

HANES



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Issue Number 35

Summer 2006.

A SOUVENIR OF THE 80th ANNIVERSARY OF THE GENERAL STRIKE. 1926-2006.

Newsletter of the Cynon Valley History Society Cylchlythyr Cymdeithas Hanes Cwm Cynon.
PRESIDENT: THE LORD ABERDARE.

“ABERDARE SOLID - STAND FAST...”

It is beyond the scope of a short newsletter such as this to record the circumstances that led up to the 1926 General Strike and subsequent lockout of coal miners.

The General Strike itself lasted for only nine days, and as the miners' strike has been the subject of an essay (See *Old Aberdare* Vol. 8), *Hanes* will take a brief look at the events of the General Strike in the Aberdare Valley. Local people who took part in the struggle will tell the story.

The strike commenced on the 4th of May and ended on the 12th. Throughout this period the local Trades and Labour Council ran the town. “*They were the Government. The people, the authorities, and the police were ready to collaborate with them*”. (Edwin Greening). The T. & L.C. took control under machinery that already existed. There was a Central Strike Committee, and below that Sub-Committees responsible for Finance, Entertainments, Transport, Communications and Intelligence. Each district had its own Committees with the same structure as the Central Committee. Their business was conducted from local workers' institutes. These bodies ensured that there were supplies of essential commodities such as food and electricity, and relief measures for the strikers and their families. Edmund Stonelake was in charge of the Central Office for his district and was “kept occupied from early morning till very late at night”. He has written “*We authorised lorries to go to the railway station to fetch supplies of food and other essentials*” D.J.Davies, a Tramway man, and Chairman of the Transport Committee recalls that “*The only thing I can remember doing was signing a chit to release a small case of vinegar which was requested by a fish and chip shop which had failed to fetch it before the strike took place*” In fact there was no shortage of food, as the strong local Co-operative movement, with its many branches, had adequate supplies. Both the Co-op and most private traders allowed customers credit during the General Strike, and subsequent protracted lockout.

The *Aberdare Leader* did not cease publication, but initially its pages were fewer than normal. There seems to have been little trouble in the town, although strikers attacked some buses and lorries carrying passengers and merchandise.

Edwin Greening recalls, “*During the nine days of the General Strike the Aberdare Valley was as quiet as a Sunday. There was no activity but that of people walking to and fro*”.

The Communist Max Goldberg, another strike official, has recorded that the strike was organized around the Trades Council. “*It was a solid strike. I was on the Central Strike Committee. We had control of everything. We wouldn't let traffic be moved. We would decide if stuff had to go to hospitals. We had our own runners who used motorcycles that travelled between the Rhondda and other valleys, and Aberdare*”. Trevor Vaughan* remembers “*On several occasions I went to the Miners' Offices in Commercial Street in the early hours and typed out fraternal messages to other Strike Committees in South Wales. One such message read Aberdare solid- stand fast- we must win!*” This despatch was delivered by motor-cycle to Carmarthen and other valleys.” (Arthur Horner was one of the despatch riders – Ed.) Max Goldberg said, “*I went to a Meeting at Hirwaun, and with me was the Station Master of Aberdare – being a Station Master he was in a class of his own. The General Strike merged all sorts of people together*”

There were only six black legs in the valley – all clerks of various sorts.

When on the 12th May the end of the strike was announced, D.J.Davies declared “*It was a disappointment when the order came to return to work. The people were in the mood to stay out much longer than the ten days*”. When it was over, the miners apart, people went back to work according to their trades.

The Miners' lockout lasted from the 1st. May to the 2nd. December 1926. There was much hardship.

When they were finally forced to return to work the miners had to accept a 20% reduction in wages, and an eight-hour day.

At the start of the strike the Motto had been “*Not a penny off the pay, Not a minute on the day!*” (A.J.Cook.)

