in their divisions was excellent and there was no reason to fear the Union's bluster. Reassured, Wodehouse's attitude was; "Let them strike, then we'll get rid of all the trouble-makers at the same time". That afternoon, told by Wodehouse that there was no cause for alarm, the Home Secretary, Sir George Cave, left London for his Somerset home.

The Police Union was founded in 1913 by ex-Inspector John Syme, who had been dismissed for approaching the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, to appeal against his reduction to sergeant and compulsory transfer for alleged insubordination. From the outset, Sir Edward Henry made it clear that the Union was an illegal body, and warned that any man found to belong to it, would be dismissed. During World War 1, Special Branch officers and military police raided Union meetings and any policemen caught in the net were promptly sacked and drafted into the army.

The Union's biggest obstacle to progress was John Syme. He

was obsessed with his one-man campaign for reinstatement. Twice during the war he went to prison, for threatening to kill the Prince of Wales, and for criminally libelling Henry in a *Police Review* article. During his second sentence, in 1917, he was removed from the secretaryship. Now the Union was in the hands of serving constables with trade union backgrounds. Their first actions were to affiliate to the TUC and to enlist the support of Labour MPs to put pressure on the Government to recognise the Union.

Although Henry and the Home Secretary, Sir George Cave, made it clear that the union would never be recognised, it was beginning to build up a sizeable membership in the Met. Meanwhile, the union officials were being taught how to organise a strike by their trades union brothers.

The Special Branch had installed spies inside the Union, but Scotland Yard had no inkling of what was being

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planned. In fact, at least half the officers in Special Branch joined the strike on the first day.

Although the Union had given two clear days notice of its intentions, the police command had no plans to counter a strike. On the evening of 29 August, Wodehouse remained at Scotland Yard. The Union held a mass meeting in Pimlico. When it ended, pickets were sent to every police station in inner London to tell their comrades that the strike had begun. Wodehouse began to receive a string of messages from the divisions, saying that the late–turn men had walked off their beats and the night shifts were refusing to parade for duty. Every station was being picketed to discourage any officers who wanted to go on duty. Wodehouse was shocked that so many officers had put the Union before their Oath of Loyalty. Now it was his task to telephone the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, to inform him that the capital city of the Empire had left its citizens to their fate.

Londoners read of the strike in the morning papers. Most editors took a hard line against a police strike, even if the men had genuine grievances. The right wing *Morning Post* called the strikers “deserters” and the liberal *Manchester Guardian* said that all police who refused to resume duty should be arrested and drafted into the Army. Many citizens, fearing riots and looting, stayed at home to protect their families.

The War Minister, General Jan Smuts, the former Boer War leader, took charge of the Government’s response to the crisis. Cave was summoned back to the Home Office, but the Commissioner remained marooned in Ireland. Meanwhile, the Union had set-up a strike HQ in Cadogan Place. All through the day, messengers were cycling to and from this base, relaying messages to the pickets and reporting back on what had become a virtually total strike by constables and sergeants.

In some divisions, the Commandants of the Special Constabulary, whose numbers were swollen by wartime requirements, offered to take over from the strikers, but Wodehouse said they must be kept in reserve at stations, to avoid clashes with the strikers.

In contrast to the inertia at Scotland Yard, General Smuts and his army colleagues had planned their response. The Adjutant General, Sir Nevil Macready, who would soon replace Henry as Commissioner, directed senior officers to get in touch with the Yard and offer military support as needed. He also despatched a detachment of guards to Scotland Yard. Armed troops guarded government buildings. Soldiers with machine guns took up post in the Foreign Office courtyard, opposite 10 Downing Street. Macready also arranged to recall Met policemen who were serving in the army, who would be ordered to perform police duty under military discipline.

At this early stage, apart from traffic jams because no officers were doing point duty, the strike was not affecting the public. A few PCs who had opted not to strike braved the picket lines, but they soon found that they were being abused by bus drivers and other trades unionists, besides their striking colleagues, and returned to the comparative safety of their stations. A few “blacklegs” were roughed-up by angry strikers.

