Britain’s Biggest Wartime Stoppage: the Origins of the Engineering Strike of May 1917

The May 1917 engineering strike was Britain’s largest during the First World War. Lasting over three weeks, it involved some 200,000 workers in forty-five towns and cities, costing 1.5 million working days.[[1]](#footnote-1) When it occurred, Russia’s February Revolution and the failure of France’s Chemin des Dames offensive had already thwarted Allied planning for a war-winning spring campaign, while during April Britain suffered catastrophic shipping losses and its cereal stocks fell dangerously low.[[2]](#footnote-2) Now, in the midst of the battle of Arras, the strike delayed delivery to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of over sixty heavy artillery pieces and ninety field guns.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Attorney-General, F. E.Smith, warned such disruption made victory more remote, and might cost soldiers’ lives.[[4]](#footnote-4) Prime Minister David Lloyd George’s War Cabinet discussed the stoppage repeatedly, the Secretary for War warning Britain’s Western Front Commander that ministers had been ‘really scared’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Arthur Henderson, the Labour Party Leader and a War Cabinet member, felt the strike represented ‘possibly one of the most menacing situations since the start of the war’; and Christopher Addison, the Munitions Minister, agreed.[[6]](#footnote-6) Alfred Lord Milner, another War Cabinet member, acknowledged to the Premier that ‘the question of Labour unrest … occupies so much of your attention - as it must indeed cause anxiety to all of us’. Lloyd George himself commented on the episode retrospectively that ‘of all the problems which governments had to handle during the Great War, the most delicate and probably the most perilous were those arising on the home front’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Historians have agreed the strike marked a political watershed.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet its causes divided contemporaries.[[9]](#footnote-9) In-house analyses by the Labour and Munitions Ministries considered two policy changes had precipitated it.[[10]](#footnote-10) One was replacing the ‘trade card’ scheme that shielded skilled trade unionists from recruitment, but more important was extending from military to civilian production the practice of ‘dilution’: officially ‘the principle that no skilled man shall perform work which can be performed by a less skilled man, that no young or fit man shall perform work which can be done by a man older or less fit, and that no male shall perform work which can be performed by a female’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Yet the commissioners who investigated the unrest highlighted rising food prices and dwindling real incomes;[[12]](#footnote-12) while many ministers and officials blamed pacifist and revolutionary agitation, centred on the engineering shop stewards. Scholarly studies have reflected these disagreements. The strike is mentioned – incisively if briefly – in the surveys by Arthur Marwick, Trevor Wilson, Gerard DeGroot, and Adrian Gregory.[[13]](#footnote-13) Marwick recognized the ‘extreme working-class discontent of 1917’, though also how quickly it subsided, as did DeGroot; Gregory also stressed the authorities’ success in surmounting the crisis.[[14]](#footnote-14) The most detailed published narrative, however, remains the Ministry of Munitions official history.[[15]](#footnote-15) The fullest subsequent accounts, by Chris Wrigley and James Hinton, employed primarily governmental and primarily trade-union sources.[[16]](#footnote-16) Both were written in the 1970s, since when scholarly attention has shifted; although other work has emphasized the First World War’s pivotal significance in relations between state and society in modern Britain..[[17]](#footnote-17) This article seeks to reappraise and synthesize the contrasting approaches, and locate them in a broader context. It will focus on the dispute’s origins, but consider also the light shed by its termination and its consequences. While agreeing that changes in government policy formed the proximate cause, it will argue they could do so because of deeper social tensions. The strikers were predominantly skilled male employees, resisting the erosion of their living standards and fearing lest hard-won protections for their earnings and status stood in jeopardy. Their union officials were hobbled by wartime legislation, contributing to a leadership vacuum that shop stewards helped temporarily to remedy. Yet despite Lloyd George’s exasperation, he recognized that the authorities must attend to underlying grievances. This conjuncture lent the strike a peculiar character, distinct from stoppages in the other belligerents, which contributed both to its short-term failure and to its paradoxical long-term impact.

The precipitating incident occurred at Tweedale & Smalley, a spinning frames manufacturer in Rochdale. Like many engineering companies, Tweedales had accepted war contracts, hiring women to fulfil them. When in February 1917 the management instructed male engineers to train female employees for *civilian* work, however, thus undermining the bases on which dilution had been accepted, the men refused and over 400 were discharged. They belonged to the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), the largest engineering trade union, which referred the dispute to the Munitions Ministry.[[18]](#footnote-18) The company was intransigent, both Addison and Lloyd George later condemning it, and Tweedale, one of the directors, pledging to recognize unions only ‘over my dead body’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Ministry intervened belatedly, explaining afterwards that it preferred conciliation;[[20]](#footnote-20) though Addison admitted the delay was excessive. Finally the government prosecuted the firm for violating the Munitions of War Act, it was fined the modest (but maximum) sum of £35 plus costs, Tweedale’s colleagues removed him, the sacked men were reinstated, the women were withdrawn from private work, and the union was recognized.[[21]](#footnote-21) By now, however, sympathetic strikes were spreading across the Manchester region, and even when the Tweedales men returned, their fellow unionists stayed out. The ASE local official reported the situation was out of control,[[22]](#footnote-22) and in early May stoppages hit Yorkshire, the Midlands, and London.

