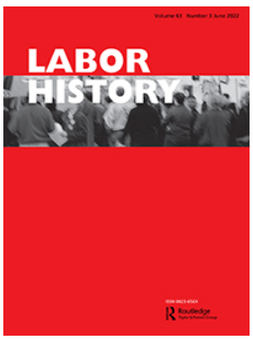

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Strikers versus scabs: violence in the 1910-1914 British labour revolt

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 200 years of British labour history there have been frequent examples of aggressive and sometimes violent mass picketing aimed at stopping non-striking scab or so-called 'blackleg' labour [sic]. Yet remarkably little detailed attention has been given within the field of British industrial relations or even labour history to the contributory causes, characteristic features, impact and broader implications of this violent dimension of the strikers/scabs relationship within industrial militancy. This paper attempts to fill the gap, focusing on one of the most intense and graphic illustrative time periods, the pre-First World War Labour Revolt between 1910-14. Drawing on an extensive range of secondary literature and new archival material, it explores the way in which working class violence as a form of active collective defence became justified by the way in which it was directly provoked by the employers' encouragement and/or importation of scab labour, combined with the partisan intervention of police, troops, civil authorities and government as a means of attempting to defeat workers' struggles. In challenging the legitimacy of public order and state power, such action encouraged a culture of community solidarity and self-defence that embraced many local supporters in the mass picketing against 'blacklegs'.

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Introduction

Most historical analysis of militant strike activity has tended to pivot around two main dimensions of militancy: the antagonism between workers and employers and divergence of interests between rank-and-file strikers and trade union leaders. But another important dimension, albeit often been downplayed or ignored in British industrial relations and even labour history literature, is the conflict between strikers and non-striking scab or so-called 'blackleg' [sic] labour[1] – effectively between the right to strike and the right to work. This relates to the way in which when a strike takes place those who take action (usually the majority) are immediately confronted with the need to mount a picket line, not only to attempt to stop the movement of goods and services in or out of a strike-bound workplace, but also to act as a moral and physical deterrent to prevent individual recalcitrant workers (usually the minority) from going into work and thereby undermining the effectiveness and solidarity of collective strike action and assisting the employers.

Ironically, it is not the employers acting *themselves* who attempt to break strikes in this fashion – instead they encourage workers to act by proxy on their behalf, for their interests and against the interests of strikers. As a consequence, a picket line is effectively aimed directly at non-striking

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Note: Some of the material in this article will be reproduced, albeit in a lengthier and differently structured form, in my forthcoming book *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*, to be published by Pluto Press in 2023.

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workers as well as against *employers*. It is a form of class struggle in so far as the struggle between the workers and employers is always reflected (or refracted) in the struggle between the section of the working class that is under the influence of the employers and the section opposed to the employers.

In the process, the sanctity of the picket line has been viewed historically by many trade union activists as both a vital strike weapon and a principle that must be respected – with a 'Thou Shall Not Cross a Picket Line' mantra effectively regarded as an 11th commandment. And it follows that with strike militancy pitting worker against worker, scabs invariably become subject to scorn, contempt and abusive language, which can on occasion escalate into intimidation, obstruction, and even sometimes physical assault. Indeed, it could be argued 'strikebreaking and violence [against scabs] are in many ways intrinsically linked' (Millan, 2019: 554).

While such considerations are clearly of relevance to the extremely violent and bloody labour conflicts that characterised America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Taft & Ross, 1969; Gitelman, 1973; Goldstein, 1978; Fishback, 1995; Norwood, 2002; Smith, 2003; Ovetz, 2019; Lipold & Isaac, 2022), they are also pertinent to any multi-dimensional historical understanding of the underlying features of much strike activity in Britain during this period (Arnison, 1974; Geary, 1985; Kelliher, 2021; Linehan, 2018; Saluppo, 2018, 2019), as well as other European countries (Millan, 2019). Indeed, British industrial struggles often displayed a high degree of assertive, aggressive and sometimes violent action by striking workers determined to make every effort to win their disputes by engaging in mass picketing to prevent the employers' use of 'blackleg' labour and its facilitation by the deployment of police, and on occasion by detachments of troops sent in by the government.

Following the legalisation of trade union activity in the 1870s, British employers demanded the freedom of non-strikers to continue to work and the right to import so-called 'free labour', calling for this to be protected by the state against the alleged 'tyranny' of unions. A succession of legislative measures was subsequently introduced which imposed restrictions on what strike action and picketing received legal protection, making it an offence for pickets to resort to intimidation and violence in order to prevent any person from going into work and 'violating' individual liberty and rights. In the wake of the 1889–1891 'New Unionism' strike wave a series of adverse court judgements further restricted trade unions' right to strike and picket by applying common law torts, culminating in the infamous 1901 Taff Vale judgment which held unions liable for damages to employers arising from strike action by their members.

The legal immunity of unions was restored by the 1906 Trade Disputes Act along with a formal guarantee of the lawful right to picket 'for the purpose of peacefully obtaining or communicating information or of peacefully persuading any person to … abstain from working', with no restriction as to place or numbers involved (Wedderburn, 1960: 163–67). Ironically, this new 'modern right to picket' ran directly counter to the findings of the 1906 Royal Commission on Trade Unions which had argued – in a fashion that many employers were to repeatedly assert – that 'peaceful picketing' by a large crowd was a contradiction in terms as it invariably passed from the language of persuasion into 'illegal intimidation' and 'physical violence' (Morgan, 1987: 152–3; Weinberger, 1991: 82). Such a claim was to remain of fundamental importance to the way in which the conduct of strike action and picketing activity was viewed throughout the twentieth century (and informed the Thatcher Conservative government's 1980s employment legislation reducing immunities for picketing activity).

Yet remarkably little detailed attention has been given within the field of British industrial relations or even labour history, to an understanding of the contributory causes, characteristic features and dynamics of the violent dimension of the strikers versus scabs relationship, and its broader implications for understanding the nature of industrial militancy and employer/state countermobilisation. This article attempts to fill the gap from the vantage point of a Marxist analytical framework, concentrating on one of the most intense and graphic illustrative historical time periods, the pre-First World War so-called 'Labour Unrest' – or what more accurately should be termed 'Labour Revolt'[2] – between 1910 and 1914 in which picketing violence was a prominent and recurring phenomenon. This included the 1910–1911 South Wales miners' strike, 1911 national

seamen's, dockers' and railway workers' strikes, 1912 national miners' and London transport strikes, 1913 Midlands metal workers' strikes and Dublin transport workers' lockout, and 1914 London building workers' lockout. Despite some general historical accounts of the strike wave (for example, Dangerfield, 1935/1997; Darlington, (2023); Holton, 1976) and studies of individual disputes (for example, Griffiths, 2009; Taplin, 1994), this article attempts to make a distinctive contribution by providing an overarching analysis of the intrinsically combustible nature of the strikers versus scabs relationship that defined this period.

It explores the way in which, despite the framing of mass picketing to deter scabs by employers, government, state and mainstream press at the time as inherently coercive and violent, working class violence as a form of active defence became justified by the way in which it was directly provoked by the employers' encouragement and/or importation of scab labour, combined with the partisan intervention of police and troops against strikers as a means of attempting to defeat workers' struggles and uphold capitalist property rights.

Methods and structure

The article draws on an extensive range of secondary industrial relations, labour and political history literature, and deploys new archival material (including Home Office documents, trade union records, daily national and local newspapers and the radical left press) to foreground hitherto neglected aspects, reveal fresh insights, challenge some existing interpretations, and offer a focused but also interconnected investigation into the context, processes, actors and outcomes of picketing violence during the 1910–1914 Labour Revolt.

After a brief outline of the broader economic and political background, and some of the ways in which the violent dimension of the strikers versus scabs relationship became manifest, the article thematically explores the multi-dimensional factors encouraging the link between strikers, scabs and violence. It evaluates in turn, scabs, employers, police and military, government, strike leaders, the community, and women workers, and highlights a number of underlying distinguishing features before then assessing the limits and potential of picketing violence and providing a general analytical assessment of issues raised.

