



WORK FOR ALL.

PRIME MINISTER. "COME ON, EVERYBODY, AND LEND A HAND. THIS ISN'T A ONE-MAN JOB!"

## The Coalition record

What did the Lloyd George governments achieve for labour and industrial relations policy?

By Chris Wrigley.

# The Lloyd George Coalition Governments: Labour and Industrial Relations

THE WARTIME AND post-war years of Lloyd George's premiership were frequently turbulent. *Tempestuous Journey*, the title of Frank Owen's 1954 biography of Lloyd George, also fits the industrial strife that his governments faced in 1916–22. The Lloyd George coalition governments usually were adroit and flexible in handling major strikes. Approaches ranged from conceding much, as in the case of the 1917 engineering strikes, to resolute toughness, as in the crushing of the 1919 police strike, sacking participants regardless of their years of service.

The First World War created huge demand for labour in the UK and other belligerent countries. During the war, 5,670,000 men joined the Army, Navy and Air Force from an adult male labour force of 18,234,000 (in 1917): 31.1 per cent. In industrial relations, labour is in a strong position in upturns in the economy. With the reduced labour force plus the huge demand for engineering products (including ships and coal), labour was strong, and employers were relatively weak. This strength in the labour market was offset by the widespread commitment to winning the war.

During the war, most strikes in the UK took place in metals, engineering, shipbuilding and coalmining. In 1917, these sectors experienced half of all strikes. The war skewed industrial output away from consumer goods

toward munitions (in the broadest sense). Engineering employment grew despite overall falls in labour (notwithstanding the replacement labour of women and the return of expatriates). The strikes that most threatened the government's ability to prosecute the war were the May 1917 engineering strikes in the main industrial centres other than the Clyde, which had been the centre of engineering unrest in 1915–16. The level of discontent revealed by these strikes forced the government to alter many domestic policies before worse unrest happened.

At the heart of the discontent was resentment at the perceived unfairness of the Munitions of War Act, 1915, to the workforce. Engineers felt that there were restrictions on them that benefited employers still carrying out private work; in particular, there was the extension of dilution (whereby the easier parts of skilled work were done by semi- or unskilled workers, including women) to private work, and the leaving certificates which employers could agree to or withhold before workers could move to another job. There was also outrage that the newly agreed trade card scheme, whereby skilled engineers (who were in short supply for war work) would not be conscripted, was proposed to be scrapped. Different engineering areas had different additional grievances. However, behind the

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specific industrial grievances was increasing war weariness, which was affecting all the belligerents, with notable bitterness at profiteering. The May engineering strikes involved 200,000 men and lost 1,500,000 working days.

The government took a variety of approaches towards resolving the dispute and mitigating its consequences. A major response to wartime industrial unrest was to muster moderate opinion among trade unionists and the public against strikes. This was partly done by bringing Labour Party MPs into government under both Asquith and Lloyd George. Arthur Henderson, Labour's leader (as chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party) held two ministerial posts under Asquith but was there to troubleshoot for the government in industrial relations. Under Lloyd George, who needed Labour's support for his coalition government, Henderson was given a place in the war cabinet, initially of five members, where again he often acted to resolve industrial disputes. Lloyd George also appointed Labour MPs to new ministries in areas of special interest to Labour: John Hodge to the Ministry of Labour (from 10 December 1916 until 17

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August 1917, then Minister of Pensions until January 1919), George Barnes to the Ministry of Pensions (from 10 December 1916 until 17 August 1917 and then war cabinet and cabinet until 27 January 1920), and J. R. Clynes later to the Ministry of Food Control (as parliamentary secretary, July 1917–July 1918, then as food controller).

The government continued its policy of trying to negotiate only with trade union officials, not with shop stewards or other representatives of rank-and-file movements. During the engineering unrest on Clydeside in 1915–16, Lloyd George had met the Clyde Workers' Committee despite statements saying he would not. In May 1917, ministers made much of the

militant workers being in revolt against the trade union officials. Henderson told a conference of representatives of the Engineering and Shipbuilding Federation on 10 May:

... the government would be prepared to go to ... any reasonable length with you to stamp this pernicious influence and policy out of the ranks of organised labour, because it is going to be disastrous to the country and to organised labour. I have set my face like flint against anything that is going to undermine the discipline and executive authority of the respective trade unions.<sup>1</sup>

The government asserted again that it would not negotiate with unofficial strike bodies. This was got round by Dr Addison, the Minister of Munitions, negotiating with representatives of the unofficial strike committee with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) executive present.