* Trevor Vaughan was then employed by the G.W.R at Aberdare. He had a distinguished political career. A member of the Aberdare U.D.C, he later moved to Newport and became Lord Mayor of that Borough. He was made a Commander of The Order of the British Empire for services to education and politics. His son Hywel Vaughan is a past Chairman of the Society, a Committee Member, and attends Meetings regularly.

Sources and further reading: Edwin Greening: A Collier Boy in The 1926 Coal Lockout. *Old Aberdare* Vol. 8 (CVHS 1997.) Martin Barclay, The Aberdare Miners' Strike “The Slaves of the Lamp”, *Llafur* Vol.2 No.2 Spring 1977. and, John Gorman “*To Build Jerusalem*” (London, 1980.)

THE THREE ABERAMAN COMMUNISTS

Around midnight on the 14th May 1926 a group of half a dozen burly police officers stormed the Margaret Street, Aberaman, home of Robert (Bob) Owen. This incident occurred during the 1926 General Strike. Bob Owen, who was our uncle, worked as a collier at the Empire Colliery, Glynneath. Bob's parents owned the house, and Bob was asleep in bed at the time. In similar raids the police also entered the homes of Max Goldberg and Frank Wilde.

Bob Owen had been active during the strike and was, according to the police "*known to them as an extreme Communist*", and was alleged to have been active on behalf of the party in Aberaman. His house was searched and the police seized a quantity of political literature, which they described as being of "*a subversive and seditious nature*"

As a consequence Bob was arrested and charged under the Emergency Powers Regulations with being in possession of certain documents, reports and statements the publication of which amongst other persons would amount to a contravention of those Regulations. Similar charges were brought against Goldberg and Wilde.

Bob, and the two other men, were brought before the Court at Aberdare, and the police through their prosecuting solicitor (Marchant Harries) opposed bail. This was however granted by the magistrates. The prosecution was of great local interest, and a vast crowd of strikers stood outside the court in sympathy and support. There were however no incidents. A few days later the three men appeared before the magistrates sitting at Abercynon.

The evidence presented to the bench was that Owen and the others were in possession of literature etc. likely to cause disaffection among His Majesty's Forces and the Civil Population, namely (a) a rotary printing machine, a cyclostyle and a large quantity of printing paper in a box, (Wilde) and (b) a "tremendous" quantity of literature." In the case of Owen it was said he had a range of books and periodicals etc. including "Moscow's Reply to the I.L.P.", "A Thesis on Leninism", "Reds and Labour Party" (which urged the abolition of the monarchy!), and other pieces of "*dangerous literature*". Police Inspector Owen Thomas read extracts from some of the above, e.g. "Shoulder the gun, and turn it against the enemy", and in a typewritten leaflet were the words "Give them peace? no give them hell!" The police also produced blank forms of application to join the Communist Party, copies of the magazine "Communist International", "The Aberaman Searchlight", "The Soviet Monthly" and the "Empire Rebel", produced by the Empire Pit Group, Glyn Neath. There were also articles on Class War, and others enjoining readers to meet violence with violence.

Bob Owen freely admitted owning the various documents which he kept, he said, for sale or distribution to like-minded people. His defence solicitor pointed out that most of the books etc. that had been found at the house could be purchased at any time at W.H. Smith, or any other booksellers.

Nevertheless our uncle, and the others, were found guilty, and in the case of Bob the verdict of the Court was that he be sentenced to two months imprisonment *with hard labour*.

Shortly after sentence was passed, someone painted "Fight to release Bob Owen and Mike Goldberg", on the roadway outside the Aberaman Hall.

This was not the end of the story however, as Bob, his father (a Fireman), and brother were dismissed on the cessation of the strike. On his release from prison the three received a heroes welcome back, and were carried through the streets on the shoulders of their fellow workers.

In June 1976, on the 50th anniversary of the strike, the Cynon Valley Trades Council, and the National Union of Mineworkers honoured Owen and the others. The event was organised by Dr. Alistair Wilson, and the three men were presented with Certificates of Life Membership of the Cynon Valley Trades Council, and by the N.U.M. with inscribed silver replica miner's lamps. Ioan Evans M.P. presided.