The Tweedales dispute touched a nerve. According to the Labour Ministry in-house history, the episode drew sympathy because a new Munitions of War Bill, currently before Parliament, envisaged extending dilution.[[23]](#footnote-23) The Manchester shop stewards committee (the nearest thing to an organizing body) cited the bill to justify action, and telegrams to the ASE Executive from Bury, Stockport, and Bolton demanded its withdrawal.[[24]](#footnote-24) Government spokesmen defended the bill, and Addison at first refused discussion until the strike ended.[[25]](#footnote-25) Even after the Tweedales dispute concluded and the ASE Executive reached agreement with Addison over the second initial grievance, the replacement of trade cards, strike action against the bill continued. Traditionally, engineering production had centred on versatile (and lengthily trained) artisans who were hourly paid (i.e. on time rates) for a gamut of complex roles. More recently their position had been challenged by imported American machine tools, which the skilled men set up and repaired, but semi-skilled employees, often paid ‘by results’ (i.e. on piece rates) operated.[[26]](#footnote-26) By 1914 skilled workers constituted 60 per cent of the engineering labour force, semi-skilled 20 per cent, and unskilled 20 per cent; while 30.7 per cent of the total were on piece rates.[[27]](#footnote-27) The war accelerated these trends. In 1915 a BEF ‘shell shortage’ helped precipitate the formation of a coalition government, in which Lloyd George became Munitions Minister. The contest, he told the Trades Union Congress (TUC), now pitted German and Austrian mechanics against French and British ones.[[28]](#footnote-28) His response was to ‘Americanize’ munitions manufacture, by importing more machinery but also (through dilution) by reappraising skilled workers’ jobs and redeploying the men to where they were essential, replacing them by semi-skilled or unskilled men and women. During the war the total engineering workforce doubled, but semi-skilled and female workers’ numbers rose still more.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The institutional framework for this transformation stemmed from the Treasury Agreement in March 1915 and the first Munitions of War Act in July. The British system of industrial relations had grown up piecemeal over decades: now an onerous regulatory apparatus was superimposed on it. Strikes and lockouts became illegal in war-producing plants (whether state-owned or private), and workers could not change firm (seeking higher remuneration) without a ‘leaving certificate’ from the previous employer: this might take six weeks, while earnings were interrupted. Profits would be restricted, but dilution would go ahead, though only in factories producing war material for the government and not for private or commercial purposes (on this Lloyd George gave public assurances);[[30]](#footnote-30) and pre-1914 practices would return once peace was restored. This latter point mattered particularly for the ASE, as the biggest engineering union and principal representative of the skilled employees. A convention of reserving particular tasks and roles for workers who had served their terms as apprentices and journeymen underpinned the skilled men’s earnings and status. Lloyd George recognized that the Government was asking them to forfeit advantages gained through long struggle.[[31]](#footnote-31) J. T. Murphy (the leading intellectual of the shop stewards’ movement), described the workers as ‘custodians’ of the jobs and benefits that their brothers at the Front deserved to regain after the peace.[[32]](#footnote-32) According to James Brownlie, the Chair of the ASE Executive Council, ‘we … in response to the call of the nation, have relaxed our hard-won and traditionally cherished trade rights and allowed people to come into our trade who have no legitimate right to be in our trade, to assist the nation in its hour of need’. A representative of the Boilermakers desired a guarantee of ‘the conditions which our fathers fought for, which we have fought for and which our sons are going to fight for’..[[33]](#footnote-33) No one, it was noted, suggested dilution for clergymen, doctors, or lawyers.[[34]](#footnote-34)

More radical wartime readjustment was forced on engineering than on any other British industry. Even so, opposition to dilution was muted, and most determined on Clydeside. After the authorities deported the leaders of the Glasgow resistance in March 1916, the Munitions Ministry believed dilution was being implemented and relations with the unions had improved.[[35]](#footnote-35) That summer and autumn, however, a fresh crisis developed over ‘man-power’ (the term was a wartime coinage), and at this time the policy changes that triggered the 1917 unrest originated.[[36]](#footnote-36) Military conscription had tightened the labour market, as did the terrible casualties during the Battle of the Somme. At the same time, although the struggle to raise munitions output had largely been won, more complex demands were now emerging for aircraft, tanks, and heavy guns. In August 1916 the Cabinet established a Manpower Distribution Board (MDB) under Austen Chamberlain, to adjudicate between the War Office, the Admiralty, the Munitions Ministry, and civilian output. The MDB asked the Munitions Ministry to relinquish 120,000 men, and the Ministry tried to ration out the remaining skilled engineers by applying dilution - in violation of Lloyd George’s earlier pledges - to private and commercial business.

This operation started with a meeting with the engineering unions on 22 November, which the ASE boycotted. Chamberlain noted the difficulty caused by ‘the jealousy or hostility of one union to another’.[[37]](#footnote-37), Although the discussion was relatively uncontentious (perhaps encouraging ministerial complacency), the unions who did attend were unhappy. They feared a separate government deal with the ASE, and indeed Addison met the latter’s leaders on 12 and 18 December. When the ASE protested that the new initiative breached Lloyd George’s promises, Addison replied the situation had changed: because of Romania’s recent defeat and occupation, Russia’s need for munitions, and new weapons programmes: ‘the pressure is now so terrible’ that extra workers were essential and extending dilution might yield 300,000. If skilled labour were redirected without dilution, industries such as textile and agricultural machinery would collapse, and no jobs remain there for returning soldiers. None the less, the ASE reiterated their hostility to extending dilution and to any agreement reached with other unions; and they proposed no alternative measure.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Addison now decided he must legislate, perhaps calculating the ASE could acquiesce more easily in an imposed solution. His ministry must arm merchant ships, finish or repair artillery for the summer offensive, and deliver tank engines and aircraft:[[39]](#footnote-39) the BEF’s capture of Vimy Ridge on 9 April showed how heavy guns could silence enemy field artillery.[[40]](#footnote-40) Cast as an amendment to the 1915 Act, the Munitions of War Bill was a simple enabling text:[[41]](#footnote-41) In the Commons it encountered little opposition, but the measure publicized the government’s intentions at the same time as the Tweedale & Smalley dispute escalated. Workers feared that next would come industrial conscription, despite the Cabinet having confirmed it would not introduce this unless voluntary schemes failed.[[42]](#footnote-42) Yet unsuccessful voluntary expedients had also preceded military conscription; and it was glaringly evident that the voluntary ‘National Service’ initiative, directed by Neville Chamberlain and intended to earmark a civilian workforce for deployment where most needed, was falling short of its targets.[[43]](#footnote-43) At a meeting on 23 April the ASE side predicted trouble: the government had acted unilaterally, the union’s delegate conference had been very angry, and the men wanted drastic action;[[44]](#footnote-44) the *Labour Leader* and the *Herald* gave similar warnings. Once the May strike started, discussions resumed, but the two sides were more distant than ever. The ASE Executive Council knew that withdrawing the bill was central to the strikers’ demands. Although condemning the stoppage, the ASE leaders still opposed extending dilution, which Brownlie judged the ‘burning point’.[[45]](#footnote-45) They were disturbed by suggestions in *The Times* by Sidney Webb that restoring pre-war practices was neither feasible nor desirable,[[46]](#footnote-46) with which a Lloyd George speech seemed to agree. It was true that Frederick Kellaway (Addison’s Parliamentary Secretary) said ‘diluted’ men would not go into the army, and after the war the new arrangements would discontinue.[[47]](#footnote-47) All the same, among the problems identified by the subsequent inquiry commissions was that constant ‘chopping and changing’ had corroded trust. Henderson insisted that the government could not yield over the bill;[[48]](#footnote-48) Addison, more emollient, was willing to compromise over detail, and admitted he was unsure how many men were obtainable.[[49]](#footnote-49) Unconvinced, the ASE Secretary reiterated that the bill breached Lloyd George’s pledges, and the restoration of pre-war practices was inadequately guaranteed.[[50]](#footnote-50) The union maintained its opposition, and when the strike ended no agreement had been reached.[[51]](#footnote-51)