Lloyd George presided over an emergency cabinet meeting that morning. The cabinet agreed that the strike must be settled as soon as possible, but without direct negotiation with the Union. Smuts notified the divisional commanders that he was prepared to meet a delegation of two “representatives” from each division at the Home Office that afternoon. The Union response was to send its chairman, PC James Marston, and the secretary PC Crisp, to the Home Office. Smuts declined to meet them.

The Union leaders moved on to Tower Hill to hold a huge open air rally. Here, a speaker from the London Trades Council pledged full support from the Labour movement, and told the strikers that Manchester and other forces would join the strike the next day (they did not). As the rally ended, a large force of pickets descended on police stations in the City of London, forcing the officers on duty to support their Metropolitan comrades. Those who tried to stay on duty were roughly treated by their “comrades”.

As night fell, the Union increased the picketing of stations. A rumour arose that some officers were being

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held against their will inside Vine Street station. Three pickets were allowed to go inside, and returned to say that there were officers in the station, but they were there of their own volition. The reaction of the pickets was to demand that the “blacklegs” be brought out, and shortly afterwards, a group of regular and special constables filed out to be greeted with cheers. The excited throng then moved on to Marlborough Street, where the night shift was “persuaded” to join the strike. Around 10pm, some 600 strikers and hangers-on arrived at Paddington Green, and again the night parade was forced to join them. The mood turned nasty at Marylebone, where pickets forced their way inside against stiff resistance, and dragged the non-strikers into the street. At Crawford Place, a small group of angry civilians challenged the pickets, saying “You ought to be in the trenches”. The station windows were broken, whereupon the strikers produced their truncheons and helped the station inspector to clear the streets.

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That evening, Smuts and the Home Secretary agreed that they had no choice but to talk directly to the Union. They drafted the terms that could be offered. The pay demands would be met in full, and Union members sacked for their activities would have to be taken back. There could be no question of recognising a police union in a disciplined service, but officers could be allowed to join it, so long as it did not get involved in police duties and discipline. Further, there would be new machinery to deal with grievances. The Union leaders were telephoned by a Home Office official and told to go to Downing Street the next morning.

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The scene in the cabinet room that morning was not photographed for posterity. Lloyd George stressed that he was addressing a “deputation of police officers”, not the union executive. He announced that the pay of the police would be increased to three pounds a week, plus a wartime bonus of 12 shillings. This was more than the amounts which Sir Edward Henry had intended to announce at a later date. For the first time, there would



July 1919: A crowd of police officers attend a meeting on Tower Hill, during the police strike of 1919.

be a widow’s pension. The Prime Minister said that PC Thiel and other officers who had been sacked for their union activities would be reinstated, a decision that appalled the Commissioner and the Home Secretary. The atmosphere changed when PC Marston asked whether the Union was going to be recognised. No verbatim note of the meeting was taken, and both sides had different views of what Lloyd George said about recognition. According to the Union, the Premier said that there could be no question of a union in the police force whilst the country was at war, but afterwards there might be an agreement if the union refrained from interfering with police discipline. The government version was that Lloyd George had told the Union leaders that recognition was out of the question, but that internal representative machinery would be introduced as soon as possible.

The meeting lasted two hours. Marston agreed that he would put the government’s terms to his membership that afternoon, and would return to Downing Street with their decision. The deputation left Downing Street by the front door, Lloyd George shook hands with the Union delegation and told them; “If ever a similar situation arises in the future, you may come to see me.” A year later, during the second police strike, he brushed aside Union leaders when they tried to speak to him in Downing Street.

So ended the first police strike. It achieved all of its objectives, save the crucial demand for Union recognition. The most remarkable feature was that, apart from scuffles between strikers and pickets, the almost total withdrawal of the police from the streets of London had not led to an increase in crime or public disorder. The Home Secretary and the Commissioner paid the penalty for their total failure to understand what was going on in the force. But, even as the strike leaders were celebrating their triumph at a mass meeting on Tower Hill, in Downing Street Lloyd George was ordering the reluctant General Sir Nevil Macready to assume the office of Commissioner. His instructions from Lloyd George were unequivocal: “You must destroy the Union once and for all, and you must restore the discipline of the Metropolitan Police.”

The stage was set for the decisive battle between the government and the Union.