Negotiations were backed by willingness to make use of legal powers under the Defence of the Realm Acts or the Munitions of War Acts.

On 17 May, seven strike leaders were arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act and were put in Brixton Prison. Lloyd George

agreed to withdraw the charges against the arrested men when they undertook to adhere to the agreement Addison had made with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. Such legal action was likely to gain public support in wartime. However, the danger of legal action exacerbating a strike was recognised. The government's overriding need was to maintain munitions output for the forthcoming battle (to be known as Passchendaele). Henderson said of the May Engineering strikes that 'no more serious situation has arisen since August 1914'.

The government was aware of a wide range of social issues behind the discontent. Like other belligerent countries, there was war weariness, the nature and extent of which

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was shown in the reports of the Commissions on Industrial Unrest. Lloyd George set up the Commissions on Industrial Unrest to report within four weeks, as he feared rising food prices would lead to further unrest. The UK and its allies had benefited from bumper cereal crops in the US, Canada and Argentina in 1915, with the total cereal production going up 18.3 per cent over the average for 1910–14. However, in 1916, the cereal production of these countries fell by 20.3 per cent from the output of 1915, a very serious matter given the UK's dependence on imported food, as Lloyd George warned in the House of Commons in February 1917, with 70–80 per cent of cereals imported. Cereals, along with potatoes, were the major sources of cheap carbohydrates for working people. All were in short supply. Later, in October, big food queues formed in parts of London and cities were moving to sugar rationing.<sup>2</sup>

There was great concern over food supplies and prices well before the May engineering strikes. There was fear of a return to the food shortages and price inflation of the Napoleonic wars. The major government measure to boost domestic output of cereals and other foodstuffs was the Corn Production Act, 1917 which had its first reading in the House of Commons on 5 April, before the May strikes. As well as increasing the acreage under arable cultivation, food control achieved a greater volume of grain for bread by better extraction rate for flour from grain as well as by mixing into wheat flour, flour from other grains and potatoes. High food prices and unfair food distribution was deemed to be the strongest underlying cause of discontent. Such discontent was exacerbated by widespread awareness of profiteering in food. It has been argued that in Germany profiteering, and the black market played major roles in causing food shortages for working people in the war.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the government feared that industrial unrest could escalate into wider social unrest which could undermine the war effort. Lloyd George commented, 'If we are to bend

all our energies towards winning the war, and winning it in the shortest time possible, it is the duty of the government to do all they can to secure peace and contentment at home.' The level of concern was not only indicated by the number of regional commissions (eight) and the four-week deadline for reports, but by the government stating in advance it would act on the findings.<sup>4</sup>

While the reports revealed regional variations in the causes of discontent, there were several common reasons besides food. Other major grievances included restrictions on mobility for skilled engineers (notably the leaving certificates from employers if men were to be allowed to leave for other work), the working of the Military Service Acts and, in several areas, inadequate housing, inadequate supplies of beer, failure to issue war pensions in a fair manner and fatigue from working long hours without respite. As well as trying to remedy these matters, the government was keen to support the setting up of local joint committees of employers and employees, which could marginalise militant shop stewards.

The number of strikes in 1918 went up by 56 per cent, but the days lost because of strikes only went up by 4 per cent. 1918 saw large numbers of relatively small strikes compared to the May engineering strikes in 1917. Engineering and shipbuilding remained the most strike prone category with 36.1 per cent of the total, and mining came second again with 14.7 per cent of the total. Building saw more than a doubling (up 173.5 per cent) of days lost through strikes, with the number of strikes also doubling.

In January 1918, when speaking in the war cabinet of the war in the coming year, Lloyd George said that 'the great factor of the war this year would be either military or morale, and he was inclined to think it would be the latter. Food was the first line of defence.' He still feared working class disillusionment with the war, fuelled by food shortages. Anger at declining real wages grew during the year.

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The government attempted to remedy skilled engineers' poor pay comparative to unskilled workers by a 12.5 per cent bonus (a grievance highlighted by the commissions of unrest after the May 1917 strikes). The bonus exacerbated pay differentials, setting off considerable unrest among pieceworkers and premium bonus workers. The government retreated before demands to extend a 7.5 per cent bonus to unskilled engineers and to workers in allied trades.

