



The National Archives

The General Strike



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An armoured car with twin turrets heads up a convoy of lorries travelling along a city street crowded with onlookers during the General Strike. Originally designed for battlefield use, armoured vehicles were brought in to protect the delivery of food and other essential supplies.

This powerful image has a lot to tell us about Britain in May 1926. To gain the most from this source, we first have to ask the right questions. Only then can we discover what the picture can reveal.

1. Look at the vehicle in front:

- What is it usually used for?
- Is it on a battlefield?
- Why is it in the streets?

2. Who are the men with their heads sticking out from the top of the vehicle?

- What is their role?
- Who has ordered them to be here?

3. What is in the lorry?

4. What does this image suggest about the state of Britain in 1926?

How can we answer these questions? We could speculate and form plausible suggestions, but one sure way to answer these questions is to study primary historical sources. The papers of the British government - the Cabinet Papers - are records that help answer our questions.

Follows an extract from the Cabinet papers:

The most serious need of the moment, however, was protection, in view of the intimidation already carried out and threatened. The Trades Union Council had now prohibited the movement of flour, and the National Union of Railway men had ordered permits for the movement of foodstuffs to be cancelled. This meant that stronger measures would be taken in the direction of picketing the docks and other food supplies.

After considerable discussion, the Cabinet agreed –

(a) *That the provision of further protection was the first essential in the present situation, and that, with a view to any possible developments, the forces available for this purpose should be expanded on a considerable scale:*

[Sections b to e deleted]

(f) *That the Secretary of State for War should have authority to issue instructions to the General Officers Commanding permitting the use of "tear" gas in any case where a situation became so serious as to involve the alternative between that course and the use of firearms:*

(g) *To take note and approve the action of the Secretary of State for War in making available as many armoured cars as possible:*

Extract ends.

Cabinet minutes 7 May 1926. CAB 23/52 C 25 (26) 1