After the General Strike

The Miners' Leader in Cornwall

A. J. Cook

Arthur Cook stayed with Bertrand and Dora Russell at Carn Voel during his brief visit in Cornwall. 'A most lovable man, simple, modest, humane, and full of fun ... I am heart and soul with him,' wrote Russell.

From *The Cornishman and Cornish Telegraph*, Wednesday, June 16, 1926.

"BALDWIN, YOU'RE A LIAR!"

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MR. A.J. COOK'S STATEMENT AT PENZANCE

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CRITICISM OF THE "CORNISHMAN"

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"The sense of fair play is lost to a great extent to some men – some editors – who are prepared to slang men before they have heard or seen them, and are prepared to judge them. Thank God, there is a law under which even the biggest criminal is entitled to some kind of trial. (Applause). To-night I am willing for you to try me.

A man who thinks he knows all, knows naught. (Hear, hear). That is why you have got such wonderful editorial articles in Cornwall – (loud applause) – and some in London too.

Cornwall is only trying, but not quite successfully, to emulate the "Daily Wail." (Laughter).

I gather that almost everybody here has come with the sincere intention of gaining some first hand knowledge of the present situation. At least, I can claim to supply a great deal of knowledge in regard to the coal mining situation.

Some of you have read perhaps in many of the papers what a wild, ferocious man I am, and have come here to get your curiosity satisfied. I have a dual capacity to serve. The first is to thank the men who gave an example to the world of what real self-sacrifice means, and who answered and proved the call "Am I my brother's keeper?" for nine days in this country such as no other country yet outside Russia has given an example of. (Applause). Again as one of the miners' spokesman – one [of] them, and one proud to be their mouthpiece – I want to say that no leader ever had more courageous body of men to lead. (Applause). In the second place, I want to raise some money to help the miners' wives and families.

The dope of our Press is failing to have effect, otherwise the front rows would not have been occupied. If you believe what you read in the Press, you would never have got so near to me as some of my friends are – (laughter) – because of the explosive material that I carry about my person. – (Renewed laughter).

THE "CORNISHMAN" CRITICISED

Here Mr. Cook held up a copy of the "Cornishman," and continued: This paper – (life would not be very cheerful without a little comedy) – this one of the local rags in which I am provided with a little spice. Spice is good for health's sake. And so I am told one thing I am a little bit doubtful about. This paper is called the "Cornishman." I say to you Cornishmen if you will live up to your reputation from now on, I shall be proud of you, and everybody else will. Cornishmen have declared their independence, and some time later you will begin to realise that later on this paper will not be even good for toilet paper. That is when you think things out. I am sure the editor will be glad of the advertisement. (Laughter). I could not come last Sunday, so I sent my secretary, so that the local people should not be told they only billed men to get people here. I would break my neck (speaking as we do speak sometimes) to get to a meeting, in a place like Cornwall. You are situated geographically so far away. Some people in London think you do not count; perhaps some of you think you don't count. You do, and will. But I could not come. Otherwise I should have been here. I have cancelled meetings at home that were booked 12 months ago in order that I might be here, and I want to say it is because I realise that Cornishmen and women should have a chance to hear from a man who is abused, and misrepresented perhaps more than any one else, and hear from me my case, because it is the miners' case I am advocating. I am advocating a case that I believe in as well as the men's case itself.

So I want you with me to resent this. He says: "A few days ago General A. J. Cook" – My pride has been wounded a wee bit, because when a small little rag like the "Cornishman and the Cornish Telegraph," takes away the

title and honour bestowed upon me by the great "Daily Wail" – because I have been crowned an "Emperor" a long time ago – to descend to a mere common General from an Emperor is not very complimentary.

I cannot go into all the things said about me – mind you by a man who has never seen me or heard me, but who is so fair that he claims to right to decide – before hearing and seeing a man – what he stand for, what he is like, and claims to tell the Cornish people who want a chance to come and hear me, what a terrible blackguard I am.

He begins by telling you to beware of cranks and demagogues. I hope you will. He is one. (Laughter and applause, and "Don't buy his paper!")

This is what he says:

> A few days ago, General A. J. Cook, Coal Miners' Secretary, was to have addressed his admirers and others at Penzance. It seems off that this human obstacle to British industry should have had the ignorance or the effrontery to come to the remote corner of England as a vendor of propaganda – a corner which stands to lose much and gain nothing by every movement and object of Mr. Cook and his colleagues.

Do you in Cornwall want to hear the truth? ("Yes!") Isn't it time we started distributing the truth? ("No!" and "Yes!) I have been told that truth will make men free. I was taught that in the Sunday-school. I believed it and got locked up twice for it.