The serious situation on the Western Front, especially with the successful German offensive of 21 March 1918, gave the government the popular support it needed to extend the ages at each end for conscription and to remove men from reserved occupations. This had an impact on munitions production, but the biggest impact was on mining. The removal of miners put the remaining miners in an even stronger bargaining position, gave them another grievance and had a very adverse impact on the vital output of coal, which would have had a serious impact on the economy had the war continued into mid-1919.

The overwhelming support for the war, albeit fraying at the edges after three years, ensured that labour rarely exercised its powerful position in the depleted labour market. With the armistice on 11 November 1918, such restraint went. In 1919, the number of strikes and went from 1,165,000 in 1918 to 1,352,000 in 1919, but the number of working days lost went from 5,875,000 in 1918 to 34,969,000. The engineering (24.7 per cent) and mining (18.5 per cent) categories remained most strike prone but otherwise the main feature was the numerous strikes across a wide range of sectors marking the pent-up grievances of the war years. There was a range of substantial strikes including on the London tubes, in textiles, clothing, electrical generating and building. The scale of strike activity, the threat of some major strikes to the established social order and the fears of Bolsheviks infiltrating the UK ensured that the government could not disengage from involvement in industrial relations. It was one

of several areas where there could not be a quick 'back to 1914'.

The internal politics of the coalition government resulted in Lloyd George prioritising coalition Conservative concerns about Russia over working to keep Arthur Henderson in his government. Henderson was in effect constructively dismissed in August 1917 for wishing to attend a socialist conference in Stockholm which would have included socialists from the Central Powers. Henderson firmly believed that attending would help to keep Russia in the war. He was smeared by some Conservative politicians and much of the Tory press as a friend of the Bolsheviks. This was ridiculous. When Henderson had been in Russia, he had spoken publicly with Kerensky in support of the war and had denounced the Bolsheviks. Ousting and humiliating Labour's leader proved to be a costly mistake. After breaking with the government, Henderson spent less time in parliament in order to devote himself to overhauling the Labour Party's organisation, thereby facilitating its route to success in the 1923 general election and subsequently forming a minority Labour government in January 1924.

Lloyd George believed he needed to appease the Conservative Right by sacrificing Henderson and, also, thought Henderson was too ready to disregard cabinet collective responsibility. Lloyd George also misjudged the respect most of the Parliamentary Labour Party and trade union leaders had for Henderson when he thought of replacing him with George Barnes, who had not been a success as chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1910–11. The ousting of Henderson reinforced what was already happening in terms of the political trajectory of the Labour movement, which was going more in the direction of European socialists than towards the moderation of Samuel Gompers and much of US trade unionism.<sup>5</sup>

The British Labour movement was unusual in that there was no major split such as that between the SPD and USPD in Germany. Those on the Right, such as Lord Milner, did

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their utmost to split 'patriotic labour' away from socialists in the Labour Party. Four coalition Labour Party ministers did not return to the Labour Party after the armistice but stood as National Democratic Party candidates and won, with George Barnes and George Roberts being ministers in the post-war coalition government. However, all the National Democratic or coalition Labour MPs bar one lost or had retired by the 1922 general election, and the last one, Roberts, lost as an Independent in the 1923 general election.<sup>6</sup>

The government faced big engineering disputes on Clydeside and in Belfast in early 1919. The end of the war saw great pressure for reduced working weeks as well as increased pay.<sup>7</sup> The Amalgamated Society of Engineers demanded in June 1918 a reduction of weekly hours from fifty-four to forty-four and negotiations secured a forty-seven-hour week, the first standard national week in engineering. The deal was endorsed by all the unions involved, including by 57 per cent of the members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers who voted. There was a short post-war depression as most war work ceased, and demobilisation quickened as unrest took place among soldiers and sailors. The threat of unemployment undermined support for the settlement especially in the big engineering works and shipyards on the Clyde and in Belfast. There was also great dissatisfaction with the deal involving a commitment to sustain output at the fifty-four-hour level, seen as excessive speeding up of work.

King George V told ministers that he feared revolution, perhaps partly because his anxieties had been increased by the Russian royal family being killed in July 1918. Robert Horne, minister for labour, and Lloyd George believed that the monarch, like much of the press, panicked unduly. The government and employers saw the unrest on the Upper Clyde as being directed against the unions which, other than the Electrical Trade Union, did not make the strike official. The government declined to negotiate with the strike committee other than

through the unions. The strike was very popular, especially among skilled workers and unemployed soldiers. The strike spread outwards from the Upper Clyde to the Lower Clyde and the Forth with 36,000 Lanarkshire and Stirling miners and 10,000 iron moulders coming out in sympathy strikes. By 29 January, ministers had to accept that they could not avoid intervening.