If the first ‘burning point’ was extending dilution, the second was protecting trade-unionists from military service, and the proposal to replace the ‘trade card’ scheme by a Schedule of Protected Occupations (SPO). Until 1916 Britain had relied on volunteering, and by October 1915 17.25 per cent of the engineering workforce had joined up.[[52]](#footnote-52) Conscription was introduced not just to comb out potential soldiers but also to safeguard labour in home industries, Lloyd George warning that once skilled men were in the army it clung onto them.[[53]](#footnote-53) A ‘badging’ system allowed departments such as Munitions to protect men from call-up, and by late 1916 1.27 million badges had been allocated.[[54]](#footnote-54) Here again, however, the Somme casualties helped force a reconsideration. The military members of the War Office’s Army Council warned that 940,000 more men were needed for 1917.[[55]](#footnote-55) ‘Artificers’ (mechanics) were also required, to service the BEF’s expanding stock of weaponry. Yet working-class war enthusiasm had faded, and one of the acutest ASE grievances concerned skilled men who were needed at home but whom recruiting officers were poaching: the union claimed the army had debadged and called up 600 men.[[56]](#footnote-56) An ASE delegation elicited from Lloyd George’s predecessor as Premier, H.H. Asquith, a promise that ‘skilled men … ought not to be recruited for general [military] service’, and ‘we are to make the most economical use… of our best resources in the way of personnel for the purpose of the War’.[[57]](#footnote-57) In exchange for dilution, skilled men should be protected. Discussion was curtailed, however, by the November 1916 ‘Hargreaves strike’, which foreshadowed the following spring’s events.

Leonard Hargreaves was a Vickers fitter in Sheffield, whom the army called up in error. The local shop stewards convened a mass meeting to demand his return, and alerted other districts by using motorcycle dispatch riders, as they would again in May 1917. Over 10,000 workers participated in the stoppage, which the stewards threatened would continue until Hargreaves’s release. The Cabinet held an extraordinary meeting, Addison admitting that ‘I was alarmed and so were we all’.[[58]](#footnote-58) A ministerial sub-committee concluded that Hargreaves had been enlisted mistakenly, and once he appeared before another mass meeting, the stoppage ended. The authorities were humiliated, and Murphy deemed this episode the peak of shop steward influence.[[59]](#footnote-59) Moreover, it led on directly to the trade card scheme, which was agreed on 18 December.[[60]](#footnote-60) The scheme was negotiated in just two days and with the ASE alone. Unsurprisingly, it was ‘cloudily drawn’.[[61]](#footnote-61) Citing Asquith’s pledge, it provided that fully trained ASE members who were either engaged in war work or had enrolled as War Munitions Volunteers would receive exemption cards from their union. The union side would ‘do their utmost’ to furnish BEF artificers.[[62]](#footnote-62) The employers had no role in this arrangement, which the Munitions Ministry and the union would administer, and which exempted an entire category of workers from call-up.

This was a remarkable delegation of authority by a government embroiled in a desperate conflict, and the agreement was soon assailed from two sides. The first was the unions. At a conference on 22 November with the other engineering unions (the ASE again being absent), the unions agreed to join, but voiced ‘considerable resentment’ at the ASE’s preferential treatment: ‘as … happens in most nurseries, the most troublesome child has received the best attention’.[[63]](#footnote-63) As the scheme took effect, non-scheme unions claimed that scheme ones were using it to poach members, and issuing cards in return for membership dues. Addison reported he had never seen such discontent, and two non-scheme unions threatened industrial action.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Opposition also came from within the government. Lloyd George considered the scheme one of Asquith’s worst surrenders;[[65]](#footnote-65) and Addison and his senior official, Sir Stephenson Kent, sought to replace it. They found the War Office and the Admiralty were agreed on an alternative approach, granting exemptions on the basis not of union membership but of men’s occupations, defined in a finer-grained (and therefore fairer) manner, even if additional effort would be needed to establish the schedule and identify the beneficiaries.[[66]](#footnote-66) In February Addison took the new plan to the War Cabinet, arguing the trade card scheme was alienating the excluded unions and the promised artificers had failed to materialize. His key concern, however, was less with the inequity than with the inefficiency of an arrangement that exempted members of the craft unions, whereas equally skilled employees who might work alongside them but belonged to a general union remained unprotected. [[67]](#footnote-67)

