

EPISODE 1: The Dunnes Stores Strike

Andrew Muir 0:00

Hi, I'm Andrew Muir, creative director at Ardent Theatre. If you enjoyed the show, please share, subscribe and leave us a five star review. Thanks for listening.

What would you do to defend your rights? Would you give up your job, your home? What about somebody else's rights? Would you sacrifice years of your life for people you've never met who live on the other side of the world? This is Mary Manning.

Mary Manning 0:25

They used to throw things at the windows. It was like teabags and tomatoes and stuff and cups of tea down top of us.

Andrew Muir 0:30

And this is Vonnie Monroe.

Vonnie Monroe 0:32

As time has gone on, it was getting more difficult because I couldn't pay my mortgage and I had to go to my boss, which provider, and just ask them for some leniency.

Andrew Muir 0:40

Back in the 1980s, both Mary and Vonnie worked at Dunnes, a well-known Irish department store, and in 1984 they went on strike to defend their right not to sell goods from apartheid South Africa. What began as a local dispute would become an epic struggle over a fundamental human right equality before the law. Regardless of the colour of your skin, their journey would ultimately see them push Ireland to become the first Western nation to ban apartheid imports. But first, they'd be assaulted by colleagues condemned by the church and even branded terrorists. I'm Andrew Muir and this is activism In the Eighties, a podcast series in which we will be charting the protests, activism and culture wars that changed millions of lives in Britain, Ireland and beyond. Starting in Dublin in 1984,

Here's Mary Manning.

Mary Manning 1:36

I was working in Dunnes obviously at the time my T-force had been 910 days before the strike actually started. Dunnes was a very strange place to work for. Nearly all the managers would have been young male and a lot of the people

who work there were young women. So there was that kind of a structure. There were came from the top and filter down the management. They were bullies really in the end. But I had been working for about a year and a half, two years there, maybe about a year and a half at that stage.

Andrew Muir 2:03
How old were you?

Mary Manning 2:03
I just turned 21.

Andrew Muir 2:04
Just turned 21.

Mary Manning 2:06
Literally on the eight July 21st birthday. So I was into just going out and Friday, Thursday, Friday evening.

Andrew Muir 2:13
And what kind of a shop is Dunnes.

Mary Manning 2:15
It's a department store, so they do have a clothing section, but we were working in the grocery parts. That's where the strike actually started. In the grocery section. They are still one of the biggest companies in Ireland. They're really well known then Don't at the time would have been well known all over and we had had previously in the previous weeks before the strike ever started. We had tried to get meetings with the management because of the way we were treated and there like I couldn't sit and calm, funny, funny. I had to call out Miss Monroe or I had to call it like you couldn't call it by the first night if you wanted to go to the bathroom. You can imagine there was about eight or nine tills across one of the entrances. You told whoever was the manager that was on that day you needed to go to the bathroom. But if eight of those other people on the tills wanted to go before you, you went in a rota, so you had to wait until someone came. Relief. This column relieved the first person they went up to the bathroom. Three flights of stairs came back down. That relief come off, went on to the second one. If you were 3 minutes late, you were brought up to the office. If your tills were all under by I think was on the pounds at the time. So there was a lot of things, issues that we wanted to have meetings about with the management, and they just wouldn't they just refused to even talk to us. So that was the kind of atmosphere that Dawn right had at the time.

Andrew Muir 3:28

Okay. 1984 and Dublin, I mean now 2023, Dublin Stags Hens, everyone is party city. Vonnie What was Dublin like in 1984?

Vonnie Monroe 3:39

It wasn't as busy as it is now. We didn't have stags and hens at that time. You'd have your tourism, which was always healthy and in Ireland. But it was pretty mundane. I was 27 years of age. I had a three year old daughter and I was separated and for me my life was just looking after my daughter. I walked in the office in Don's I had been working in Don's for at that point probably almost ten years, but the same management crew were there. It wasn't any different. Working in the office, you still had the same sort of hierarchy looking down and you really.

Andrew Muir 4:15

Did you know each other before?

Vonnie Monroe 4:17

There was a big crew people there, but we didn't socialise at that time. We were colleagues and work as such. I never socialise much because I had to go home to Leah, my daughter. So for me in 84, living in Dublin was just survival really. I was literally only separate at the time and I was getting on my feet. I had a home and I was keeping that going as well. I was paying a mortgage, but overall, Dublin wasn't a bad place to live.

Andrew Muir 4:43

Can we move on to that moment where you Mary said, No, I'm not going to handle this. This product, which was the beginning, it was a grapefruit, is that correct?