Bob Owen had worked alongside the respected author Bert Lewis Coombes at the Empire Colliery, Glyn Neath at the time of the strike, and was a close friend of his. Owen later served as a member of the Management Committee of the Aberdare Co-operative Society Ltd.

Olga Evans and Gaynor Rees.

(Sources. The Aberdare Leader May 22nd. 1926 and June 10th 1976. Family reminiscences.)

MAX GOLDBERG REMEMBERS

Max Goldberg, another of the three arrested in Aberaman in 1926, has left us with his account of the trial, convictions and subsequent prison sentences. Maximilian Stanislav Goldberg was born in Cardiff in 1899. His father was Austrian, and his mother Irish. The family moved to Aberaman in 1904, and Max became a collier at Aberaman Colliery in 1912, and later, in 1917, a blacksmith. He was victimised in 1920 and became a railwayman. His radicalism sprang from Irish Republicanism. In 1927 he became a student at Moscow's Lenin School, which he left in 1929. From 1930 to 1936 he was a reporter for the Daily Worker in Glasgow and London. In the latter part of his life (1936-1963) he was an Official with NADW and USDAW. He died in 1973.

In his recollections of the 1926 General Strike, Max tells us that the strike was centered on the Aberdare Trades Council. "It was a solid strike. I was a member of the Central Strike Committee and responsible for transport. We had control over everything. The police were going to arrest me at the outset of the strike, but the Trades Council was tipped off, and passed a vote of confidence in me. The police could not then touch me. The strike was well organized in Aberdare, and the local strike Committee was in place some weeks before the commencement of the strike.

When arrested at the end of the General Strike, and in cells awaiting trial, we were visited by George (Later Viscount) Hall M.P., and Alderman Mrs.F.Rose Davies J.P. Both gave us words of encouragement. We were granted bail at the first hearing. There was a crowd of some 20,000 on the streets in the vicinity of the Court at Market Street. Wil John Edwards* persuaded the police to let us leave the courtroom through the main door. The police intended to hurry us out of the side entrance into Boot Lane. Had they done so there might have been a riot. The venue of the actual hearing was moved to Abercynon in the hope that this would confuse our supporters, and keep them away. This ploy did not however work.

After being sentenced we were led from the Court to the railway station handcuffed to common criminals. On our arrival at Cardiff we were led through the streets on foot. We were again handcuffed, and the walk from Queen Street to the prison at Knox Road was quite long.

On reaching the prison we were confined to our cells for 24 hours. For the next 14 days we were obliged to sleep on bare boards. The food was poor – bread, margarine and a cup of coffee. Initially we were not allowed any reading matter. There were two periods of exercise each day, each lasting half an hour. During our time in prison we had to sew mailbags – so many a day. I was not told how many I had to complete. In the presence of one of the warders, an "Old Lag" suggested I made up twenty-four each day. When the warder left the other prisoner turned to me and said, "*A pile of those will make you a comfortable bed.*" Thereafter I only completed six a day".

Max Goldberg believed that the particular charge brought against him, and the other two Aberaman men were for the sake of expediency, and that the authorities, fearing Revolution at grass roots level, arrested all those who could have taken control. So on the Saturday following the end of the General Strike, the police in practically every South Wales mining community picked out the leading Communists, and arrested them.

* Author of "From the Valley I Came" (1956)

*Max Goldberg recorded this account of events onto tape shortly before his death. The recording is held in the Archives of the South Wales Coalfield Collection, at the South Wales Miners' Library, Hendrefoelan House, Gower Road, Swansea. A transcript of this has been published in an article entitled 1926 in Aberdare, which appeared in *Llafur* Vol. 2 No.2. Spring 1977, following the 50th Anniversary of the General Strike and subsequent Miners' Lock-Out. This epitome of Max Goldberg's Reminiscences is published by kind permission of the Editors of *Llafur*.*

SOUP KITCHENS AND OTHER ASPECTS OF 1926.