Context

To understand the explosive and violent nature of the strike wave it is necessary to highlight some aspects of its material and social context. To begin with, a series of poverty surveys had shown what H.M. Hyndman in *The Times* (25 August 1911) called the 'intolerable conditions of labour' and the 'neglect of the misery and squalor in our great cities'. According to the author of a 1911 study on the industrial militancy, with about 30 per cent of the population living in poverty, and nearly one half of all workers in actual poverty, 'it speaks volumes for the patience of the British people that they have not long ago risen in revolt against these scandalous conditions of life' (Ellis Barker, 1911: 444–5; 446). What helped to transform the situation was the way in which years of pent-up frustration at declining real wages and working-class living standards was transformed with the onset of economic recovery, a fall in the level of unemployment and a consequent increase in workers' collective bargaining power – thereby providing both the *threat* and *opportunity* that contributed to stimulating the incendiary character of the strike wave that swept the country.

It was an explosion of labour militancy that spilled over into some 4,600 strikes across many different industries in repeated battles with employers for higher wages, better working conditions and trade union organisation, leading to a spectacular increase in union membership from 2.4 million at the end of 1909 to 4.1 million by 1914 which surpassed (in absolute if not relative terms) the achievements of the earlier 'New Unionism' strike wave.

The revolt was dominated by unskilled and semi-skilled workers, embracing both members of established and recognised trade unions as well as others hitherto unorganised and unrecognized, who became engaged in a bitter fight to build collective organisation and win union recognition against the hostility of many employers. Not only was trade unionism a minority phenomenon (in 1910 only 17 per cent of the workforce were unionised), but the vast majority of workers were outside the collective bargaining system (in fact, of four of the main industries affected by strikes, the mines, railways, shipping, docks and building, only two, mining and building, had the benefits of established collective bargaining agreements and union recognition) and therefore did not have access to any established procedures which could handle their grievances.

For example, collective bargaining in the waterside transport industry and on the railways was either backward or non-existent. This meant accumulated grievances tended to explode into widespread militant revolts by unorganised or newly organised workers, who became determined to utilise their collective industrial power to coerce employers to agree to make concessions over wages and working arrangements which could not be resolved by negotiation or through ineffectual government-sponsored Joint Boards of Conciliation and Arbitration. In the process, the revolt largely took place independently and unofficially of the national trade union leadership whose unresponsiveness to workers' discontents, attempts to channel grievances within established official channels, and advocacy of compromise and moderation was rejected by workers in favour of militant strike action from below.

Underpinning the confrontation between strikers and scabs, was the role assumed by young workers in a predominately unofficial dynamic as rank-and-file workers eagerly sought new forms of militant organisation and action that would allow a direct struggle against the employers and transcend the defensive mentality associated with earlier forms of official trade union policy and leadership (Woodhouse, 1995: 11–12).

Moreover, there was a widespread questioning of the political system in Edwardian Britain. While Dangerfield (1935/1997) went so far as to suggest there was a semi-revolutionary situation, many historians have insisted that the struggles were only really significant in terms of securing limited immediate improvements in wages and conditions and the right to union organisation, demonstrating only 'trade union consciousness' on the part of workers with no significant section being politicised (Pelling, 1968). Arguably while the former viewpoint is an exaggerated portrayal, the latter completely ignores the inherent radicalised sentiment and behaviour that was expressed during this period amongst at least a sizeable layer of workers.

In pursuing their immediate goals of increased wages, better working conditions and trade union organisation and recognition, workers were often confronted not only with intransigent employers and hesitant union leaders, but also with hostile government officials, the defiance of magistrates and persistent attacks by police and troops. Many workers also became disaffected with parliamentary politics caused by the functioning of the newly-formed Labour Party in the House of Commons as a mere adjunct of the post-1906 Liberal Party government, which frowned on militant industrial struggle. Consequently, the established 'rules of the game' – piecemeal social reform by means of institutionalised collective bargaining and parliamentary action – were widely questioned and put under considerable strain, reinforcing the appeal of 'direct action' via militant industrial struggle as the weapon to advance the labour movement's interests (Kirk, 1994:108; Darlington, 2013: 45, (forthcoming (2023))).

Thus, it was a revolt against the authority of the employers – as well as on occasions a challenge to the power of government and the state – that encouraged a process of radicalisation inside the working class. Whilst not revolutionary in itself, it signified the emergence of a political culture that was outside the previously accepted order of things, a counter-politics which stood for the celebration of working-class solidarity, aggressive strike action and mass picketing that pointed in the direction of a determination to shift the balance of class forces in society towards the working class.

But inevitably this meant that those so-called 'blackleg' workers who threatened to break collective solidarity and strengthen the employers' hand by crossing picket lines were viewed as the mortal enemy who had to be stopped at all costs. It was in this context that the intimidatory and violent dimension of the strikers versus scabs relationship became manifest.

Scabs and the 'the argument of force'

Scabs who continued to work and refused to support their fellow workers once a strike was called, could be motivated by self-interested individualism and/or immediate income needs to support their families. Indeed, in some disputes, employers purchased the 'loyalty' of individual workers to scab on their fellow workers by offers of wage increases ranging from 25 to 50 per cent, although they had previously resolutely refused to consider trade union representations for improved pay and conditions (Report of Proceedings, Trades Union Congress, Newport, 2–7 September 1912, p. 91). But fear of victimisation by, or deference towards, employers, and/or defiance of trade unionism could also encourage such behaviour. Whatever their varied motives, it seems clear most scabs had little sense of collective solidarity with their fellow workers, with scabs imported from outside the work-place, and sometimes from outside the geographical area, accepting employment in full knowledge they were taking the places of strikers.

Despite the fact that in many disputes, strikers successfully engaged in peaceful dialogue, reasoning and persuasion ('force of argument') to win over those workers who undertook to cross picket lines, circumstances often made this not merely problematic but essentially impossible given the coalition of antagonistic forces that were marshalled against them. This meant defence of the picket line as a means to prevent scabs from passing became an end in itself that strikers attempted to achieve through sheer collective physical compulsion ('argument of force'), with scabs potentially becoming legitimate targets of threats and even violence. For example, in the 1910–1911 South Wales miners' strike, mass pickets, often involving hundreds and sometimes many thousands of strikers and their supporters, were mounted outside the entrances to strike-bound pits, so as to make it practically impossible for anyone to get into work, with scabs often threatened, assailed by missiles and physically assaulted. As *The Times* (8 November 1910) noted, groups of strikers congregated at street corners to harangue and molest scabs:

> When one of these men was seen on his way to work, with his 'jack' of food, the strikers formed a cordon around him very much in the same way as a scrummage is formed in Rugby football. By this method of 'persuasion' man after man was turned back amid more or less excitement, which was proportionate to the amount of effort which he made to force his way through the crowd.

At some pits a number of firemen and other colliery officials and managers were attacked in the streets (Evans, 1911: 84; 78; 83) and 'blacklegs' made a social outcast, with the letter's 'B', 'BL' or Scab' painted on the doors of their houses, while crowds of pickets, including women and children, threw stones and smashed the windows of their empty homes.

Likewise, during the 1911 national railway strike, pickets and their supporters held public meetings outside the houses of scabs, with bricks thrown through windows; neighbours were called upon to boycott them, and publicans threatened that if 'blacklegs' were served with drink, customers would be asked to patronise another house (Davies, 2012: 108). During the 1912 London transport strike it was reported that outside one scab's house 'there was a band playing the Dead March, a van with gallows on it, the effigy of a man, and the representation of a hanging was carried out' (*Glasgow Herald*, 8 July 1912).