Mary Manning 4:54

Two grapefruit.

Andrew Muir 4:55

Two grapefruit. Yeah. Tell us about that moment.

Mary Manning 4:58

I mean, the background of the strike, the union policy came from a union. They had taken a vote at the AGM on Easter of that year to boycott South African goods. So this letter went around. There was I data at the time, it's now Monday trade union and Karen Guerin, who was the shop steward, came in, read it out. We didn't even know what was South African. We didn't know what apartheid was. None of us knew. But because of what was happening in the

store before this, we had weeks and weeks of them just not wanting to meet with us. People been bullied all the time. So when this policy came in, we thought we were just going to say no, like it was more to get against the management. And actually what the management then did was they put us on tills. So anybody who said that they were going to refuse to handle the South African goods was put on a table with management standing behind us.

Andrew Muir 5:45

Where they would have.

Mary Manning 5:46

To say it was only a matter of time before someone actually. So I saw this woman coming towards me, she to buy a fruit basket and I was can't go away. She came up to me and I just said to her, Look, I'm sorry, it's union policy. And if she'd question me anymore about apartheid, what was happening South Africa, I wouldn't have been able to tell her. And she was fine. I said, okay, that's fine. So she went off and then the manager who sat behind me came up and told me to close my register and I was brought up to the office. Karen, as a shop steward, was brought up, but she wasn't allowed to come into the office with me. So anyway, I just said, no, it wasn't how to handle the goods. And they said, Well, we know our option, but to suspend you.

Andrew Muir 6:28

And then it began.

Mary Manning 6:29

Then it began.

Andrew Muir 6:30

Mary, how did you know? Was there like a list by your till? Something that said, this is from South Africa.

Mary Manning 6:35

This is what we had done once we got the policy and we went around the store to find it because it was a grocery store, it was outspent by the fresh fruit and veg. And then there was tins of Diamante. They were said African as well. So they we literally went around for a couple days beforehand finding out what is South African. I knew straight away when they were when she was coming up that these are two outspends. I can't take these.

Andrew Muir 6:55

It's a massive moment for you. As you said, you must have been terrified. Nervous, a mix of all sorts, knowing that you were probably going to say no to this particular purchase.

Mary Manning 7:06

Yeah.

Andrew Muir 7:07

That is incredibly strong.

Mary Manning 7:10

I mean, I didn't.

Andrew Muir 7:11

21 years of age. Yeah.

Mary Manning 7:12

Yeah. I didn't suppose I didn't think about the consequences like none of us did. We just said no, we're not one of them. And that's it.

Andrew Muir 7:19

Bonnie. How, how did it trickle down? What, how did that then begin?

Vonnie Monroe 7:23

Well, as Mary said, we had a conversation about the product, even though myself and Teresa were in the office, we had no knowledge of what was going on downstairs because we were closed off in the office, three flights of stairs in a corridor away from everybody. So I was coming up to break time when we came out and they said Mary's been suspended. And we said, Right, okay, So we've had this conversation. So obviously we're going to go out in sympathy with her, you know.

Andrew Muir 7:46

So very quickly, you made that decision.

Vonnie Monroe 7:48

Well, the decision kind of was made because when the letter came about, the girls on the floor had had that discussion as well. And we were part of that discussion.

Mary Manning 7:56

And the management had told us a couple of days beforehand that if it continued to be serious consequences, they didn't say what the serious

consequences were going to be. So we knew it was going to come to a head at some stage.

Vonnie Monroe 8:06

Yeah.

Mary Manning 8:07

We didn't know when or who, but we knew it was going to come to a head.

Andrew Muir 8:10

And the group started to form, it started to grow, people started to talk and it was like, well, we.

Vonnie Monroe 8:15

At that time we literally Theresa and I left the office. We said to the guy, the manager, Mary has been suspended. She's a union colleague. We're going into sympathy with her. We all just piled together and walked out. We had to go over to the union.

Mary Manning 8:26

Then there was probably about 220, maybe a little bit over 20 union members in the store at the time. But they did not come out. No. And a couple of come out and went back in the back the next day. So it was left then to the hard core. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 8:40

And what was the sort of atmosphere amongst you? I mean, you just literally walked away from the store, your job, you're off, went.

Vonnie Monroe 8:46

Away and we just like it's happened. Okay, so we've had this letter come in and now actually something is happening now. So we have to go over and tell the union we've carried out their instruction and where do we take it from there?