The enduring images of the 1926 General Strike and subsequent Lock-Out are, "The idle wheels and the deserted crossings". The jazz bands, public meetings, the tramp of miners foraging for coal and the soup kitchens.

Local references to the latter are scant and scattered, but our researcher has scoured sources for information relating to these.

The soup kitchens were not of course the product of 1926; they go back to much earlier strikes. At the height of the severe winter of 1860, The Revd. John Griffith, the former Vicar of Aberdare, then Rector of Merthyr Tydfil, assumed responsibility for organizing clothing clubs and soup kitchens for the unemployed of Merthyr Tydfil and their families. Again during the lock-out of January to May 1875 he set up a National Distress Fund for the town, and was accused by the Masters of perpetuating the strike in the coalfield. Charles Wilkins referring to his role in the lock-out, writes "He laboured unremittingly at the soup kitchen as captain of the bread cutters". The tradition of the soup kitchen was to assist only women and children, but on one occasion "A wretched supplicant male worker turned up and John Griffith whispered to a friend, "look here Nestor, you go and steal a basin of soup, and I will steal a loaf of Bread. And it was done!" It has been estimated that in the Aberdare area at that time 100 gallons of soup a day was distributed to the dependants of strikers three times a week.

In Aberdare during the "Block-Strike" of 1910-1911, a local fishmonger, F.W.Hurt, gave 500 rabbits to feed the children.

In 1926 the Scale of Relief granted by the Board of Guardians for the duration of the lock out was, Wife of Man locked-out 12/-, for each child 4/-, single men 10/-. It was further ordered that 2/- weekly be deducted if a child was fed at school. All strike pay over 12/- weekly to be taken into account.

To alleviate distress Miners' Lodges and various other groups and organisations raised money for different causes, which was then paid out according to need. Funds were collected by the jazz bands, and from the proceeds of concerts, carnivals and other entertainments.

The publications entitled "The Way We Were" compiled by pupils of Blaengwawr Comprehensive School contains some oral history relating to soup kitchens, and the 1926 strike.

"In 1926, I was ten at the time of the strike but can remember vividly the hard times endured by everyone connected with the mines. As a youngster though it was the time of my life. A glorious summer! We were entertained by jazz bands. Young boys were allowed into the cinema free of charge. Every Wednesday we went for food in the soup kitchen". (John M. Williams.)

Most people were poor, and when the General Strike was called in 1926 people had even less money. The children had their meals in the soup kitchens. (Mrs. Annie Walters)

I was brought up at North View Terrace. I can remember the 1926 strike when we used to go to the soup kitchens at the Church Hall, Aberaman. (Mrs. Kathleen Davies.)

A photograph in this publication of a soup kitchen at a local school in 1926 shows ten helpers, all male. The "cooks" wear white aprons and are equipped with half a dozen Dixie's. The soup, generally made from vegetables, was served with a thick slice of bread. Recipients had to bring their own spoon and a cup.

On the 27th July 1926 the Glyn Neath Miners of Aberdare opened communal kitchens at Christchurch, East Avenue, Gadlys, and Seiloh Chapel, Regent Street, Aberaman. They then had eleven kitchens under their control (Edwin Greening)

From the Aberdare Leader of 6th November 1926

- ("Mems from The Mount").

Our General Hospital needs coal – So
If you've got a broad back,
And a middling good sack,
Just fill it and take it on a barrow,
Get up speed with a burst.
Don't think you'll be first,
For they've started the game in Caegarw!