Emmanuel Shinwell, chair of the strike committee, on 29 January took a deputation to the lord provost of Glasgow, presenting their demands and calling for Lloyd George and Horne to intervene. The next day, the war cabinet discussed its response to the deteriorating situation and Shinwell's threat that if the government did not respond, the strikers would go beyond constitutional methods. Brigadier General Borlase Wyndham Childs, director of personal services, whose responsibilities included the supervision of discipline in the army, told the war cabinet that, while soldiers had been used in past strikes, the situation had changed; then 'we had a well-disciplined and ignorant army, whereas now we have an army educated and disciplined.' Robert Munro, the secretary for Scotland and Liberal MP for Roxburgh and Selkirk, advised that Glasgow's 2,000 special constables should be used to maintain services as he believed that they 'might be more reliable and suitable than soldiers.'

The government prepared to 'take firm action', instructing Lord Clyde, the lord advocate and coalition Unionist MP for Edinburgh North, to examine the legal grounds for the arrest of the ringleaders of the strike. On 31 January, Lloyd George, in Paris at the Peace Conference, warned that the case for arrests should stand up in a court and that the action should not be for striking but be 'on a charge of sedition, e.g. an attempt to use force'. That morning, mounted police charged a huge demonstration that was supporting Shinwell and his deputation when they went back to the lord provost of Glasgow for the response to the strike committee's demands. When this

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police action was reported later in the day to the war cabinet, Munro said, 'it was ... clearer than ever that it was a misnomer to call the situation in Glasgow a strike – it was a Bolshevik rising.' His colleagues were largely reassured by the information that 12,000 troops could be moved quickly into Glasgow and that six tanks and 100 armoured cars were going by rail from London that night. Bonar Law told his colleagues that Lord Clyde was going to Scotland 'to try quietly to set the people in Glasgow to work to get a voluntary organisation of citizens to form themselves against this movement.' After a show of military force in Glasgow, the strikes and unrest fizzled out.<sup>8</sup>

The situation in Belfast was as worrying as Glasgow for the government. Milner wrote in his diary on 31 January, 'Things are pretty bad at Glasgow and worse at Belfast'.<sup>9</sup> The press and some politicians referred to the Belfast strike committee as a 'Soviet', but the strike committee did not. Edward Shortt, chief secretary for Ireland and coalition Liberal MP, told the war cabinet, 'The workmen had formed a "Soviet" committee and this committee had received forty-seven applications from small businessmen for permission to use light.' Ian MacPherson, Shortt's successor as chief secretary and a Liberal MP, suggested to the war cabinet that civilians should be enrolled in Belfast, as had been done in Glasgow, to avoid using troops to run the gas and electric works.<sup>10</sup>

The use of volunteers against trade union action was notable in 1911–1926. The volunteers were mostly middle and upper class, working to maintain supplies and transport, intending to help their communities and to thwart trade unionism. Some 3,000 special constables had been enrolled in Liverpool in 1911. Volunteers worked in the Lister Street power station. They were protected by the army and by the presence of the battleship *Antrim*, which later was stationed in Archangel in 1916. Volunteers were also utilised against strikes in the docks, railways and coal in 1911–12 and in the Leeds municipal strike of 1913, as Liam Ryan has detailed.<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Morgan has

argued that the Supply and Transport organisation was a milder response than might have been made:

The more inflammatory alternatives, military intervention, citizens' guards and the like, were carefully ruled out ... The emphasis would be on the government as the defensive organiser of essential supplies and services, not the aggressive party seeking a war with the unions.<sup>12</sup>

The sheer volume of strikes in 1919 pushed the government to mobilise moderate opinion in industry by devising the National Industrial Conference in February 1919. This followed on from the National Industrial Council of 1911, which had been suggested by the textile employer Sir Charles Macara, which was intended to bring together all those who shared the ideal of 'the substitution in the industrial sphere of cooperation for antagonism in relations between employers and employed.' In 1919, big claims were made for the National Industrial Conference (NIC) which first met on 27 February. It was called a parliament for industry and was complementary to the Whitley Committees (joint industrial committees). It was seen by many as a UK alternative to Lenin and Bolshevism. Henderson and Clynes were enthusiastic deeming the conference a means for avoiding serious industrial unrest. When addressing the NIC, Lloyd George exceeded even his normal flattery of those he was seeking to win over. He said:

You are really a Peace Congress, you are settling the future of this country, but you may be doing more than that. ... You may be making the model for civilisation which all lands will turn to and say, 'Let us follow Britain'.

