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## Revision

# The general strike of 1926

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Consider the following question, then look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

*'The failure of the general strike was the result of government actions.'* How far do you agree with this view?

## Student answer with commentary

The general strike, from 4 to 12 May 1926, is usually seen to have failed because of a combination of weak leadership within the Trade Union Congress and the well-prepared response of the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin. Although the strike did display considerable working-class solidarity, with over 1.5 million men out on strike, the TUC ultimately called the strike off after nine days. It not only feared that the strike could get out of its control and be portrayed as a political revolution rather than an industrial dispute, but it was also running out of money. The government had planned well and this, and the readiness of people to act as 'patriotic volunteers', meant that the strike could not succeed in the short term – a crucial factor, since the TUC was banking on a quick victory.

The opening offers a variety of reasons for the failure of the strike and is balanced in its approach. It avoids the trap of telling the story of what happened and focuses on why it failed. It does offer a view, but this could be a little clearer.

It is evident that the government was well prepared for the strike. Following 'Red Friday' in 1925 it had organised to break a potential strike that might follow. The civil servant who masterminded these plans, Sir John Anderson, prepared with remarkable thoroughness: most notably, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies was established, which ensured volunteers could maintain essential supplies. The country was divided into ten areas, so essential services could be maintained, with troops manning power stations. The government was also resolute in its attitude. Stiffened by the right wing of his party, Prime Minister Baldwin was determined the strike would not succeed. He had all the resources of the state available, and this allowed the government to spend some £433 million over the nine days, compared to the union's £4 million, with the latter unable to afford any more. The government also won the propaganda battle, with Baldwin's appointment of Churchill to edit *The British Gazette* a masterstroke. One of its first actions was to brand the strike a challenge to the constitution, rather than to stop the exploitation of the miners. Churchill went on to paint the strike as a 'direct challenge to ordered government' and a 'road to anarchy and ruin'. The circulation of the gazette was also much wider than the TUC's *British Worker*, taking the government's message into more homes. As a result, the government was able to appeal to many upper- and middle-class volunteers to keep essential services running and thus reduce the impact of the strike. Government

action therefore prevented it succeeding in the short term, while also having the resources to defeat it in the long term, should it continue.

This first main paragraph considers the importance of the named factor, 'government action', and is well supported, with precise details and examples such as Anderson, the OMS and figures of expenditure. The argument that government action was important is emphasised in the judgement in the last sentence, where its role in ensuring victory in both the short and long term is stressed.

The readiness of many people to act as 'patriotic volunteers' was also important in the failure of the strike. Although the strike virtually brought the railways to a stop, road transport functioned well due to volunteer drivers, and this ensured that essential supplies – most importantly, food – were moved around the country. It could be argued that in the days before motor vehicles, the strike would have been more effective. Government planning and preparedness therefore ensured that the strike could not succeed in the short term. The concept of a general strike was also unpopular with many, as it was associated with Bolshevism and Russian Communism. Even the Labour Party opposed the idea, knowing that it would be bad for them following the Communist scare in 1924 with the Zinoviev letter. Not only were many in the country opposed to the strike, but the Labour movement itself was divided, and this certainly weakened its position against a strong government.

The second factor discussed is the role of the public and their attitudes towards the strike. The role of the patriotic volunteers is explained, before the response considers that many were worried by the fear of Communism and its potential links with the strike. Perhaps some mention could have been made of the dislike of syndicalism. The response also argues that even within the Labour movement there were divisions, which weakened the strikers' position further.

However, the failure was compounded by the lack of union strategy. It was apparent from its negotiations over the weekend before the strike that the General Council was reluctant to support action, describing the idea as a 'national disaster'. The TUC did not have a clear plan and certainly did not have either the funds or local organisation to maintain the strike for a long period. The local strike committees that were set up in towns and cities often received ambiguous instructions, or none at all, from the TUC. At the same time, a High Court ruling had declared the strike illegal, and suggested union funds could be liable for seizure, exposing union leaders to the potential of lawsuits for breach of contract. The unions therefore feared they would be bankrupted. Many of the other union leaders were moderates and feared that if the strike continued, they would lose control of it and that it would become a revolutionary threat to the state. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that the TUC called off the strike on 12 May without any guarantees for strikers. The strike was not being won, union funds were exhausted in strike pay and violence might spread.

The third factor considered is the role of both the TUC and miners. It explains the lack of planning, confused nature of instructions and then links the weakness of the union position back to strength of the state and the legal position. It also emphasises the different attitudes of the TUC and miners' union to the strike, which further undermined its position.

The miners had called on the TUC for support as allies, but this meant that mine owners could appeal to the government. The struggle was therefore an unequal contest. The TUC was faced by the power of the government and state, with detachments of the army stationed outside major cities. Baldwin broadcast to the nation on 8 May, and his skilful words portrayed him as a moderate man, even if he would not negotiate until the strike was ended. With the TUC reluctant to even start a general strike it

was only too happy to seize on the offer of talks with Sir Herbert Samuel, even though Samuel's proposals had not been agreed by the government. The TUC agreed the Samuel formula, but the miners were against it, and this led to a breach between the two and the General Council ended its support for the miners on 12 May.

This paragraph is more descriptive in approach but does pick up on several crucial issues – the power of the state, the attitude of the TUC and the breach between the TUC and miners, all of which played a role in the strike ending. However, there is no judgement as to the importance of these issues.

Despite the strike achieving greater support than had been predicted and with little sign of crumbling worker solidarity, the strike failed. In the circumstances, it appears unlikely that it ever stood any chance of success. The TUC felt it had to support the miners after Black Friday, but the support was, at best, half-hearted and it took the first opportunity to abandon the miners, aware they could not win. In contrast, the government was well prepared and had the vast resources of state available. Given the unequal nature of the struggle, it is hardly surprising the strike failed.

The conclusion reaches a judgement. It hints at a link between the factors – the strength of the government, which the TUC was clearly aware of and therefore saw little chance of winning the struggle – but this link could be developed. Despite this, the response is focused on failure and does have some judgement, which takes the response into the higher levels.

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