The explanation for this verse can be determined from a corresponding news item that reads "Workers of Newtown, Arnold Street and Phillip Street have carried in the aggregate about 6 tons of coal to Mountain Ash General Hospital after an appeal for fuel by Matron Morgan"

- Mountain Ash Education Committee reported that the total number of children fed had been 2,000. The number of meals provided, 50,000. The cost of each meal was two (old) pence.
- The noted Victoria Coon Band, Miskin, and the Glancynon Ladies' and Miskin Mixed Jazz bands had paraded all the streets of Mountain Ash and Miskin, and collected £13.10s. for the Mountain Ash and District Boot Fund. The fund had received a total of £193, and paid out £73.
- There were a number of free boot repairing centres in the valley.
- There was also an Aberdare Childrens' Boot Fund.
- This edition of The Leader reported that the Aberdare Trades and Labour Council's Distress Fund had collected a total of £15,089.16.10 to date. (6th.November)
- On the 25th.October the Merthyr Tydfil Board of Guardians wrote to the Education Committee intimating that they would not accept responsibility for any payment in respect of the provision of school meals for children after the 23rd instant.
- The Leader carried an advert, submitted by the furnishers Victor Freed, which proclaimed, either without tact or with attempted humour or topicality, that their goods were of "STRIKING VALUE!"

THE JAZZ BANDS OF 1926

Do you remember 1926? The summer of soups and speeches...

The slogans and the penny concerts,

The Jazz-bands and the moorland picnics... (From Idris Davies's *Gwalia Deserta VIII*)

Yes, we do! We are fortunate that the late Mr. Edwin Greening has vividly recorded some of the events of 1926 for us, and members are urged to have another look at his fine essays in Volumes 2 and 8 of *Old Aberdare* during this, the eightieth anniversary of these strikes. One colourful aspect of the lock-out, mentioned by both Idris Davies in his poems and Edwin Greening in his articles, are the famous Jazz-bands, an important part of the social history of the period that require further consideration, as do many other aspects of the disputes. .

The jazz-bands, or gazooka bands, were not new, but their hey-day was in the strike-bound summer of 1926, when their numbers increased. Groups of men organized themselves, under exotic names, into marching bands that played gazookas – tin cigar shaped instruments, which produced a distinctive but monotonous sound by anyone capable of humming. These bands were not only a diversion; they boosted moral and asserted collective values at a time when the very existence of the valley communities was in doubt. They were still with us in the 1930's, and the tradition passed to the drum majorettes of the South Wales carnivals of the 1950's. They were the product of special circumstances and are seen or heard no more. They are however celebrated in the above-mentioned poem, and Gwyn Thomas's Radio play "*Gazooka*" (1952), and in a collection of his short stories. (*The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales*. P.290).

Desmond Edwards in his "*Walkers in the Streets*" (Reminiscences 1951) describes the anatomy of a local jazz band, and how it played a part in the prevention of the breakdown of law and order during the lock-out.

"The famous jazz-band movement played a part in the suppression of violence during the 1926 miners' strike. The Cwmdare band for example, was a marching-band consisting of a long column of men each carrying the standard instrument, the tin gazoot. These were very cheap and very popular. I think most children had a gazoot; I know we did. Then there were a pair of kettledrums, and finally a big drum, which in our band was handled by a big strong man named Jack Hooker.*

*In the early days before regional competitions imposed uniformity, the costumes worn were multi coloured patch work, all home made, with wide ruffs, white gloves and fancy headgear of all shapes and sizes. The gazoots were fixed into prettily coloured and decorated cones, and the drums were draped with ribbons and skins. The leader manipulated a fine long staff and was obviously a person of considerable importance. Training, both musical and in marching was most rigorous. In our case the latter was the province of the village bobby, P.C. Bendall who, in short sleeves, in the schoolyard barked out his commands until the steps and intricate patterns were perfected. The co-opting of the police in this way was clearly a shrewd move, and an excellent example of identification with the community. It was of course quite thrilling to watch the band procession in full tilt, with our signature tune "Moonlight and Roses"*** stride its way gaily and colourfully in public display along the streets"*

* I believe the writer meant side or snare drums. A kettledrum is the tympani of the Symphony orchestra.