Mary Manning 8:58

Also, it was the 19th of July. It was a beautiful, sunny, hot day. And we were, I think a great couple of days of work will stand up most of the.

Vonnie Monroe 9:07

Two weeks we get out.

Mary Manning 9:08

Of there. Yeah, we didn't even think two weeks. I don't think.

Vonnie Monroe 9:11

Yeah.

Mary Manning 9:11

That's literally what was good.

Andrew Muir 9:13

You ever been on strike before?

Vonnie Monroe 9:14

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But like that, as Mary said, two or three days. Yeah. You know, And then we'd have talks and then that could be trashed.

Andrew Muir 9:21

Right. So you assume the same for this. Yeah.

Mary Manning 9:23

Didn't even read.

Vonnie Monroe 9:24

We weren't looking for money. We weren't looking for new uniform. It was a discussion to be had as far as we were concerned around the sale of this product, which should have really been put back in the management's basket, pardon the pun. And they themselves should have taken it to their board and spoken about it. But they after the letter, they had obviously got a copy of the letter. They had their conversations. Yeah. As Mary said, the management said yeah, it'll be consequences. But what they said.

Mary Manning 9:51

Well that was kind of dunnes their thing was you do she told her else.

Vonnie Monroe 9:54

Yeah.

Mary Manning 9:54

The union represented workers in rotas stores in Marks and Spencers in iron, it's in other places around Dublin and they all allowed the staff to refuse to handle, to sell different goods. So it was just done. That said, do what you're told.

Andrew Muir 10:08

So you meet your union representative and you tell Brendan that it's happened.

Vonnie Monroe 10:13
The trigger has been pulled.

Andrew Muir 10:14
The trigger has been pulled. A grapefruit is not going to be handled. We're out. Yeah. So you didn't step back in?

Mary Manning 10:20
No, that was.

Andrew Muir 10:20
That was it.

Mary Manning 10:21
We went out. I wouldn't say anything. Brendan then gave us placards. We got the placards. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 10:24
Yeah. How long was it before take me to Brendan before suddenly you're out and new placards?

Vonnie Monroe 10:29
We have to for the next day because we were out. We were. That we were. I was early, but we had them. But we. Our first full day the next day, full.

Mary Manning 10:36
Day of.

Vonnie Monroe 10:37
Being on strike as we were going to say, you know, it was that day.

Andrew Muir 10:40
Incredible. And then so did someone turn up first that following day it was all of you a group or were all.

Vonnie Monroe 10:46
There on time.

Mary Manning 10:46
9:00 in the morning, you.

Vonnie Monroe 10:47
Were the job after that?

Mary Manning 10:48
That was their job. That was your job. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 10:51
So that was it.

Mary Manning 10:51
9:00 to six or whatever it was. You go out with a placard, say on a Thursday and I am because they opened late and early, if the delivery people were coming in because there was a delivery entrance at the back of the store, they'd be in and out earlier. But what happened was some of the union members who are delivery men wouldn't pass the picket. So then what they did was they got like scabs. They actually got the guy who used to take the rubbish away. He then started to bring in goods in and out, go to the back entrance of the store. So we started to realise this and then we start to pick on the backdoor. Now granted there was only nine of us, so there's three entrances. There was a front entrance as a side entrance, and then was the back end, the back entrance. This were all one was because the police would be around there and no one could see it. It was a public walkway, but it was where Tommy was arrested from there, and it was where all the trouble happened happened. There.

Andrew Muir 11:45
Vonnie, you go out on strike, you don't get paid your wage, do you? It changes. It all changes. Mm. So what was that like for you?

Vonnie Monroe 11:54
You know. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 11:56
The single mum recently separated a three year old daughter.

Vonnie Monroe 11:59
Yeah. What was that? A mortgage. It was like that too. When? As the other girls were taking a break for two weeks, I can, you know, weather this for a couple of weeks and see how I go.

Andrew Muir 12:09
Right. Okay.

Vonnie Monroe 12:10

And as time has gone on, it was getting more difficult because I couldn't pay my mortgage and I had to go to my mortgage provider and just ask them for some leniency, you know, and I'd pay them some money, not my full mortgage, because I didn't have it to pay. We've got 21, 20.

Mary Manning 12:25

£1 an issue. We got a rise to £23.

Vonnie Monroe 12:28

£21, £21. Yeah, yeah.

Mary Manning 12:30

And I think the wages in John's at the time they went to bad guys double wages I think was about £80 or something. Me Yeah, it was.