While industrial strife was highly menacing, Lloyd George and his colleagues were clear that the recommendations coming from the industrial conference would be acted on. Once

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the threat of mining and railway strikes had passed, so the government's support for the National Industrial Conference dwindled and all but evaporated by November 1919.<sup>13</sup> While, perhaps, it was an early example of corporatism, which was evident under Harold Macmillan in the early 1960s, it owed much to the joint committees in a range of industries from the late nineteenth century and which had impressed moderate Labour leaders such as Henderson and Clynes.

In the immediate post-war period, the government was faced with the prospect of a coordinated strike of miners, dockers and railway workers – a revival of the Triple Alliance of 1914. The miners were in an economically strong position during and after the war, up until late 1920. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) had called for nationalisation of the mines from 1894 and, at its 1918 annual conference in July, it was unanimously agreed that it was 'clearly in the national interest to transfer the whole industry from private ownership and control to state ownership with joint control by the workmen and the state'. State control in 1916 and 1917 had left ownership in private hands with guaranteed profits

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based on good pre-war years, but the state did very well from the soaring price of coal. The miners wished to avoid decontrol returning the industry to unsatisfactory private ownership. The MFGB conference had voted for their demands to be submitted within four weeks of the end of the war, but the MFGB delayed until after the general election. Lloyd George successfully stalled the issue further by setting up a Royal Commission under the high court judge Sir John Sankey. Lloyd George seemed to suggest that the government would accept its majority recommendation. When

the majority recommendation of its members reported in favour of nationalisation, the government rejected it. Lloyd George told the war cabinet, that it was 'impossible to carry nationalisation in the present Parliament.' This rejection of the majority Sankey Report embittered relations between the miners and the Lloyd George post-war coalition government. However, after the Interim Report on wages and hours, the government did agree to a 20 per cent rise in wages and a reduction in hours of work from eight to seven.

The railway workers did not delay after the armistice. They submitted a demand for a range of improved conditions, nationalisation and a measure of workers' control. In late February 1919, they received substantially improved conditions of work but not nationalisation or any element of workers' control. Lloyd George was very adept at dividing J. H. Thomas, the leader of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), from the miners and from ASLEF, the train drivers' union. However, when the railway workers went on strike on 26 September 1919, the government went all out to defeat them. They operated the Supply and Transport Committee, putting into operation plans developed since the 17 February, the government had the advantage of still controlling shipping and the wartime rationing machinery. It was also ready to direct

propaganda internally, against the NUR, instead of externally against the Central Powers. Lloyd George attacked 'this anarchist conspiracy' and wrongly claimed the strike aimed for nationalisation. The NUR countered the government's cinema and newspaper adverts and won the battle for public opinion. The government settled the dispute.<sup>14</sup>

With the severe recession of 1921–22, the balance of power in industrial relations tilted heavily in favour of employers. The trade unions struggled – usually unsuccessfully – to hold on to gains made in 1915–20. The miners



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were faced with wage cuts and a return of more hours of work in 1921 as the government decontrolled the mines early. The 1921 mining dispute was even more bitter than that of 1926. The engineers suffered a heavy defeat in 1922 in a lock-out in which the employers successfully asserted managerial prerogatives.

No longer fearing union power, many Conservative MPs saw no need to rely on Lloyd George or to work with the coalition Liberal MPs. Like most employers, they wished for a small state and little or no intervention in industrial relations. Sir Allan Smith of the Engineering Employers Federation commented at the National Industrial Conference on 27 February 1919 that 'the whole experience of the last twenty years has proved that if only the government will leave us alone, we are far better able to settle our differences than any agencies outside.' Austen Chamberlain, the chancellor of the exchequer, complained in the war cabinet on 28 January 1919 that the expectation that the government would intervene in industrial disputes resulted in strikes being prolonged as neither side would say their last word. The continuing involvement in industrial disputes alienated increasing numbers of Conservative MPs, some of whom had revolted against some domestic policies from early

in the 1919 parliament. With such dissatisfaction on a range of issues, especially around Ireland, India and the former Ottoman Empire, it was less surprising that Lloyd George fell in October 1922, than that he survived from early 1921.

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