On 23 March the Cabinet approved the principle of the Schedule of Protected Occupations.[[68]](#footnote-68) Addison and Henderson now had to sell it to the unions, at the same time as steering through the Munitions of War Bill. Addison enlisted Sir William Robertson (the Chief of the Imperial General Staff) and Sir John Jellicoe (the First Sea Lord), who addressed conferences with the ASE on 3 April and the other unions a day later (the ASE thereby again being singled out). Jellicoe said he needed thousands of surface vessels against the German U-Boats; Robertson paid homage to the working classes, without whom victory was impossible: and Britain must ‘win properly’. The army was making progress, but Germany had fielded a million more combatants than in 1916, while just to maintain the BEF’s strength he would need another 500,000 by July.[[69]](#footnote-69) Henderson, who chaired both meetings, also stressed the intensity of the fighting, and that trade cards had caused immense dissatisfaction among the excluded unions in return for disappointing results. The government believed the SPO must replace them, and this was non-negotiable: the trade card scheme was ‘dead’. Addison amplified that calling up non-card skilled men had cut aero-engine output by two thirds and that the BEF still lacked artificers, yet it desperately needed aircraft, tank engines, and railway repairs.[[70]](#footnote-70)

The 3 and 4 April meetings had contrasting outcomes. The non-ASE unions complained about their treatment, but broadly welcomed the SPO; the ASE was initially reserved, and Henderson told the Cabinet that he hoped for little resistance,[[71]](#footnote-71) but by late April a confrontation loomed over trade cards as well as dilution. In fact Henderson had confronted the ASE with a *fait accompli;* it felt the government had again reneged on pledges, and departed unilaterally from a freely negotiated arrangement. The union had spent £10,000 from its own funds on printing 28,000 cards; yet the scheme had been denied a fair trial. Other unions feared the SPO gave employers an excessive role and might facilitate victimization.[[72]](#footnote-72) None the less, it was the ASE whose opposition was strongest, as became clear during a stormy discussion at the Munitions Ministry on 23 April, when the Executive Council reported that a national delegate meeting had massively rejected the SPO. Brownlie warned that the position was ‘very grave’.[[73]](#footnote-73) Indeed, the minutes of this meeting suggest abolishing trade cards could on its own have occasioned a stoppage. In the War Cabinet Henderson now warned the situation was ‘very menacing’ and would need ‘careful handling’, but Addison thought that if the government stood firm the men would yield. It was agreed to postpone the SPO from 1 May (Labour Day) to 7 May, in the hope of avoiding disruption to munitions and shipbuilding.[[74]](#footnote-74) Still, Addison commented retrospectively, the Russian Revolution and the situation on the Western Front left ministers no alternative to the new scheme.

As the strike spread over the following week, it became clear that Addison had miscalculated. The trade card issue came to a head almost simultaneously with the Tweedale & Smalley dispute and the Munitions of War Bill, reinforcing the impression that the authorities were untrustworthy and the engineers under assault from every direction. The Manchester shop stewards cited abolishing trade cards as a reason for downing tools; the ASE Executive learned that it was causing unrest from Aberdeen to Bristol.[[75]](#footnote-75) Although the Labour Ministry’s internal history thought trade cards secondary to the Munitions of War Bill, it stressed fears of a wholesale comb-out for the army, and suggested trade cards were the primary flashpoint in Sheffield, Wolverhampton, Coventry, and Leicester. They also mattered particularly to the Electricians (the one major union that came out with the engineers), whose members tended to be younger than the ASE’s and more exposed to call-up.[[76]](#footnote-76) In short, the issue added to the strikers’ grievances and helped their movement expand.

None the less, on 5 May, Addison achieved an agreement on the SPO with the ASE Executive. It ended one of the most disagreeable negotiations he had known: he dreaded his morning commute.[[77]](#footnote-77) The opening meetings were very difficult indeed, the ASE insisting that their members had mandated them to defend trade cards, and Henderson riposting that they were holding up the entire military machine.[[78]](#footnote-78) Yet when agreement came it was sudden: Hisee of the Executive acknowledged that they had kith and kin at the Front, and Brownlie that they had responsibilities to the country and understood the U-Boat threat.[[79]](#footnote-79) Conversely, Henderson assured the ASE that the authorities must have the SPO, but not in order to draft skilled men, and the government limited the benefit for the army, as it agreed that any ASE man not covered in the SPO would not be called up ‘until all male diluted labour liable and fit for general military service in the occupation in the munitions area in which he is employed shall first be withdrawn’. Hence, although the ASE Executive now appealed to their delegates to keep the men at work, they had again secured substantial exemption for their members.[[80]](#footnote-80) Despite the Army Council’s warning that a shortfall would damage troop morale and harm the spring offensive, by mid-May the War Cabinet had concluded that ‘labour troubles’ had delayed combing out and the War Office would have to wait.[[81]](#footnote-81) The Adjutant-General, Sir Nevil Macready, reported that the BEF risked an ‘impossible’ position, with a prospective shortfall of 250,000 Category ‘A’ men, but he faced increasing war weariness and resistance to recruiting.[[82]](#footnote-82) Thus although the government ended the trade card scheme, it made concessions in return, and the ASE’s appeal did not end the stoppage. This sequence underlined that trade cards were secondary to dilution, and also that the ASE Executive no longer controlled its members.

Retrospectively Addison reasserted that the new military demands in autumn 1916, leading to the Munitions of War Bill and the SPO, had been the entire cause of the strike.[[83]](#footnote-83) From the findings of the Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest, however, appointed in the stoppage’s aftermath, a more complex interpretation emerges.

The meetings during the strike between union representatives and the government hardly mentioned earnings. The men voiced grievances over manpower policies, not pay, and the employers were marginalized. The Labour and Munitions Ministries’ internal histories agreed on such an interpretation, although admitting that in a calmer context the disagreements over dilution and trade cards might have proved more tractable. According to the Ministry of Labour, dilution and rising food prices had eroded workers’ willingness for sacrifices,[[84]](#footnote-84) and the Ministry of Munitions agreed idealism had withered. According to the latter’s official history:

The workpeople, men and women, were tired. Long hours of continuous strain in the factory, overcrowded houses and lodgings devoid of every comfort, dear unpalatable food, hardly to be got by dreary waiting in the queues, the absence of amusement and recreation, bereavement and the return of the maimed, produced a nervous irritability, which was only intensified by the excitement of the news of the Russian Revolution, America’s entry into the war, or the capture of Vimy ridge.