Such intimidation and violence became particularly manifest against 'blacklegs' who were involved in moving goods outside of strike-bound workplaces. During waterfront strikes this invari-ably led to pitched battles in ports and docks across the country. For example, during the 1911 London Transport strike pickets thronged the streets around the Tower of London and out towards

Wapping, stopping scab-driven vehicles that were involved in the moving of goods from the docks to markets, by unharnessing horses from carts, tipping their goods into the street, leaving carts to block the roads, and physically attacking 'blacklegs'.

Picketing also sometimes involved acts of violence against property. For example, during the South Wales miners' strike, there were repeated attacks on scab-operated pit-head power houses and pumping stations (Pitt, 1987: 7). In the port of Hull, mass picketing by dockers and their sympathisers extended from assaults on scabs who had been brought in to unload cargoes to attacks on the offices of a leading shipowner and Labour Exchange operated by the Shipping Federation, while members of the Constitutional Club were assaulted as they left the premises (TNA/HO 45/10,649/210.615; *Hull Daily Mail*, 30 June 1911). And during the national railway strike, in an attempt to stop any movement of goods or passengers on the tracks facilitated by scab labour, there were numerous raids on trains, engine sheds, signal boxes, railway stations and goods offices, as well as the tearing up of tracks, placing of obstacles on the line, and the cutting of telegraph wires (Home Office, Railway Strike of August 1911: Confidential Memoranda and Reports, TNA/HO 45/10,658/212.470/451; *The Times*, 19 August 1911).

While the problem of 'blacklegging' was notably prevalent in the port and dockside industries where there was an available pool of unemployed, unorganised labour, often willing to work below union terms and conditions of employment, it was also very common across a wide range of other industries, including the railways, textiles, engineering, food processing and agriculture.

Employers' provocation

Picketing violence during the Labour Revolt was invariably a direct product of employers' provocative attempts to undermine strike activity either by active encouragement of existing workers to cross picket lines and remain in work and/or by the importation of 'outside' scab labour (McIvor, 1984). Previously during the 1888–1891 strike wave, the newly-formed Shipping Federation had launched an offensive against the dockers' and seamen's unions by supplying ships that were laden with non-unionised 'free labour' to shipping and dock companies involved in disputes. By such means they successfully broke strikes at individual ports across the country over the following 20 years, as in Hull in the spring of 1893 – the best-organised port – where the importation of several thousand scabs under extensive police and military protection had resulted in much violence (Saville, 1967: 323–4; Savile, 1996: 13).

These union-busting employers' tactics were again to be utilised during the 1910–1914 Labour Revolt (Powell, 1950; Saluppo, 2019), albeit with much less success. This was partly because of the speed, comprehensiveness and solidarity with which the strikes successfully closed down most of the country's ports, but also because strikers displayed a defiant determination to utilise mass picketing and violent physical attacks as the means to prevent 'blacklegs' who were brought in to unload and transport cargoes from the docks (Geary, 1985: 31). Even in Hull, in what had become a totally unorganised port, mass picketing combined with assaults on scabs effectively undermined the employers' strike-breaking operations and forced them to acquiesce to pay and conditions agreements that would have been unthinkable only a short time before.

By contrast, during the subsequent 1913 Leith dockers' strike in Scotland, the local employers' association with the assistance of the Shipping Federation were more successful in bringing into the port 600 'free labourers' housed on their ships, the *Lady Jocelyn* and the *Paris* (Kenefick, 2007: 114–15). By restricting only six pickets at a time within the dock perimeter wall, and always under tight police escort, they made it effectively impossible for strikers to persuade the scabs to stop work, despite solidarity industrial action taken by other workers. In the face of such obstacles, strikers angrily responded by rioting around the docks, with numerous cases reported of molestation of 'free labourers' and even an unsuccessful attempt to blow up the perimeter wall with gelignite. A protest

letter to the *Leith Observer* (9 August 1913) insisted it was the introduction of scab labour that was 'the cause of rioting and bloodshed' and that scabs were simply traitors to their fellow working men 'who had no right to work in an industrial dispute' (Kenefick, 2007: 118).

During the 1913 Leeds Corporation workers' strike the local authority employers utilised their clerks and supervisory staff to maintain a skeleton municipal service by acting as strike-breakers on trams, and in gas works and electrical power stations, whilst being provided with food and living accommodation at their places of work. The scabbing operation was supported by 200 out of the 660 students from the recently established Leeds University, with the backing of the Vice-Chancellor. Once again, it was the use of such scab labour that provoked a number of clashes in which strikers laid siege to installations being worked, smashed tram windows, sabotaged the city's tramway electricity supply, and placed the gas works in a virtual state of siege (Williams, 1971: 81).

Meanwhile, in other industries, such as the railways, textiles, engineering and other areas of manufacturing, the violent dimension of many disputes arose to a large extent directly from determined attempts to counter employers' inflammatory strike-breaking tactics of encouraging *existing* workforces to defy strikes and cross picket lines. As a train driver in Edinburgh during the railway strike recalled: 'We learned … that something called "pickets" were to be formed to try to offset the intimidation that forced men to work against their colleagues … We learned what the dreaded word "blackleg" meant in the councils of the organised workers' (McKillip, 1950: 97–8).

To a large extent picketing violence during the Labour Revolt could be characterised as being 'impulsive rather than pre-meditated bitterness', with strikers 'not adopt[ing] violence as a policy' as such (Phelps Brown, 1959: 35). Confronted by employers' attempts to encourage 'blacklegging' (which was perceived as pouring salt into an open wound as fellow workers refused to abide by collective majority strike decisions, crossed picket lines and compromised the impact of action) pickets became incensed and often reacted violently in an essentially spontaneous fashion on the basis of aroused impulses, engaging in totally unexpected (and what otherwise would have been thought of as rather uncharacteristic) behaviour (Karsh, 1982: 122; 129; 134). Yet it is clear such action often appeared rational and considered, and – given the context and circumstances and limited alternative choices at their disposal – it was viewed as necessary and even morally defensible.

Significantly, although violence was not confined to certain industries, geographic areas, size of dispute or specific groups of workers involved, it should be noted both the 1912 national miners' and 1914 London building workers' strikes generated much fewer incidences of picketing violence or social confrontation on the streets compared with other large-scale strikes. Such 'peaceful picketing' appears to have been directly linked to the relatively less proportionate occurrence of 'blacklegging', even though the schism between workers and employers remained considerable. By contrast, in some protracted and unsuccessful disputes such as the 1912 London transport strike and 1913 Cornish clay workers' strike, where the intransigence of employers, growing number of local or imported 'blacklegs', severe economic hardship for strikers and their families, and the prospects of potential defeat for workers seemed imminent, incidences of picketing violence were relatively high.

Police and military intervention

An additional contributory element to the violence which occurred when strikers faced scabs was the way in which in many industrial disputes both the police and the military repeatedly displayed their primary duty as the defence of employers' property and enforcement of managerial rights over the employment relationship, thereby unequivocally participating as partisans *against strikers*.

Thus, a habitual immediate stimulus of violence on the picket line in many industrial disputes was the deployment and intervention of mass ranks of police officers – often buttressed by police reinforcements drafted in from other nearby geographical areas (with London's Metropolitan Police sometimes acting as a national back-up) – and their direct role in providing physical escorts for scabs to enter strike-bound workplaces and facilitating the movement of goods outside, thereby denying strikers' right to exercise 'peaceful persuasion'. Ironically as a consequence, violence

regularly occurred not as the result of picketing *per se*, but because of action by the police to curtail it, notably the way pickets were subject to extreme intimidation and violence for challenging their authority (Weinberger, 1991: 56; 67).