** Andantino in D flat, Op.83 No.2, composed in 1888 by the English composer and organist Edwin Lemare (1865-1934), and lyrics (1921) by Ben Black and Neil Moret

Edwin Greening says that the bands were divided into Jazz Bands and Character Bands, and that there were some 90 such groups in the Cynon Valley. They grew in number in June 1926. All the known bands are listed in this issue. The Editor would be glad to have a note of any band names that do not appear in the list.

NOTE. The Museum at Aberdare has, on display, a small collection of original costumes and artefacts belonging to local jazz bands of the 1926 period.

THE 1926 JAZZ BANDS

One of the earliest bands was the Cwmbach Macaroni Jazz band. This was formed in Well Place, Cwmbach on the 17th. May 1926.

THE BANDS

Abercynon Ladies' Jazz Band.
Glancynon Ladies' and Miskin mixed Jazz band.
Newtown, Mountain Ash.
Bonkey Boys Jazz Band
Penylan Jazz Band
Abernant Jazzers
Brook Street "Bing Boys"* Jazz Band, Aberaman
Cwmaman Institute Jazz Band
Lady Jazzers, Cwmbach.
Cwmpennar Jazz Band
Cwmbach Nutcrackers
Woodland Street Flappers
Gwladys White Ladies.
Cefnpennar Ladies
Cwmbach Institute Ladies
Aberdare Town Nightingales
Hirwaun Town Jazz Band
Hong Kong Jazz Band, Trecynon
Brynmair Road Jazz Band.
Abernant Jazz Band

Aberneol Jazz Band
North View Jazz Band, Aberaman (Musical Director, Evan Davies, "Ap Dewi Mabon")
New Hotel Jazz Band (Aberaman)
The Original (1926) Victoria Coon Band (Legend on their drum), Victoria Street, Miskin Mountain Ash. Note this band was "Blacked-up"
Cwmaman Bush Boys. Jazz Band.
Glancynon (Miskin), Jazz Band
Penrhiwceiber Boys' Jazz Band.
Morris Avenue Jazz Band.
Hirwaun (Brecon Road) Jazz Band.
Hirwaun (Reg Pearce's) Jazz Band.
Aberdare Green Street Jazz Band.
Robertstown Jazz Band.
The Globe Hotel, Cwmaman, "Easy Goers" (This group advertised for "Allsop's Empire, and other Ales")

* A very successful Musical Comedy of 1916 that was revived in 1924. Starred George Robey.

THE CHARACTER BANDS.

Mexicans.
The Club Street Mexican Jazz Band (40 in number. Black and white cotton trousers, bespangled waistcoats, red sashes and tall straw sombreros made from fish frails given by local fish merchants, Jack Francis, Richard Hurt and Rose Burge.)
Foundry Town Toreadors
Newtown Mountain Ash Stone Age.
Shanghai Orpheans
The Egyptian Priests. (A topical choice as Tutankhamun's tomb had only been discovered in 1922.)
The Toy Drum Majors.
The Abercwmboid Broad Beans.
The Abercwmboid Mixed Pickles.

The American Indians.
Abercynon Miners' Comic Band.
Napier's Chinese Band
Mountain Ash Convicts.
Aberaman Jews
Hirwaun Twinks
Hirwaun Lady Pierrots
Hirwaun Union Jacks
Blue and Silver Band
Napier's Black Watch.
Glanamman Road Bull Fighters.
Miners-On-Tramp.
The Chocolate Coons

Published by The Cynon Valley History Society
Hon. Secretary Brynmor Evans, 45 E Oxford Street, Gadlys, Aberdare, CF44 BBE (01685 875558)
Edited by Geoffrey Evans, 5 Plasdraw Place, Aberdare CF44 ONS (01685 871840)
E-mail GMorgannwg@aol.com.
Registered Charity No. 51014
Printed by Dial-A-Print, Mountain Ash 01443 474822.