Men in such a mood distorted out of all proportion the grievances which arose from the administration of the Munitions of War and the Military Service Acts, especially where large workshops and trade union organisation made meetings frequent and isolated the munition workers from the rest of the community.[[85]](#footnote-85)

The reports of the industrial unrest commissioners, in contrast, highlighted wartime social stresses as causes in their own right, rather than as contributory factors that complicated negotiations. This reflected the commissioners’ terms of reference ‘to inquire into and report upon the causes of industrial unrest’, i.e. not simply the May strike.[[86]](#footnote-86) Set up by the Prime Minister in June, they were expected to report within a month on eight regions: the North-East, the North-West, Yorkshire and the East Midlands, the West Midlands, London, the South-West, Wales, and Scotland. Lloyd George told them to discover ‘the fundamental causes of labour unrest … The Government attached the utmost value to the findings of the Commission and the issue is a matter of paramount national importance.’[[87]](#footnote-87) They worked quickly, relying heavily on interviews with employers, trade unionists, and other local leaders (167 in Yorkshire and the East Midlands, 138 in the West Midlands), as well as public meetings.[[88]](#footnote-88) Guided by his secretariat, Lloyd George provided a broad remit, including food prices and the wartime strain on the workforce, whereas pacifist and revolutionary influences were downplayed.[[89]](#footnote-89) George Barnes, the former ASE Secretary who later replaced Henderson in the War Cabinet, was broadly accurate in his summary of the findings for the Premier.[[90]](#footnote-90) In addition to grievances specific to each area, such as housing shortages (for example in London and Barrow), Barnes distinguished more universal causes, indeed including poor inter-departmental co-ordination, trade cards, and the Munitions of War Acts (particularly leaving certificates), but especially food prices and the distribution of supplies. All the reports foregrounded these latter, as both causing unrest in their own right and hardening attitudes over dilution and trade cards. The ASE Executive also understood the feeling over food prices, which the commissioners linked to anger over ‘profiteering’, as shopkeepers and ship-owners battened on consumers’ privations. In fact the strike followed years of pressure on living standards. Real incomes had stagnated for a decade before the great pre-war strikes of 1911-13, and during the first half of the conflict working-class households’ real earnings fell by about a third.[[91]](#footnote-91) Between 1914 and 1917, according to the North-West commissioners, food prices rose by 102 per cent and overall living costs by 70-75 per cent, whereas wages grew at most by 40-50 per cent.[[92]](#footnote-92) Professor W.G.S. Adams, who headed Lloyd George’s secretariat (or ‘Garden Suburb’), advised that bread prices had doubled, food prices generally had risen by 92 per cent, and wages by only 65 per cent, and on 7 May the Cabinet learned that food supply breakdowns in East London and Ireland might be imminent.[[93]](#footnote-93) According to the South-West commissioners, prices had risen because the war had largely been financed by expanding the currency. Additionally, food supply had deteriorated, due to pressure on agriculture and to Britain’s exceptional dependence on seaborne imports.[[94]](#footnote-94) Moreover, strikes were illegal, and leaving certificates impeded men from moving to higher remuneration, while between 1914 and 1918 semi-skilled workers on piece rates grew from 30.7 to 40.8 percent of the engineering workforce.[[95]](#footnote-95) Piece-rate earnings rose faster than those for skilled men on time rates, thus narrowing differentials at a time when the skilled men’s pre-war advantages seemed endangered.[[96]](#footnote-96) In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that one historian has described the May strike as ‘a massive battle in defence of class privilege’, and that other unions lacked sympathy with the ASE. [[97]](#footnote-97) Yet the commissioners also stressed how repeated policy changes had sapped goodwill. A multiplicity of grievances underlay the explosion of May 1917, and discredited the trade union executives.

Four roads led to the engineering strike: the Tweedale & Smalley dispute and the conflict over dilution; military recruitment and the replacement of trade cards; pressure on real living standards; and the shop stewards’ organisation and leadership.

The shop stewards were not particularly highlighted in the internal histories by the Labour and Munitions Ministries or in the commissioners’ reports. Indeed the Munitions Ministry considered the *lack* of leadership was one of the strike’s main weaknesses, the stewards making a virtue of referring key decisions to the rank and file.[[98]](#footnote-98) In contrast, G.D.H. Cole, the guild socialist and labour historian who was working for the ASE, considered the movement’s spontaneity an asset.[[99]](#footnote-99) The Munitions of War Acts had effectively outlawed official strikes, and like all the major 1914-18 stoppages the engineering strike was unofficial. The ASE Executive Council repudiated it,[[100]](#footnote-100) and the stewards primarily provided such direction as it possessed, exerting particular influence in Manchester, Sheffield, Coventry, and London.

Shop stewards pre-dated the war, and the ASE constitution referred to their appointment and duties. In contrast to the district and national officials, they were unpaid and part-time, continuing to work alongside union members. Their original functions were confined to mundane matters such as collecting dues.[[101]](#footnote-101) Although in Whitehall the ASE Executive had a reputation for tenacity – not to say obstruction - [[102]](#footnote-102) wartime conditions would alienate officials from many on the shop floor, and implementing dilution required workplace agreements that enhanced the stewards’ role. They gained wider prominence from resisting dilution on Clydeside and from the Hargreaves strike. The Shop Stewards’ and Workers’ Committee Movement took the form at local level of workshop and district committees that represented all the stewards from the different unions present in the workforce. But a national network also emerged, holding conferences at Manchester in November 1916 and May 1917.[[103]](#footnote-103) In Manchester, a Joint Engineering Shop Stewards’ Committee, whose letters were signed by George Peet, first called for industrial action at the end of April, in solidarity over Tweedale & Smalley and against the withdrawal of trade cards. It resisted involvement by the ASE Executive.[[104]](#footnote-104) From Manchester the strike fanned out through local decisions, often taken in mass meetings, while motorcyclists spread the word. (At Bakers in Willesden, for example, the men themselves took the initiative, mainly due to the Munitions of War Bill.) [[105]](#footnote-105) At Derby on 12 May another meeting agreed that a national committee of strikers’ representatives should meet in London, where it based itself at Walworth, close to the ASE’s Peckham headquarters. In contrast to the ASE Executive’s conditional acceptance of the SPO, the Walworth Committee continued to support trade cards as well as opposing the Munitions of War Bill, and claimed that they, rather than the Executive, spoke for the strikers. [[106]](#footnote-106)

