

# The General Strike of 1926

## Background to the strike

2026 witnesses the centenary of the only general strike in British history (to date). The origins of the strike lie in the fractious atmosphere of industrial relations from the Edwardian into the interwar period. The unions had been growing in strength and assertiveness, with membership rising from c.2 million in 1910 to 5.5 million by the start of the strike. In 1914, three major unions (dockers, transport workers and miners) formed the Triple Alliance in order to maximise their power to lobby for better conditions and pay.

The government had been drawn into industrial disputes before the war and its responsibility was magnified as the state took control of key sectors during the war. There was political instability, with five changes of government between 1918 and 1924, two being brought down by votes of no confidence. In addition, the economy was free-falling due to a major global depression leading to a slump in exports and rising unemployment.

The catalyst for the strike centred on the miners with their evocative slogan 'not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day'. The mines had been returned to private ownership in 1921 and continuing economic pressures meant that the mine owners were keen to reduce costs. In January 1926, a Royal Commission led by Sir Herbert Samuel recommended a reorganisation of the industry, an end to government subsidies and a reduction in miners' pay. Mine owners rapidly announced that pay cuts and an 8-hour day would start from 1 May. The miners sought support from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the battle lines were set.

## The nine strike days

As the timeline demonstrates, the establishment (including the government, the church and the BBC) was well-organised. Food supplies were maintained, troops were deployed in some areas and volunteers supported key industries. But this does not obscure solidarity among the workers. Indeed, more workers turned out on strike the day after it had ended than had done on the final day. Overall, 4 million workers came out on strike to support the miners. The strike was nationwide, and not just clustered in mining districts. There were outbreaks of violence, thousands were arrested, and a number of towns and cities experienced rioting and looting. The strike was finally ended, not by the workers, but by a small section of the union leadership reaching a compromise with the government.

## The aftermath of the strike

Although the general strike was ended on 12 May, the miners continued their industrial action until the end of the year, and reluctantly returned to work on lower pay. The amount of coal produced in 1926 was only half that of the previous year and millions of tons were imported from Poland and Germany. There was a knock-on effect on other industries and unemployment rose by 500,000.

The Conservative government, led by Stanley Baldwin, introduced a Trades Disputes Act in 1927 outlawing sympathetic striking (where workers not having an industrial dispute of their own went on strike purely out of support for the main strikers). However, this did not necessarily reduce the influence of either the trades union movement or the Labour Party, and only served to radicalise some unions, such as the miners. Although historians continue to dispute the impact of the general strike, there is no doubt that it was a major turning point in the history of industrial and labour relations in twentieth-century Britain.



**March**  
Samuel Commission recommends reorganisation of the coal industry. Mine owners demand 13% pay cuts and an 8-hour day. TUC starts preparations for a general strike

**1 May**  
May Day parades. TUC calls for a general strike in support of the miners. Government proclaims State of Emergency

**3 May**  
At 1.05 a.m., the government announces that negotiations have broken down and refuses appeals from the TUC to reopen negotiations. General Strike begins at midnight

**5 May**  
Government newspaper, *The British Gazette*, published. Disturbances in towns across Britain

**7 May**  
Government calls for volunteers to become special constables. BBC refuses to broadcast offer by Archbishop of Canterbury to mediate

**9 May**  
BBC broadcasts call for civil constabulary. Strikers march in London wearing WWI medals

**11 May**  
TUC calls more workers out on strike but signs memorandum with Sir Herbert Samuel to end the strike

March

1 May

4 May

7 May

10 May

**30 April**  
Government coal subsidy ends. At midnight, more than one million miners are locked out of the mines

**2 May**  
The TUC and prime minister continue to negotiate. Workers at the *Daily Mail* refuse to print an article denouncing the strike

**4 May**  
First line workers (c.3.5 million) go on strike, including transport, printing, iron and steel, utilities and miners

**6 May**  
Injunction to stop firefighters joining strike. Lorries are chained to railway lines to prevent strike breaking

**8 May**  
Stanley Baldwin broadcasts to the nation on the radio. Soldiers are called in to some areas to prevent rioting

**10 May**  
Four people killed in railway accidents caused by trains driven by volunteers; pubs run out of beer

**12 May**  
TUC visits Downing Street and tells the PM the general strike is over, although miners remain on strike as they will not accept wage cuts

ModernHistoryReviewExtras

Go online for a printable pdf of this poster  
[www.hachettelearning.com/modernhistoryreviewextras](http://www.hachettelearning.com/modernhistoryreviewextras)

Workers demonstrating with union banners in the north east of England during the General Strike

Sarah Richardson is professor of modern British history at the University of Glasgow.