Now, I don't quarrel with anybody. I hate nobody. Life's too short to develop hate. We need one another too much to develop hate for one another. We are too inter-dependent. We are so much alike, we are so really human. It is not because I hate; it is because I feel men and women are being traded upon, that their ignorance is being exploited, that men want to keep you ignorant, want to stop you if they can from hearing the truth, while hundred of papers are disseminating lies, because the written word is more important than the spoken word. When you read in the papers of "Public opinion against the miners. The miners are going back to work. Smith and Cook do not represent their views," public opinion is the opinion of an editor, who is paid ten times, yea twenty times more in one week to use the pen to write filth against the finest men that every Britain had. (Applause).

They may use the pen. One miner is worth forty editors in this country – (applause) – the man who takes his like in his hand, who goes down the pit, and uses his brawn to hew coal from the bowels of the earth, to provide light, heat, motion and the driving force of this country – one of them is worth more to Britain – I say it and repeat it – than 20 that use the pen to abuse him.

This is the 42nd day of the great struggle – of the lock-out. Coal is as necessary to the economic life of the nation as wheat is to human life. True we live in a more or less oil age, but coal is not played out; it has never been scientifically played in. I represent 1,00,000 miners – 5,000,000 human souls – who to-night are watching my movement, who to-night are placing their trust is Herbert Smith and Cook. It is not an easy task; it is not a light load to bear. My colleague and I have to carry a great responsibility when we are confronted with dirty mis-representations. In fighting for the miners I am fighting for myself, and the quicker the struggle is over the sooner my wife will get her housekeeping money."

The speaker referred to the days when Keir Hardie and a few followers led the way for the formation of the Independent Labour Party and for over twenty years the miners had been pointing out that the industry that made Britain the workshop of the world was coal. He was thrown out of the church twenty-one years ago because he joined the Independent Labour Party movement.

"BALDWIN, YOU'RE A LIAR."

The 1st of May, 1926, was the greatest day in the history of this country. It rang out the old and rang in the new. It was the first time in the history of this country that we stood together.

I have been to the Land's End to-day, and from the Land's End to John O'Groats, the railwaymen, the clerks and the dockers all stood four square. Not only that. I go further and say, the fight was for them as well. They know now if we go down they are beaten. If the minders are beaten you go down, too. (Hear, hear).

You say "Trust Baldwin." Those of you who doubt my comrade's statement **(evidently a reference to a remark made earlier in the meeting by Mrs. Russell)** – listen.

On the 30th April when, till 2 o'clock nearly on Saturday morning, my colleagues and myself tried to secure a settlement before the men were all locked out, Baldwin became the coal-owners' advocate, and for the first time the miners' leaders had put before them terms by the British Prime Minister. What we they? Ten per cent reduction and longer hours, and he said: "These are the terms." We said to him: "Sir, since when has the nation paid you to be the coal owners' advocate? You are the Prime Minister of the nation, the chief officer of the Crown. You dare not take the side of the owners, but the side of the nation." Yet he handed to me, the secretary of the organisation, a letter with the coal owners' terms upon which the men could resume work. We said, every Labour leader said, Jimmy Thomas said, "Those terms are such that they cannot even be discussed."

There were no other terms. The lock-out came. Those are the terms in

every proposal put before us till two days after the strike was called off.

Yet I have in my hand the message sent over a wireless (the Nationalised Wireless), and he made this statement: Baldwin, honest Baldwin, Christian Baldwin, your Baldwin, that preached peace – on Friday, April 20, acting as the coal owners' advocate for longer hours and lower wages, for miners, said those things.

On May 8th, he said: "I wish to make it as clear as I can that the Government is not fighting to lower the standard of living of the miners or of any other section of the workers. That suggestion is being spread about, but it is not true. I do not believe that any honest person could doubt that my whole desire is to maintain the standard of living of every worker."

That is the statement broadcast on May 8th. When did Baldwin defend us?

When on the last Thursday in June last year, I myself met Baldwin, I said to him, when he came again as the coal owners' advocate for that pay:

"Mr. Prime Minister, do you suggest, do you propose that the only remedy you have for the coal problem is to reduce the wages of men who are now 40 per cent. Below the 1914 standard of living? Is this all?"

And his reply – he dare not deny it – I challenge denial to-night – these were his words: "Mr. Cook, not only must the wages of the miners be reduced, but the wages of all other workers must be reduced if Britain is to regain prosperity." ("Shame!")

These were the words of Baldwin, who lies, and he knew he lied.

The strike was called off on 12th May. On the 14th May my colleagues and I met at 10, Downing-street, on his invitation. He said: "I want to meet you; it is time to settle this matter." I said: "Yes; long ago we ought to have settled it. Reason is better than force."

This man who made this statement on 8th May, on 14th May said: "I will send you proposals. Still wages must be reduced." He asked us on the 13th to again consider longer hours, because he said it would not mean so big a reduction. We had his proposals on the 15th.What were they? "Ten per cent immediate reduction for three weeks and then, after three weeks' reduction in every district, district by district, according to the economic capacity of the pits."