Within the government it was feared that subversives had gained ground. In December 1916 the Home Office warned chief constables of ‘an organized attempt to create trouble in munitions works which has more than local importance’.[[107]](#footnote-107) Major F.A. Labouchere told Addison that a ‘Revolutionary Ring’ linked union radicals with compromise peace advocates in the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the No-Conscription Fellowship, and the Union of Democratic Control (UDC).[[108]](#footnote-108) Milner forwarded to the Premier a report that ILP and UDC activists hoped to provoke a general strike against the war,[[109]](#footnote-109) while Addison was secretly arranging for suspected revolutionaries to go to the Front. Frances Stevenson (the Premier’s secretary and mistress) blamed the strike on ‘German agents and Pacifists who are trying to corrupt the workers’, [[110]](#footnote-110) and Lloyd George himself on 20 May attributed to the unions ‘unworthy motives … everything must be subservient to the war and that the working classes must be patriotic and trust the government’.[[111]](#footnote-111) Many shop stewards were indeed socialists, affiliated to the British Socialist Party or the Socialist Labour Party.[[112]](#footnote-112) Yet by the time the Premier appointed the inquiry commissioners he had reconsidered. The appropriate response, he told parliament, was removing legitimate grievances as well as imposing repression.[[113]](#footnote-113) He well understood the imperative need for armaments, and had long opposed recruiting more men for the army from key home industries.[[114]](#footnote-114)

This analysis helps explain why initially the strike appeared a failure yet eventually accomplished many of its objectives. The government responded to the unrest by intensifying surveillance of the labour movement, and the Labour Ministry introduced weekly inter-departmental bulletins for the Cabinet, while Basil Thomson, who headed the CID at Scotland Yard, was authorized to centralize intelligence on ‘anarchist and socialist movements and their influence on strikes’.[[115]](#footnote-115) Thomson was concerned to avoid alarmism, however, and noted that the May strike was perfectly orderly.[[116]](#footnote-116) The police were not deployed against it, the Manchester chief constable opposed arrests, and his Sheffield counterpart told employers that his instructions were to watch and report but not take action.[[117]](#footnote-117) When the Munitions Ministry tried to contain the movement by muzzling press reports, the Press Bureau warned it must rely on voluntary co-operation from proprietors and editors,[[118]](#footnote-118) although initial coverage was indeed slight.[[119]](#footnote-119) However, the authorities maintained their practice of dealing only with the official trade union representatives, Henderson assuring the ASE leadership that he had ‘set my face like flint’ against undermining their authority, and Addison refusing to meet the Walworth Committee unless the ASE Executive accompanied them.[[120]](#footnote-120) The Cabinet endorsed this position.[[121]](#footnote-121) As the strikers were unsupported by union funds and by mid-May a drift back to work was already evident, the Walworth Committee risked being left high and dry even before the government upped the stakes by arresting the shop stewards’ leaders.[[122]](#footnote-122)

These arrests were postponed until George V had completed a visit to Lancashire – a visit to whose impact Lloyd George later paid tribute - and the Cabinet agreed the king should meet leading trade unionists.[[123]](#footnote-123) The details of the arrests were finalized at a Downing Street conference that the Premier chaired, the Attorney-General waiving his supposedly quasi-independent role in order to implement the Cabinet’s wishes.[[124]](#footnote-124) Although the government took precautions to seem non-provocative, on 18 May it went ahead, exceptionally using the emergency powers in the Defence of the Realm Act. Only eight of the agreed ten names were taken into custody. None the less, the authorities had calculated correctly, and acted when the strike was losing impetus. The Walworth Committee had already decided to request a meeting with Addison in conjunction with the ASE Executive Council, and when the interview took place on 19 May, the Walworth men were deferential.[[125]](#footnote-125) They sought the opportunity to speak for the workshops; they did not challenge the ASE’s legitimacy, and after being heard they left. They seemed inexperienced, perhaps ill at ease in the metropolis. Once they had gone, the ASE Executive and Addison soon reached agreement. The ASE and the Walworth Committee would call for the stoppage to end. They were assured that strikers would not be victimized, but otherwise gained little.[[126]](#footnote-126) A follow-up meeting at Downing Street confirmed the text,[[127]](#footnote-127) and many of the mass meetings held over the weekend agreed to resume work. Admittedly some voted to stay out until the arrested men were released, and in the following week the stoppage even spread to new centres. Still, Addison could urge Lloyd George that with the SPO accepted, the Munitions of War Bill still before Parliament, and the shop stewards ‘hopelessly discredited’, it was best to release the prisoners without charge, and this was done.[[128]](#footnote-128) By 26 May the return to work was complete.[[129]](#footnote-129)

It seemed the strike had failed. Certainly Tweedale & Smalley had given way, and the SPO had been accepted only on conditions that protected engineers from conscription. But the Munitions of War Bill was not withdrawn, while rising prices and narrowing pay differentials remained unaddressed. Yet by December the balance sheet had altered. Lloyd George’s instructions to the commissioners showed his resolve once the stoppage was over to get to the root of the unrest, and in considerable measure this he did.