For example, during the South Wales miners' strike, the general manager of the Cambrian Combine sought police protection at the Llwynypia pit for strike-breaking labour (mainly surface men who were keeping the pumps running), and the Chief Constable of Glamorgan, after discussions with local magistrates (some of whom were directors or shareholders in colliery companies), reinforced local police with additional forces to defend the pit's power house from pickets. With the colliery transformed into a near fortress, the police responded ferociously to mass picketing with baton-charges and fierce hand-to-hand fighting in a battle that lasted for over two hours, resulting in one miner being fatally bludgeoned over the head and numerous other casualties. Strikers and their supporters expressed their frustration and bitterness with street rioting that selectively damaged 63 shops in the nearby town centre of Tonypandy owned by local business figures with strong links to coal owners and mine managers (Smith, 1988: 62–4; Evans & Maddox, 2010: 76).

Keir Hardie, the local Labour MP for Merthyr Tydfil, raised the conduct of the police in the House of Commons, complaining they had bludgeoned pickets in a 'reign of terror' (*Labour Leader*, 2 December 1910) and he demanded an inquiry into their conduct (which the Home Secretary refused).

In the 1912 London transport strike the Metropolitan Police played a central role in protecting strike-breakers, with clashes between strikers and police occurring when scab-driven food convoys were escorted *en masse* from the docks. Despite strike committee protests at the police's rough handling of pickets and their protection of imported scabs, the Home Secretary insisted police protection would continue to be given to 'free labour' unloading and moving provisions. For example, a special train of strike-breaking lorries from the Smithfield meat market arrived at the dock to unload the *Highland Brae*, with the goods then conveyed back to the market in convoy accompanied by 1,000 police (including 100 mounted men), with troops and Army Service Corps lorries held in reserve. The Home Office documented the systematic way: 'Protection was afforded by the Metropolitan police daily, Sunday excepted, throughout the strike'; between 27 May and 31 July 'they protected en route to Smithfield 187 convoys, comprising 8,600 vehicles' (Weinberger, 1991: 109; 110; 'London Dock Strike 1912', Home Office Confidential Memoranda and Correspondence, TNA/HO 45/10,674/218.781). With literally thousands of imported labourers working under protection in the port, the strike was inevitably marked by an atmosphere of intense hostility and repeated physical confrontations.

There were also widespread violent and bloody clashes between strikers and police during numerous other strikes during the period, including the 1913 Dublin transport workers' lockout, when police baton-charged crowds of pickets protesting at scab labour (much of which had been imported from England), injuring hundreds and killing two (Yeates 2000, 51–53). In the 1913 Cornish clay workers' strike, police forces were drafted in from Glamorgan, Bristol and Devon and attacked strikers opposing scabs by trying to restrict the number of pickets to three. One eye-witness recorded

> Crack! Crack! Crack! With startling quickness the batons fell upon the heads of those nearest. It was an indescribable and unforgettable scene. Soon a struggling and seething crowd was reduced to dazed and startled units as one by one they fell bleeding and groaning to the ground and shrieks and screams of the women onlookers, and yells of protests from the rapidly dispersing strikers. (Costley, 2013: 37)

The widely reported police 'brutality' witnessed at these disputes attracted the attention of the national press and a unanimous resolution was passed at the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress protesting at the violent conduct of the police (Report of Proceedings, 46th Annual Trades Union Congress, Manchester, 1–6 September 1913, pp. 237–239), albeit once again no inquiries into the behaviour of the police were ever held.

The intervention of the military was also a feature of a number of strikes in economically strategic industries, usually occurring at the request of local authorities when it was felt the police were unable to maintain 'law and order'. Thus, in the wake of the Tonypandy riots, Home Secretary Winston Churchill (who had already sent 500 Metropolitan Police to the area), now dispatched troops armed with rifles and fixed bayonets and ball cartridges to buttress the police and reassert control (Evans, 1911: 111).[3] Both forces were led by a joint military commander who informed the strike committee that more than six men present on a picket line would be regarded as constituting 'obstruction', leading to sporadic clashes between strikers and the forces of law and order continuing for several more weeks. According to one of the Aberdare Valley strikers, Edwards (1956: 223):

> … our area was invaded by soldiers … the soldiers had been sent to intimidate the people and … break the strike … the area was like an armed camp. The soldiers and their horses were billeted on the colliery owners' properties, and, from these centres, they embarked on regular patrols to look for trouble, and to make it, if they could not find it.

Similarly, during the 1911 national seamen's and dockers' strikes both police *and* troops were dispatched, with literally daily violent confrontations with pickets on the waterfronts and surrounding areas of Liverpool, London, Hull, Manchester/Salford, Glasgow, Bristol and Cardiff. In Manchester, when crowds of pickets attempted to stop a convoy of scab lorries escorted by 200 police (fronted by 20 mounted officers, with lines of others running along both sides, and another detachment of mounted police at the rear) from transporting food from railway depots to markets across the city, they were repeatedly baton-charged and knocked down. This resulted in a series of mini-riots over a 48-hour period:

> Pitched battles between strikers and police, mounted and on foot, were frequent, the strikers meeting baton charges with showers of stones, brickbats, and other missiles … It is estimated that the number of casualties during the rioting of the last two days totals about 100 (*Daily Mirror*, 6 July 1911; 'Strike Riots: Manchester and Salford'. (TNA/HO 45/10648/210.615/43a)

It required the Home Office's dispatch of 750 soldiers from the Scot's Greys and Staffordshire Regiment to help the police 'restore order'.

In the Liverpool general transport strike over 3,000 troops and several hundred police were dispatched to the city, a Royal Navy gunboat was moored on the River Mersey, and (in what became known as 'Bloody Sunday') a furious attack to disperse a demonstration of 80,000 workers by police (some on horseback), resulted in dozens of casualties. The *Manchester Guardian* (14 August 1911) reported ' … IT WAS A DISPLAY OF VIOLENCE THAT HORRIFIED THOSE WHO SAW IT'. In the two days that followed there were running battles on the streets, and when a convoy of five prison vans taking convicted 'rioters' to prison under the protection of mounted troops and police was attacked by a crowd of several thousand people, troops opened fire and shot dead a docker and carter.

With the onset of the national railway strike, Churchill suspended the Army Regulation which forbid the use of troops except at the specific request of local civil authorities, and dispatched almost all the country's 58,000 military to 27 different strategic railway centres to act in a strike-breaking capacity by 'protecting all railwaymen who continued at work' (Nurse, 2001: 19), while placing large parts of the country … under martial law' (Bagwell, 1963: 295; 'Employment of Military during Railway Strike: Correspondence between Home Office and Local Authorities', TNA/HO 45/10,657/212.470/421). This led to repeated clashes between strikers and troops and police across the country. In Chesterfield, where the scab-worked Midland railway station was attacked by a large crowd and partly burnt down, 50 troops of the West Yorkshire Regiment were called in to supplement the local police force, and the strike crowd was only repulsed after repeated bayonet charges by the army (TNA/HO 45/10,656/212.470/279; *Daily Mirror*, 21 August 1911).

In Llanelli, soldiers marched out with fixed bayonets to seize back control of a level-crossing that had been taken over by pickets to stop the scab movement of trains, and when a crowd rained a fusillade of stones, slates and railings on the soldiers, another two workers were shot dead (Hopkin, 1983: 497–99). The killings provoked hours of rioting with shops looted, goods depots assailed and

carriages set alight, which led to another four fatalities. Keir Hardie told parliament that the men shot down in Llanelli had been 'murdered by the Government in the interests of the capitalist system' (*Parliamentary Debates* [Hansard], 22 August 1911, col. 2340), and penned a pamphlet entitled *Killing No Murder!* which for a time was one of the most popular books in the country.

What all of these examples underlined, was the way in which it was the character of intervention by the police and army during the Labour Revolt, combined with employers' support for 'blacklegging', that was primarily responsible for the violence that occurred. Their conduct was widely perceived as being designed 'not so much to suppress disorder as to suppress strikes' (Independent Labour Party, 20th Annual Conference Report, Merthyr, 27–28 May 1912: 99).