Vonnie Monroe 12:37

Good money because we were in Dublin, the union was strong enough to always for when wage agreements were going. They were in there. We always got our rises, our increments. Yeah, we're always able to get them, you know.

Andrew Muir 12:48

So to start with, you're out and you think it's going to be for a couple of weeks. When did you start to think, Mary Actually, this might not be two weeks.

Mary Manning 12:57

It probably would have been a few months into it because initially the Irish anti-apartheid movement came down to the picket line and there was different people come down within the first couple of weeks, I'd say. But then after a while, things just went very quiet because I think what happened was we were a trade union strike. So that put some people off and then we had the church talking against us like the priests in Mass used to stand up and say, Go into dons these people are doing. Why do.

Andrew Muir 13:26

You think the church was.

Mary Manning 13:27

Think there's too many links between South Africa, the church and then Don Bent on had a huge influence over the church as well. So I think it was probably around the would have been probably October, November.

Andrew Muir 13:39

This is after July. So you've got about four or five months.

Mary Manning 13:41

Yeah, and it was freezing cold weather. Yeah. And no one was taking any interest like Brendan and the Union were trying to get the government of up saying like it's really a government issue and, but no one wants to get involved. It's too hard an issue to actually touch. We had people coming up to us on the picket line and telling us, you know, your heart and the black people of South Africa, you're taking their money out of their hands and this is the kind of things that we were getting on the picket line. And what changed for us was Nimrods Jackie come to the picket line.

Andrew Muir 14:09

Who was Nimrod?

Mary Manning 14:11

He was in exile in Ireland at the time. He was X ANC, he was a teacher, but he hadn't been back in South Africa for I can't remember how many years beforehand, but he couldn't go back. He was on a wanted list, so he was in exile here and it was Labour youth militancy that brought him to the picket line. And he just came every single day and he actually spoke to us and told us what was happening in South Africa and how black people weren't allowed to marry. They weren't allowed to own land, they had to have a passport all the time. I think it's something like 80% of the people are 90% people were black and these were being held by white people who owned all over and all the riches in the world and the land.

Andrew Muir 14:49

Vonnie, did you start to learn a lot more about.

Vonnie Monroe 14:52

Absolutely. You would not believe.

Andrew Muir 14:54

I know you said initially it was all about management and the dons wanting to go against it, but then suddenly it changes and you start to learn more about actually the initial absolutely anti-apartheid.

Vonnie Monroe 15:05

We didn't have a huge amount of knowledge. No, you know, we already knew where Africa was.

Andrew Muir 15:09

Yeah.

Mary Manning 15:10

Hey, it's Nelson Mandela.

Vonnie Monroe 15:11

Probably heard.

Andrew Muir 15:11

Yeah. Yeah.

Vonnie Monroe 15:12

What tournament? When was time was going on and we got to November. It was getting cold. And then we met this man and he was given testimony from living there. What kind of a life he had and his family have. And this was an educated man. He wasn't just somebody that had a story. He lived it. He tried to better his own family, tried to get them educated as well. For me, the minute he started to tell us about what went on, it just the penny kind of dropped me. So you mean because the color of your skin, it's just the color of your skin. This is happening. You you. I couldn't get my head around that. I used to go home and I would tell my mother about what went on, Nimrod telling us about that. And I said, Imagine if we were all black here now, Mom, what would we do? We'd never be able to have a house, we'd never be able to get educated, we'd never be able to hold down jobs. I had nine in a family and they were all working at this stage and all had good jobs, but that would never happen for us.

Andrew Muir 16:10

So did you start to feel very passionate now about South Africa?

Vonnie Monroe 16:13

That's what was about all of us. I think it happened for us. All it.

Mary Manning 16:17

Did was he changed it from being policy on a piece of paper that the union sent us.

Andrew Muir 16:21

Became real and human.

Mary Manning 16:23

We passionately.

Vonnie Monroe 16:23
Absolutely.

Mary Manning 16:24
Absolutely believe like an what.

Andrew Muir 16:26
Was he like? What kind of a kind of He was.

Mary Manning 16:27
Very quite soft like he was very soft, but he wasn't one of these people who came and told us, now this is what you have to do. And he just generally every day came along back to us for hours. And because we walked up and down.

Andrew Muir 16:39
Do you remember the day he first arrived?

Mary Manning 16:41
I think it was we went out on July 19th and I think he came down. Daphne was in two weeks. He was down and was there until the very end.

Andrew Muir 16:49
He had family still in South Africa?

Mary Manning 16:52
Yeah. Yeah. When we went to Nelson Mandela's funeral.