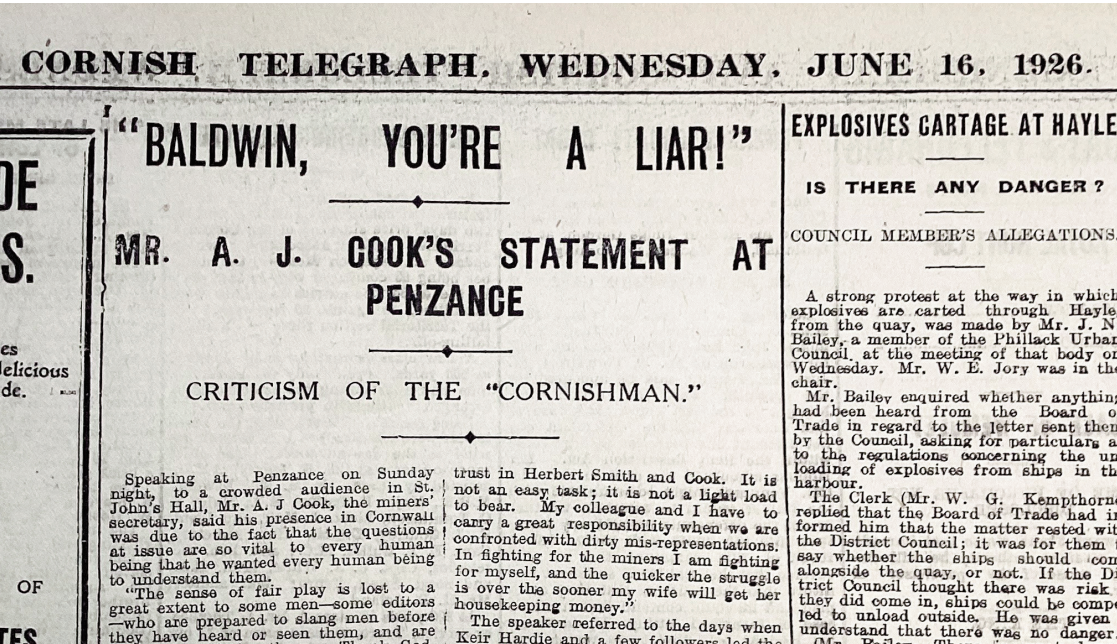
"Baldwin, you are a liar," **shouted Mr. Cook.**

On Tuesday, when you speak in the House of Commons, either live up to this statement or declare to the world you are a liar!

On Tuesday they are going to speak. If Baldwin believes the nation is out to starve the miner, let me remind him that it will be the dearest victory any Government has every won.

Now, let him test the nation, if he believes the nation is behind him. Let him next Tuesday declare a dissolution in the House. (Hear, hear). Let him

appeal to the country on the issue. Let us have an election as quickly as possible – within three days, and close up every pub. while the voting is on. (Loud cheers). Let him try it, and I am sure he will find Hammersmith, North East Ham and others repeated. (Cheers).



CORNISH TELEGRAPH. WEDNESDAY. JUNE 16. 1926.

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EXPLOSIVES CARTAGE AT HAYLE

IS THERE ANY DANGER?

COUNCIL MEMBER'S ALLEGATIONS

A strong protest at the way in which explosives are carted through Hayle from the quay, was made by Mr. J. N Bailey, a member of the Phillack Urban Council, at the meeting of that body on Wednesday. Mr. W. E. Jory was in the chair.

Mr. Bailey enquired whether anything had been heard from the Board o Trade in regard to the letter sent them by the Council, asking for particulars a to the regulations concerning the un loading of explosives from ships in th harbour.

The Clerk (Mr. W. G. Kempthorne replied that the Board of Trade had in formed him that the matter rested wit the District Council; it was for them say whether the ships should com alongside the quay, or not. If the Di trict Council thought there was risk they did come in, ships could be compe led to unload outside. He was given understand that there was no danger.

(Mr. Bailey: There is great danger The "Florence Cook" had fifteen tons detonators aboard, and lay alongside t quay for weeks; she was there through the strike.—Mr. Bailey assert that in no other town in Cornwall w the explosives carted through the stre as they were in Hayle. "If anyth happened, where should we be? shall wait until an accident occurs, then we shall act. It is time someth was done." He thought the explosi

It is thanks to the Morrab Libary, Penzance, that the June 16, 1926 copy of The Cornishman and Cornish Telegraph*, which reported A. J. Cook's Penzance speech, is physically preserved. This remarkable library and archive holds an extensive collection of books and is home to valuable archival holdings with a particular focus on Cornish history. See* morrablibrary.org.uk