Government partisanship

Further contributing to the picketing violence in many industrial disputes was the Liberal government's repeated unambiguous intervention in support of strike-breaking initiatives on the side of employers. The government was confronted with a number of nation-wide strikes that were perceived as being severely disruptive to the functioning of the economy (for example, with the waterside strikes holding up perishable goods and considerably disrupting food supplies, the miners' strike laying off up to a million other workers, and the railway strike paralysing the movement of goods and passengers). And many strikes during the period were also seen as a threat to public order (with mass picketing and social confrontation on the streets evident in literally dozens of disputes across the country). In response, the Cabinet adopted a combination of both co-option and coercion strategies with the unifying aim of trying to contain the mounting industrial militancy to the advantage of employers (Wrigley, 1979: 18).

On the one hand, the government utilised its Board of Trade Chief Industrial Commissioner (or 'trouble-shooter') to assist parties in negotiating settlements to end numerous disputes, cultivated amicable relations with 'responsible' national trade union officials who could help them contain and limit conflict, and strengthened and further spread Conciliation and Arbitration Boards in different industries (Askwith, 1974). On the other hand, the government, which was forced to directly intervene itself to settle industrial disputes on occasion, also encouraged hard-line police action against mass picketing, with support and/or authorisation for the deployment of troops in several large-scale industrial disputes to coerce and repress workers' militancy and protect 'free labour'.

For example, during the South Wales miners' strike, Churchill instructed the commander of police and army forces to ensure that 'intimidation clearly going beyond peaceful persuasion . . . should be rigorously prosecuted' (Morgan, 1987: 160–61). In the seamen's and dockers' strikes, he insisted it was the duty of local civil authorities not only to maintain order, but to secure the unloading of perishable cargoes, in effect positively encouraging police and military protection for strike-breaking initiatives to counteract the effect of widespread picketing (Weinberger, 1991: 73–4). Similarly, in the national railway strike, the government's unilateral decision to mobilise troops to protect scabs being employed by the railway companies unequivocally cast the government in the role of strike-breaker and not, as the Prime Minister publicly claimed, simply an impartial arbiter trying to 'hold the ring' between two contending parties (Addison, 1992).

Yet ironically, the industrial militancy precipitated a sustained campaign by employers for the repeal of the 1906 Trade Disputes Act's section providing legal protection for the right to picket. For example, the Shipping Federation lobbied over claims of intimidation and violence and the failure of the police to take firm action (Powell, 1950: 11). In reply, Churchill assured them the Act did not sanction intimidation or threats of violence, but he promised to consider the advice given out to police 'which would assist them in distinguishing between peaceful persuasion by pickets acting within the law and the intimidation particularly . . . by crowds which it is their duty to repress' (Morgan, 1987: 167). According to Prime Minister Herbert Asquith's report to King George V on 21 July 1911, Churchill also raised the issue in the Cabinet:

> Mr Churchill called attention to the disquieting condition of the industrial world and the almost daily outbreak of strikes, direct and sympathetic, accompanied by a growing readiness to resort to violence, and imposing heavy responsibility both on the police and military. (TNA/CAB 41/38/3; Wrigley, 1976: 62)

During the Liverpool General Transport Strike the city's magistrates frequently complained to the Home Secretary about the perceived ineffectiveness of existing legislation with reference to picketing and the need for new measures to deal with the use of 'wholesale intimidation'. At a special meeting of Liverpool magistrates, a Report was adopted which claimed that 'while thousands of workmen desired to work, they were afraid to do so by reason of the present system of intimidation which is carried on under the pretence of peaceful picketing':

> It is common knowledge that threatening, intimidation and persistent following were rife. All these are offences … and could be severely punished provided witnesses could be found who dare give evidence of the offences. But the same fear of bodily injury, and probably the greater fear of violence to the wife and home, [effectively] prevents witnesses coming forward. It is in the knowledge of this fear that this new form of wholesale intimidation flourishes. (Lyddon & Smith, 2007: 222)

The demand for repeal of the law on picketing was supported by the chair of the Liverpool Steam Ship Owners' Association, who argued that 'such a thing as peaceful picketing is not, and cannot, be practised in the actual progress of a strike … [Pickets] are out to stop men working … the power behind the picket by which its orders will be enforced is the violence of the mob, and nothing else – and we have seen over and over again how quickly that violence follows on the slightest disregard of the peaceful persuasion … We are entitled to the protection of the law against the illegitimate advantages derived from mob violence directed against willing workers' (Lyddon & Smith, 2007: 225–6).

Such protests were part of a wider campaign by the Conservative Party and the press for proposals which amounted to taking an offensive against the unions, and in October 1911 an Employers' Parliamentary Council, supported by 65 other employers' associations, made representations to the Prime Minister, blaming the Trade Disputes Act for the unrest and asking for the Act's repeal, in particular protesting against '"peaceful persuasion" of a mob of unlimited numbers' as 'a form of tyranny so gross and monstrous as to completely [negate] the rights of every law-abiding citizen who declines to subject himself to labour union domination' (Lyddon & Smith, 2007: 212).

Nevertheless, the Liberal government resisted this pressure for changes to the Trade Disputes Act and its picketing clause. This was partly because they feared it would threaten their slim parliamentary majority which was dependent on the retention of the Labour Party's support; partly because the Cabinet was divided and undecided on the best way to contain the industrial militancy given that more repressive measures ran the risk of merely fanning the flames of violence; and partly because the prime minister felt that even if police powers with regard to intimidation were strengthened, there would remain the problem of obtaining evidence because of the unwillingness of witnesses to come forward (Davidson, 1978: 591).

Instead the Home Office urged the police to take much more vigorous action under existing law, with a circular issued under Churchill's direction to provincial police chiefs on 11 August 1911 titled 'Intimidation During Trade Disputes' reiterating that while the 1906 Act allowed peaceful picketing, 'any person who … uses violence to, or intimidat[ion of] him or his wife or children, or injures his property, is guilty of an offence and liable to prosecution'. While not stipulating any limit to the numbers of pickets involved, it stated that if 'disproportionate in size to what is needed for lawful purposes as to exclude the idea of peaceful persuasion', then participants were liable to be charged with watching and besetting (TNA/HO 158/15/212.614/57). This important document, in effect, redefined Section 2 (1) of the Trade Disputes Act 1906, with the police encouraged to interpret the Act as extending their own powers, with the process of persuasion to be regarded as evidence of intimidation or coercion if a crowd of pickets was involved.

Such Home Office instructions for more aggressive action towards picketing, alongside magistrates' strict interpretation of picketing law, encouraged many hundreds of arrests, prosecutions and convictions, invariably involving fines and in several cases imprisonment. It both stimulated and provided

justification for ongoing police and military violence that appeared to considerably exceed that of strikers, such that the 1913 annual Trades Union Congress (Report of Proceedings, 1–6 September 1913: 69–70) considered it 'fully entitled to call this Liberal Government a bloody Government'.

Strike leaders and unofficial dynamics

Despite the overall unofficial character of the Labour Revolt, the subjective encouragement of strike militancy by certain militant national and local strike leaders that both implicitly and explicitly included support for intimidation and violence against scabs could also be a contributory factor in the equation, at least in some individual disputes. For example, in the Liverpool general transport strike, the strike committee chairman and revolutionary Industrial Syndicalist Education League leader Tom Mann's fiery and unequivocal hostility to 'blackleg' labour was evident in a speech he made after the appearance of a shipload of strikebreaking workers appeared on the River Mersey: 'If that boat were sunk before she had time to moor correctly', said Mann:

> . . . he would for his part rejoice. If he were able to sink the ship himself, he would do it . . . As for the scabs on board, the sooner they went to heaven or hell – according to which they were most fitted – the better for the world (applause). He was not afraid of the statement being reported, and of its reaching ears of important persons. (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 26 June 1911)

Belligerent sentiments of this kind on the part of Mann are likely to have encouraged aggressive rank-and-file action. A similar process took place in the 1912 London transport strike, when after repeated clashes between strikers, scabs and police, and the employers' continuing refusal to make concessions, the flamboyant strike leader Ben Tillett became increasingly incendiary in his speeches at mass meetings and demonstrations. In Hyde Park on 7 July, he said he 'did not want to utter any threats':

> . . . but if they could not win by peaceful methods, if the capitalists and Government said they should not have the right to live, then they must take the power into their own hands. We must use other means, and I openly state here that the only means we have to use is violence and the use of every physical power we have. (*Glasgow Herald*, 8 July 1912)

Wherever Mann or Tillett were present, the emphasis on vigorous industrial class conflict was particularly pronounced, suggesting that the subsequent outbreaks of mass picketing and attacks on scabs in the waterside disputes might not have been entirely as sudden or 'spontaneous' as appeared (Holton, 1976: 93). Likewise, the influence of syndicalist activists organised in the Unofficial Reform Committee of the South Wales Miners Federation on nurturing militant direct action from below during the 1910–1911 strike needs to be taken into account.