One historian has discerned an ‘appeasement’ of the working class in the strike’s aftermath.[[130]](#footnote-130) The most dramatic illustration was the bread subsidy approved by the Cabinet in July, over indignant Treasury opposition. It would cost some £25 million (but rising to £40 million).[[131]](#footnote-131) The price of a quartern loaf fell from 11d to 9d, and the Cabinet minutes cited the commissioners, ‘who attributed much of the prevailing unrest directly to high food prices … For the vigorous prosecution of the war a contented working class was indispensable’.[[132]](#footnote-132) The measure supplemented the regular upward adjustments of engineering wages agreed at the beginning of 1917, and was followed by a 12.5 per cent bonus for time workers (which triggered demands from other groups for corresponding increases).[[133]](#footnote-133) Inflation accelerated in the second half of the war, but bread prices were held and workers’ living standards better protected.[[134]](#footnote-134) Whereas previously, moreover, the government had relied for propaganda on unofficial bodies and the press, it now did more itself to mobilize support. The idea came during the strike from the novelist John Buchan, Lloyd George’s Director of Information, and its fruition was the National War Aims Committee (NWAC), an all-party programme of lectures, meetings, and publications to support the military effort.[[135]](#footnote-135)

The authorities also addressed the strike’s precipitants. After May Addison continued negotiations with the ASE over the bill, insisting dilution must be extended though offering compromise on substance if the principle remained.[[136]](#footnote-136) The ASE put that principle to a ballot, which rejected it by 46,851:8,945.[[137]](#footnote-137) At this point Lloyd George moved Addison to a new Ministry of Reconstruction – the Premier having also decided during the strike that promises of a better post-war society must become more explicit.[[138]](#footnote-138) Winston Churchill, who replaced Addison, not only introduced the 12.5 per cent bonus but also scrapped the Munitions of War Bill and leaving certificates.[[139]](#footnote-139) The authorities accepted a smaller supply of labour for military production, although the armaments drive’s success may have facilitated this concession. They also accepted that the War Office would not get the men it wanted. During the 1917-18 winter the Cabinet reappraised the manpower situation and judged the priority was sustainability at home in what was still expected to be a long conflict. Food production, shipbuilding, and even timber felling took precedence over the army, and although the BEF was bigger in January 1918 than January 1917, its combatant numbers diminished.[[140]](#footnote-140) On the other hand, the SPO had been agreed with the ASE during the strike, and in Addison’s view it worked well for the rest of the war.[[141]](#footnote-141) It is true that in early 1918, when the government correctly foresaw a massive German offensive, it proposed to call up all skilled engineers aged 18-25. By this stage food shortages were more acute and many ASE shop stewards prepared for another strike, as well as demanding a compromise peace, but even prior to the offensive they lacked rank and file support. This was the more remarkable because in autumn 1917 the stewards had won a recognition agreement from the engineering employers. But now the danger of defeat seemed imminent, while suspicion of the ASE among the other unions continued to inhibit unity.[[142]](#footnote-142) In 1918 the days lost through industrial action exceeded those in 1917, but the disputes were smaller, primarily affecting services such as railways and the police.[[143]](#footnote-143)

It is time to recapitulate what May 1917 was and was not. It was a spontaneous movement, largely confined to the engineering and electrical industries (and to members of two unions). It was triggered by the Tweedale & Smalley dispute, which occurred, however, at a point of tension over the trade card scheme and the Munitions of War Bill. Long hours and deteriorating real wages, accompanied by rising food prices and suspected profiteering, made the ‘burning points’ harder to soothe. The strike was unofficial, condemned by the ASE leadership, denied support from union funds, and partly for this reason lacked sustainability. In many ways a “revolt of the craftsman” (as Murphy labelled the Hargreaves strike),[[144]](#footnote-144) it may have expressed gender as well as class tensions: women were excluded from ASE membership, and the Tweedale dispute arose because their role was expanded.[[145]](#footnote-145) The strike was not supported by the TUC (to which the ASE was not affiliated),[[146]](#footnote-146) or the Labour Party leadership, Henderson and John Hodge (the Minister of Labour) backing the ASE officials and prioritizing war production (Henderson had lost a son on the Somme and had two more on active service).[[147]](#footnote-147) Geographically the movement was concentrated in Lancashire (though was weaker on Merseyside), South (but not West) Yorkshire, and Coventry (but not Birmingham), as well as South-East London.[[148]](#footnote-148) It was not intended to overturn capitalism, nor was it directed primarily against the bosses. Certainly the shop stewards and the ASE Executive used class-conscious language, and they suspected the employers of exploiting workers’ patriotism. Yet the government was almost as critical of Tweedales as were the unions, and both the newly founded Federation of British Industries and the Engineering Employers’ Federation – the latter represented by their redoubtable chief executive, Allan Smith – protested to the Munitions Ministry about being side-lined in a dispute that vitally affected their interests.[[149]](#footnote-149) After the strike a standing national Whitley Council representing employers and workers was never established in the engineering industry, as neither side favoured it.[[150]](#footnote-150) In the first instance the strike was not over wages or working conditions, but a protest against the government’s labour policy. To this extent it was political, but it aimed neither to overthrow neither the constitutional and social order nor to change the government. Although many shop stewards were socialists, the ASE did not demand the engineering industry’s nationalization. References in the contemporary texts to Russia are surprisingly few, and the Leeds convention of socialists and pacifists, held in June, came after the strike had ended. The convention indeed called for soviets in Britain, but none were formed: public halls were denied to them and local authorities banned them, but much of the labour movement itself proved unreceptive. [[151]](#footnote-151) Nor, although the Petrograd Soviet (which had repudiated a war for annexations and indemnities) called on 2 May for an international gathering of socialist parties, did the Stockholm conference proposal feature in the engineers’ demands.