However, there is clearly the danger of exaggerating such influence, with syndicalism frequently blamed by the press and government for the strikes and violent disorders generally, particularly after Mann was prosecuted for 'sedition' following publication in *The Syndicalist* newspaper of an 'Open Letter to British Soldiers' urging them to refuse to shoot strikers. Even some historians have argued that the pre-war strike wave was primarily a 'Syndicalist Revolt' (Dangerfield, 1935/1997; Halévy, 1961). In fact, the syndicalist movement was only one of many stimuli to workers' militancy and was in many respects itself a *response* to the growing labour rebellion and political radicalisation that occurred, rather than its *cause*. Certainly while its philosophy of militant 'direct action' from below bypassing the orthodox bargaining machinery and perceived 'class collaboration' of official labour leaders fell on fertile ground during the strike wave, and its leadership influence in some individual disputes was disproportionate to its numerical strength, such influence was a distinct minority phenomenon inside the strike movement generally, and there is no evidence that syndicalists actively encouraged violence as a policy, or themselves participated in any acts such as rioting or physical damage to property.

Moreover, it should be noted, the sheer breadth and intensity of militancy and the aggressive attacks on 'blacklegs' and other forms of violence during the Labour Revolt took the majority of official national trade union leaders completely by surprise, invariably displaying an unofficial

dynamic. Officials who were often opposed, or reluctant, to call strikes, and had for years become renowned for their 'moderation', suddenly found themselves obliged in the face of unexpected rank-and-file militant assertiveness to support strike action and articulate their members' demands, rather than lose all influence over the latter's actions. But this in turn then opened up possibilities for the rank-and-file to escalate the action further than such officials – and sometimes even local strike committee leaders – were willing to approve or able to prevent.

For example, when national railway union leaders, faced with an unofficial strike movement that had spread across the country and undermined their authority, belatedly announced an official national strike, it was not sufficient to contain the violent character of rank-and-file picketing against scabs in many strike centres. Even the advice of local union officials to remain calm and avoid clashes was rejected by strikers, many of whom had little or no experience of union membership and were confronted by aggressive police and military intervention designed to undermine the effectiveness of the strike. Thus, when 2,000 pickets in Llanelli struggled to seize control of the railway level-crossing from the police and army, the train drivers' local union official pleaded: 'Is it worth shedding blood for the sake of preventing a few trains passing through? Don't allow the dignity of Llanelli to be dragged into the mire by having bloodshed without cause' (Griffiths, 2009: 44). Yet such entreaties were to be of no avail until the arrival of a larger contingent of troops with fixed bayonets forced pickets to withdraw.

Amidst an outbreak of serious rioting over three days during the 1913 Leith docks strike, it was widely reported in the press that although union officials had tried their 'level best' to avoid the use of violence, the police had provoked the strikers and were the cause of many disturbances around the port (Kenefick, 2007: 116). Even the South Wales miners' strike committee (on which syndicalists were prominent), not only played no active part in the looting and riot damage to shopkeepers' property, but publicly expressed their disapproval, albeit they also acknowledged an inability to control their members when 'blacklegs' were allowed to cross picket lines (Macready, 1924: 146–147).

Community solidarity

An important underlying feature of the aggressive challenge mounted by strikers to the legitimacy of public order and state power was that it led to deep levels of social polarisation between local communities in which strike-bound workplaces were located and the employers and representatives of civil authority, encouraging a serious questioning of traditional patterns of behaviour and allegiance (Holton, 1973: 218–9). In the process, there was a culture of community solidarity, aggression and self-defence that embraced the relatives and friends of those directly involved in strikes, as well as local trade unionists and other supporters in the mass picketing and direct action against 'blacklegs', notably in the face of hostile police and military forces deployed to disperse pickets.

For example, throughout the South Wales miners' strike, large segments of the working-class community, notably women and children (wives, siblings and offspring of strikers), participated in the mass picketing aimed at stopping scabs, as well as in the rioting in Tonypandy. Similarly, when a strike crowd hurled sticks and stones at police, who responded with repeated baton-charges around a narrow warren of streets during the 'Battle of Penygraig' on 21 November 1910, many wives of strikers and other women, according to an Home Office observer, showered boiling water onto the heads of the police from bedroom windows. As police beat back the pickets they met with:

> . . . cross-fire by men and women – especially women – in the doorways and at the windows of the houses on either side. All sorts of missiles were used – stones, bricks, kitchen and chamber utensils, and even ash-boxes. (Holton, 1973: 187)

Later in July 1911, when a 3,000–4,000-strong crowd of miners, from positions on the mountainside above the pit, threw stones at police escorting a scab into work, they were backed up by women who collected loose stones in their aprons to provide relays of ammunition (Evans, 1911: 111).

During the 1911 London transport strike there was also support on the streets from strikers' families in confronting scabs, with one official parliamentary report noting a number of attacks upon a convoy carrying 'blacked' cargo through Rotherhithe:

> . . . a crowd of 3,000 lined the streets prior to the movement of goods from the docks. There was a considerable proportion of women and children in the crowd and the disorder took place to some extent under the protection of their presence. Superintendent Waters stated that a woman with a baby aloft in her arms stood in front of a van proceeding along the Jamaica road, compelling the driver to stop while two or three men endeavoured to pull the driver from his seat. ('Report on Certain Disturbances at Rotherhithe on 11 June 1911', *Parliamentary Papers 1912-13*, Cd. 6367; Holton, 1973: 213)

Likewise in Hull, Salford/Manchester and Liverpool during the seamen and dockers' strikes, in Llanelli during the railway strike, and in the 1912 London transport strike, there was overwhelming support from local working-class communities on picket lines and the streets in confronting scabs. During the 1913 Cornish Clay workers' strike, the Workers' Union organiser Julia Varley organised solidarity from the wives and girlfriends of strikers, with a joint demonstration of 300–400 that included two 'waggonettes' full of women who appealed to scab workers to join the strike (Costley, 2013: 37). In the 1911 Horwich Locomotive Works strike, women took a prominent part in many of the demonstrations that took place, including a riot when a large crowd, including several hundred women, assembled at the work's main entrance to await the arrival of the foremen and 'blacklegs', with eggs thrown and fights breaking out with the police; one male striker at a mass meeting felt it necessary to call on the women 'to be ladylike' (Whitehead, 1983: 21).

Press reporting of strike violence in places like Tonypandy, Liverpool and Llanelli (sometimes reinforced by reports from magistrates, police and military reports) tended to suggest the hand of so-called 'outcast' mobs of anti-social youth, with the participation of only a small number of strikers. For example, during the national railway strike, faced with reports in the House of Commons about the disorder and violence involved, Churchill blamed the troubles on the 'hooligan class' (Heffer, 2017: 686), and in the Liverpool transport strike the *Reynold's' News* (20 August 1911) commented:

> It would be grossly unfair to blame the strikers directly for the deplorable scenes which have cast a shadow on the good name of Britain. The hooligan element, the ragtag and bobtail of the slums, who live, move and have their being in malicious turbulence, have taken advantage of the strikes to have a good time.

Detailed studies by historians of those hospitalised, arrested, charged and convicted for violence and rioting in Tonypandy, Liverpool and Llanelli show that what they all had in common was the involvement of a wider cross-section of the community than just those directly involved in strikes. But they also reveal these were comprised mainly of local working-class people from a range of different occupations, as opposed to a habitually unemployed or criminal underclass (Davies & Noon, 2014; Hopkin, 1983: 502–4; Smith, 1988). For example, in Llanelli during the railway strike, large numbers of unionised tinplate workers (employed in the foremost industry of the town) joined the mass pickets of railway workers and played a conspicuous role in the confrontations with the civil authority, along with solidarity displayed by local miners (Griffiths, 2009: 54–7).

An additional manifestation of community resistance and use of collective violence was shown in the September 1911 schoolchildren's strikes which spread in a rapidly accelerating wave, affecting some 66 centres across Britain and embraced major cities such as Hull, Bristol, Birmingham, Sheffield, Glasgow, Portsmouth and Southampton. In many areas 'flying pickets' – who were provided with a piece of cardboard on which the word 'Picket' was written to pin on their school caps or coats – sought support from pupils in neighbouring schools. For example, in Manchester it was reported:

> The young disputants . . . marched in a body to the Holland Street municipal school . . . to induce . . . a sympathetic strike . . . teachers prevented the pickets from entering [but] the strikers . . . assumed quite a militant attitude, having on the way secured sticks which they brandished fiercely. (Marson, 1973: 6-7)

In Hull schools were described as being 'besieged' by crowds of pickets, shouting at the pupils who returned to their classrooms 'come out!' and 'blacklegs', and in Liverpool gangs of strikers smashed street lamps and school windows as they marched, with '"loyal scholars" beaten with sticks' (Marson, 1973: 5; 9).

Women workers' strikes

Among the rapidly growing numbers of women workers who took strike action during the Labour Revolt many appear to have been influenced and emboldened both by the growing industrial struggles in which their predominately male counterparts in the trade unions were involved, as well as by the militant women's suffrage movement of the period (Hunt, 2014: 49; Darlington, 2020, (forthcoming (2023))). The suffragettes (members of the Women's Social and Political Union) in particular, were involved in dramatic forms of so-called 'Deeds Not Words' to bend parliament to their will in pursuit of votes for women. This encompassed physical assaults of ministers in the Liberal government, coordinated mass window-breaking in London's West End, blowing up of letter boxes, and arson attacks on well-known buildings and country houses, as well as MPs' homes (Riddell, 2018: 66–7; Atkinson, 2018). In response to Emmeline Pankhurst's expressed strategic orientation that: 'The argument of the broken pane is the most valuable argument in modern politics' (*Votes for Women*, 23 February 1912), the suffragettes were to be at the receiving end of extreme levels of repression and violence from the government and police, including the systematic force-feeding torture of many of the 1,000 imprisoned protestors.

In the process, the overall weakening of traditional respect for 'law and order' and constitutional behaviour that characterised the militancy of both the suffrage movement and labour struggles of the period,[4] was reflected in the way in which many women's strikes across the country were very assertive, and often aggressive. Mass picketing was used to spread the action to other groups of workers and/or prevent 'blacklegs' from breaking the strikes, with verbal abuse, physical assaults of strike-breakers and fights with the police common. For example, when women factory workers joined together with seafarers, dockers and others during the Cardiff general transport strike in July 1911, the *South Wales Daily News* (22 July 1911) reported 'the feminine strike was not without its exciting incidents', as women and girls on the potato wharves left work and went on the rampage, forcing entry to other premises and pitching casks of beer into the dock:

> In Penarth-road, a big centre of factory girl workers, the strikers … forced the girls of … Hancock's Brewery to leave … peaceful persuasion having failed, they adopted sterner measures. It was not until bombardment of potatoes had been continued for some time that the girls decided to come out. With augmented ranks the marchers proceeded to Frank's sweet factory, and again, it is alleged, violence was offered, several employees complaining that they were literally dragged out and their dinner stolen and eaten by the crowd.

In the Dundee women's spinners and preparers' strike in March 1912, a large detachment of police had to be called to contain a 'hostile crowd' of mass pickets attempting to exhort other female weavers to join the action, and when the strikers swarmed the factory gates the police were 'roughly handled' as they attempted to maintain control (*Scotsman*, 2 March 1912). The worst disturbances took place at Lochee where, on one occasion, a crowd attacked a jute vehicle, and police who attempted to break-up the demonstration were 'pelted with sticks, stones and other missiles', resulting in several constables being injured (Kenefick, 2012: 212).

During the 1913 Black Country metal workers' strikes, five young girl strikers imprisoned for alleged intimidation of scabs, were met on their release by a demonstration in which thousands of people lined the route and gave 'loud cheers' for the girls, with a large meeting held afterwards addressed by officials of the small and militant Workers' Union (*Labour Leader*, 11 August 1911). Similarly, during the 1913–1914 Bliss Tweed Mill women's strike in Chipping Norton, scabs were pilloried, with effigies of them paraded through the town, and during one of the nightly processions strikers and their supporters smashed the windows of the mill's general manager's house. A number

of strike-related incidents – assaults on foremen, strike-breakers and police, and 'riotous' behaviour – went to court, with fines and imprisonment resulting. Annie Cooper, who was found guilty of assaulting a scab and sentenced to 14 days in prison after refusing to pay the fine, was met on her release by 1,000 jubilant sympathisers and presented with a silver teapot inscribed to commemorate the occasion, paraded through the streets in a wagon pulled by the strikers accompanied by a brass band, and greeted by a packed meeting at the Town Hall (Richardson, 2013: 94–7).

Limits and potential

At this point it is useful to consider the limits and potential of picketing violence against scabs, with reference to the outcome of industrial disputes during the Labour Revolt. On the one hand, it is clear the use of mass picketing to stop 'blacklegs' contributed enormously to the overall level of workers' strike success, with 86 per cent of those who went on strike between 1911 and 1914 being victorious or winning concessions from employers to some degree or another, whilst in turn led to an enormous growth in the total power of organised labour and level of trade union membership (Knowles, 1952: 243) despite the dramatic reversal of fortune in some individual battles. Again, and again in many different industries and workplaces, employers' attempts to undermine strike action, either by importing scab labour or by direct encouragement of their existing workforce to cross picket lines, often backed by police and troops, were effectively thwarted by the sheer level of strikers' mass picketing organisation and willingness to engage in violent forms of behaviour, along with the community support that was displayed.

The ultimate power of such action was to be illustrated in the 1911 waterside strikes, notably in Liverpool, Hull, Cardiff and London, where strike committees established systems of official 'permits' that considerably restricted the movement of goods and supplies without a special authorising licence (with the exception of provision of bread and milk for hospitals and other public institutions) backed up by mass picketing to prevent scab operations. In the process, strike committee took on some of the powers of the civil authorities and effectively resembled embryonic alternative organs of working-class power (Hikins, 1961: 191–192), albeit they did not propose any broader explicit *political* challenge (Taplin, 2012: 35).

On the other hand, there were important limits to picketing activity against scabs during the 1910–1914 period. For example, with the effective failure of an attempt to turn the 1912 London transport strike into a national dispute, workers were left isolated and their position undermined – unable to prevent ships being diverted to other provincial ports during what became a protracted dispute. With many strikers and their families pushed to the margins of starvation, the numbers abandoning the strike, as well as 'blacklegs' brought into the port, increased from 5,000 at the beginning of the June to 19,000 by 23 July, eventually forcing the strike committee to call off the strike defeated (Askwith, 1974: 225; Clegg, 1985: 56).

Likewise, an inability to stem the flow of scabs was to result in the defeats of the Leeds Corporation and Leith dockers' strikes in 1913. In the Dublin lockout, the police's violent attacks on strikers resulted in the failure of mass picketing to halt the importation of scab labour, compounded by the failure of British trade union officialdom to mobilise effective solidarity.