International comparisons underline the strike’s particularities. It was strongest in the provinces, and although commanding substantial support in the capital it could not provoke a general strike there as Russian workers had in theirs. In Russia’s February Revolution, events in Petrograd – the country’s biggest industrial centre as well as seat of government – held centre stage.[[152]](#footnote-153) What began as an International Women’s Day protest over bread prices spread from female to male employees and brought out most of Petrograd’s textile, metalworking, and armaments plants, whose workers crowded into the city centre to demand political change. Factory and district committees, increasingly directed by organisers from the socialist parties, became the driving force. Government repression, using police and Cossacks and then a mutinous city garrison, helped turned protest into revolution, but the Petrograd workers had a vibrant tradition of political strikes and insurrection that outside Ireland the British largely lacked.[[153]](#footnote-154)

Germany and France might seem closer comparators. Unionization among German workers was on a similar scale to Britain, and the socialist unions worked closely with the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* - SPD). In 1914 both supported the war effort. Germany, however, had conscription from the start, and only slowly and grudgingly did the army release skilled workers. Military influence on labour policy was much stronger than in Britain, both nationally (the War Ministry being headed by military men) and locally (the Deputy Commanding Generals in each district wielding decree powers). The ‘Patriotic Auxiliary Service Law’, passed in 1916, extended official recognition to the unions but compelled workers into war production.[[154]](#footnote-155) By now a challenge to the union leadership had developed, centred on shop stewards representing the Berlin metalworkers (especially the turners), and strikes became the principal vehicle of opposition. Thus Germany’s strike wave of April 1917 was comparable in numbers to Britain’s in May, but its demands were more radical. In Berlin the strikers called for better food supplies; in Leipzig they also wanted franchise reform and a non-annexationist peace, in common with the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which had separated from the SPD. [[155]](#footnote-156) In January 1918 a national stoppage brought out hundreds of thousands of workers for wholly political objectives – a compromise peace and internal democratization. The authorities refused concessions, drafting over 50,000 strikers into the army and jailing the leaders. None the less, the episode foreshadowed the revolutionary workers’ councils of November 1918.[[156]](#footnote-157)

France’s May-June 1917 strikes were smaller, and although the participants’ banners denounced the war, their prime concerns were wages and hours. They coincided, however, with mutinies in the army, and a nadir in civilian morale.[[157]](#footnote-158) The stoppage began among women textile workers before spreading to other industries (including metalworking), but those involved remained predominantly female.[[158]](#footnote-159) Like Britain and Germany, France had expanded its female workforce during the war, and working conditions for both genders were worse than across the Channel.[[159]](#footnote-160) The army drafted even more of the country’s menfolk than in Germany, and relinquished some to manufacturing only under continuing military discipline. For them to join strike action risked draconian penalties.[[160]](#footnote-161) None the less, military influence on labour policy was smaller than across the Rhine: press coverage of the 1917 stoppage was permitted, and the strikers’ demands were largely met. Even after Georges Clemenceau (who had a strike-breaking reputation) became Premier, the French authorities generally conceded wage claims.[[161]](#footnote-162) As in Germany, a ‘minority’ tendency within the labour movement called for a compromise peace, the metalworkers’ federation being prominent within it. However, the French Socialist Party (*Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière* – SFIO) maintained a fragile unity, and when in May 1918 workers in Paris and central France attempted a political stoppage, the government broke the movement by blanket censorship, mass arrests, and calling up participants. France was less polarized than Germany, though more than Britain.[[162]](#footnote-163)

Britain therefore had experiences in common with its neighbours, but the political consequences proved less extreme. Employers’ representatives played little part, repression was milder, and government policy assisted the union moderates who eschewed overtly political demands and co-operated with the war effort. Part of the responsibility lay with Lloyd George, who, even while the unrest commissioners were investigating, approved a massive British offensive in Flanders. The Premier acknowledged that in such testing circumstances industrial harmony was vital, as did most of his Unionist colleagues. By shifting leftwards during 1917, moreover, the Labour Party avoided a schism like the SPD’s while remaining more pro-war than the SFIO.[[163]](#footnote-164) One thread through this labyrinth was a resilient sense of national community, evident not only among leaders such as Brownlie and Henderson but often also in the rank and file. The engineers at Marconi in Chelmsford, for example, though torn between loyalty to comrades and to country, decided to stay at work.[[164]](#footnote-165) The May 1917 strike was not a pacifist enterprise (and the unrest commissioners stressed the men’s patriotism),[[165]](#footnote-166) though it was certainly a protest against the burdens and injustices that war had imposed. To a large extent the authorities acknowledged this distinction. According to the Ministry of Labour, the engineering strike had

obviously … not arisen out of any desire to stop the war … On the one hand [the men] were reluctant to hold up the war to the detriment of their relatives in the trenches. On the other hand, it seemed important to them, in their own interests, to keep their trade privileges intact. One has an impression, in short, of unrest paralysed by patriotism – or, it may be, of patriotism paralysed by unrest.’[[166]](#footnote-167)

Two decades later, when France and Britain began rearmament against Hitler, the Paris government backed French business in breaking a nationwide stoppage in 1938 and imposing extended working hours. By 1940 many French leaders feared the workforce was alienated and the prospects in another prolonged military conflict were jeopardized.[[167]](#footnote-168) In Britain, the ASE’s successor, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) resisted dilution, citing the First World War experience as a primary rationale.[[168]](#footnote-169) None the less, in August 1939 it yielded, and in 1940 it negotiated an enduring wage adjustment agreement with the employers. [[169]](#footnote-170) Lessons had been learned from the 1917 unrest, which many British leaders – not least Churchill himself – remembered. at ran yetBeengineering It proved more influential and successful than its participants may have known.

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5. Derby to Haig, 27 May 1917, TNA, WO 256/18. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Minutes of meeting, 10 May 1917, p.10, TNA, MUN 5/20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Milner to Lloyd George, 26 May 1917, Parliamentary Archives, London (henceforward PA), Lloyd George MSS, F/38/2/5; Lloyd George, *War Memoirs,* Vol. II, p 1141. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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12. Barnes to Lloyd George, 17 July 1917, TNA, LAB 2/254. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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15. *HMM*, Vol. VI, I. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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