Meanwhile, in the 1911 waterside strike Cardiff's seamen experienced much greater difficulty than those in Hull and Liverpool in making their strike effective because of more successful attempts by the Shipping Federation to import scabs into the port under police protection, despite mass picketing. The frustration of some strikers and their supporters, including women and children, became channelled towards racist-tinged violent attacks on Cardiff's Chinese laundries in the belief – largely if not wholly erroneously – that they were housing Chinese 'blacklegs' (Griffiths, 2012: 9–10; Evans, 1988: 149–152).

Overall assessment

In concluding this review of the strikers versus scabs relationship during the Labour Revolt it is apparent that the violent methods used in the conduct of disputes was viewed, by at least a significant minority of strike participants, as legitimate and necessary if victory was to be achieved. Working class violence – such as physical assault on scabs (and even to some extent rioting) – as a form of active defence became justified by the way in which it was directly provoked by the employers' encouragement of scabs and the partisan intervention of police and troops as a means of attempting to defeat workers' struggles. In a context in which employers had often systematically defeated earlier attempts at strike activity by strike-breaking, the perceived failed methods of respectability and moderation previously championed by official union and Labour Party leaderships were undermined and replaced with unbridled militancy, on occasion going further than even some radical strike leaders were prepared to countenance. It became widely accepted that the only way that the employers' and state's determined resistance to union organisation could be broken, was by militant and aggressive forms of strike action, accompanied, if and when necessary, by 'demonstrative violence' (Newsinger, 2013: 8–9) to discourage scabbing and ensure that picket lines were scrupulously respected. On this basis the intimidatory and violent form of collective direct action utilised by strikers against scabs, employers, police and troops, remained compatible with trade union objectives – representing a kind of latter-day 'collective bargaining by riot' in the machine-breaking spirit of early trade unionism in the period before the British economy had become more comprehensively industrialised (Hobsbawm, 1952).

Significantly violence against strike-breakers had the instrumental value of enforcing respect for the will of the majority and forging collective workers' solidarity – that prioritised the defence of *collective* against *individual* interests. Hence the ambivalent and paradoxical nature of such strike violence: that while in some respects it indicated a breakdown of workers' overall unity and solidarity (strikers versus scabs), it was also used as a means to maintain unity and solidarity (amongst strikers; Chinguno, 2015: 110–13; 117). The efforts of employers to induce defections from the ranks of the strikers, the persistence of scabs, and the intervention of the civil and military authorities were all severe challenges to strikers' commitment and collectivism. But the combination of imperative needs and the determination of strikers and their supporters to resist the scabs also helped to develop the bonds of collective purpose, organisation and identity (Karsh, 1982: 128; 141).

Of course, there was an ironic contradiction in the way that employers who were vehement in their denunciation of the allegedly morally unjustifiable use by strikers of obstruction, intimidation and violence against scabs, habitually used their own form of coercion and force, often backed up by the violence of police and troops, while attempting to impose a class-based moral philosophy of individual rights upon strikers that concealed their own concrete and antagonistic interests. In this respect, what was really at stake in the conduct of pickets for the employers, government and the state, was not so much concern over alleged interpersonal physical violence, but rather the adoption of highly effective picketing tactics that challenged managerial prerogatives and the grossly unequal, exploitative and authoritarian nature of the capitalist employment relationship, a challenge which was viewed as ultimately violent by its very nature. As the *Syndicalist Railwayman* (September 1911) explained:

> As might have been expected, the success of the workers in their recent strikes has aroused members of the propertied classes and their respectable hangers-on to virtuous indignation and protest. Loud and long are the complaints made against the weapons and methods used by the workers in their campaigns.
>
> The strike, now that the workers are learning to use it effectively, is declared to be a barbaric weapon, unfit for use by civilised body of men, and peaceful picketing is declared to be nothing more than a pretext for coercion and intimidation. In the name of 'British liberty', these things must be put down with a stern hand …
>
> Seeing that they are making these complaints at a time when all the coercive forces of the State have been at the disposal of the employing-class their unconscious class-bias is somewhat striking.

> Indeed, one of the chief reasons for the effectiveness of picketing in recent strikes and which has led to the present outcry is the extra display of coercive power on the side of the capitalists.

In sum, despite attempts made to discredit the 1910–1914 Labour Revolt with denunciations of 'mob rule', 'thuggery' and 'violence' (*Daily Express*, 20 June 1912), it is clear that not only did strikers essentially only *dispense* violence as a form of collective self-defence against the combined force of scabs, employers, police, military, civil authorities and government, they were also overwhelmingly the *recipient* of intimidation and violence from these combined forces. Moreover, the level of working-class violence on the picket line was dwarfed by comparison with the far greater violence that was meted out by the instigating role of the forces of the state on behalf of employers in an attempt to break strike action. As *The Clarion* (21 June 1912) explained, the framing of the meaning of, and responsibility for, violence was shaped by the imbalances of power:

> Everything that is wicked is attributed to the men . . . on strike . . . Free labour, on the other hand, is under their special protection for strikebreakers can do no wrong. The villain of the piece is always the man [sic] who dares to strike or quarrel with his employer.

Finally, it should be noted that, although the violent dimension of the strikers versus scabs relationship has often been ignored or downplayed in British industrial relations and labour history literature, it was a fundamental and intrinsic part of the history of British trade unionism stretching as far back as the mid-eighteenth century onwards (Linehan, 2018: 12). And while this violence has sometimes been viewed as a throwback to a more primitive phase of labour agitation which gradually faded away with the development of sophisticated collective bargaining, conciliation and arbitration procedures and permanent and effective trade union machinery which could contain conflict (Webb & Webb, 1920: 264; Linehan, 2008: 213–217), it clearly still remained at the very fore of industrial militancy during the 1910–1914 Labour Revolt, and arguably should not be viewed as merely a sub-text in trade union history beyond this period, as both the 1984–1985 miners' strike (in a battle with non-strikers in the Nottingham area) and 1986–7 New International print workers' strike (confronted with an employer-recruited alternative workforce) vividly demonstrated (Bain, 1998; Richards, 1996).

Notes

1. The term 'blackleg', although utilised colloquially during the 1910–14 British strike wave without any direct racist overtones by strike participants, has been placed in inverted commas to highlight it is not the author's term of choice. Both terms 'scab' and 'blackleg' are used interchangeably within the article, as they were by strike participants.
2. Arguably, the so-called term 'Labour Unrest' is an inadequate description. Given its overall characteristic features of unofficial rank-and-file independence, insurgency, mass picketing, sympathy strikes, defiance of trade union and Labour Party leaders, violent social confrontations, and challenge to the existing social and political order, the strike wave deserves to be termed a 'Labour Revolt' (Darlington, (forthcoming (2023))).
3. Some historians, such as Mor-O'Brien (1994), have questioned whether Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, can be held responsible for the violence that took place in Tonypandy. It is true Churchill initially countermanded troop movements by halting them in Swindon, whilst simultaneously dispatching Metropolitan police instead to reinforce the local forces that were already massed against the pickets. But with the news of further rioting he immediately ordered the troops directly into the area, and placed both police and troops under the authority of a military commander responsible to the Home Office. As a result, Tonypandy and the surrounding areas were effectively put under military occupation for months until the strike was finally ended in 1911, with the intervention of the troops alongside the police crucially undermining the strikers' ability to utilise the key mass picketing tactic of preventing safety officials and scab labour from working (Smith, 1988: 5; Evans and Maddox: 90; 104).
4. Further adding to the extra-parliamentary and unlawful context was the battle for Irish independence from British imperialism and the threat of civil war that arose from a reactionary counter-mobilisation against the government's proposed Home Rule Bill that was mounted by Ulster loyalists, backed by their supporters in the Conservative Party and upper echelons of the British military (Powell, 1996: 131–162).

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