Vonnie Monroe 16:55
We paid a.

Mary Manning 16:56
Visit. She went to her mom's house. I met his daughter, two daughters, granddaughter and his son. So my son is just just.

Vonnie Monroe 17:02
It's just like looking at Nimrod.

Mary Manning 17:03
Yeah, it was Nimrod.

Andrew Muir 17:05
He was.

Mary Manning 17:05

His dad. And then he died. And I think was 2009.

Andrew Muir 17:08

He died as a load of you. You're all women with now. We have two of Tommy. You've got Tommy and you've got Brendan and you've got Nimrod. You've told us a little bit about Nimrod. Tell us a little bit about Brendan.

Mary Manning 17:20

Mary He was what I would call a trade union leader. It was the one that we went to.

Andrew Muir 17:26

Did you trust him implicitly?

Mary Manning 17:29

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I was lifelong friends with him. Absolutely. I like he just he was as passionate about South Africa as we were. Like we ended up in. And that's probably part of maybe why he was so passionate about it, because he was there from the first day and he literally just gave up his Saturdays, come down to the picket line and stand all day on the picket line. He actually got into trouble with the trade union over a few things that happened. Right. But he's the epitome of what a trade union leader should be, the person who you go to if you've got a problem in your job, should be the one person that you can trust and is going to say, I've got your back. And Brendan had our back.

Andrew Muir 18:05

But Tony, did you go to him?

Vonnie Monroe 18:07

Yeah, we were the trade union, the members of the trade union, that's who we union is and the likes of Brendan. They worked for us as far as we were concerned. When we went to them with a problem, we hoped that they would be able to solve our problem for us, that we did get to a point where the hierarchy were telling this time to go back to work now.

Andrew Muir 18:26

Well, yeah, there was that moment. Wasn't that the big unions saying go back to work?

Vonnie Monroe 18:30

Yeah, but Brendan never said that was never.

Andrew Muir 18:33

He didn't say that he.

Vonnie Monroe 18:34

Believed in us, that we were doing the right thing because he was as passionate about it as we were. Yeah, I'm talking about two years into this. Yeah, a lot had happened to a lot of people.

Andrew Muir 18:43

But the reason why that you were told to go back in was because they promised that there would be a there was going to be changes. Is that right?

Mary Manning 18:50

I think people were embarrassed by us. You've got the Irish anti-apartheid movement and they were very good and they did give us money. And certain members of the Irish anti-apartheid movement came down onto the picket line. But they had been doing this for years, had been doing, as we used to say, that she's my priorities. And then all of a sudden, here's these young workers in the middle Dublin.

Andrew Muir 19:09

They're making noise, making noise.

Mary Manning 19:11

And we were women and young women.

Vonnie Monroe 19:13

And tell me had they we'd all been with ten men there, there might have been a different story.

Mary Manning 19:18

They couldn't control us either as well. And they told us to go back to what they told me. But you'd made your point. It's time for you to go back to work.

Andrew Muir 19:29

And what about from the workers themselves? You must have had friends that didn't come out with you, did you? Well, that must have been really difficult. Was it?

Mary Manning 19:35

I had, like, literally, as I said to you, my t-force was nine days beforehand. Some of the people who were.

Andrew Muir 19:41
At that party, at the.

Mary Manning 19:42
Party walked by. And in the end, because the canteen was three flights, stairs up, they used to throw things at the windows. It was like teabags and tomatoes and stuff and cups of tea down top of us. And then that what they do is they walk in with their especially at Christmas, Christmas, remember? Of course. Yeah. Well I buy my bonus today and then they just call us names and stuff but you just we didn't care. Call them as many names back to me.

Vonnie Monroe 20:07
They were the same as Dunnes stores. Yeah, the management and downstairs. So the management walking by, you just ignored them anyway as well. So you just had to ignore those girls, as did overtime.

Andrew Muir 20:15
Did anyone else join you at all over time? That was it. Those are that initial number that stayed at that data.

Mary Manning 20:20
That went down 11, then that stayed at nine.

Andrew Muir 20:22
They stayed at nine. Yeah. And Vonnie, can you tell us a little bit about Tommy? Who was Tommy?

Vonnie Monroe 20:28
Tommy was a part time worker initially. I mean, I didn't work with Tommy. Mary worked for Tommy because he was on the floor, but Tommy decided he was going to walk out as well.

Mary Manning 20:37
No, Tommy, what happened was we were out in the picket line, and Tommy started his shift at 5:00, and he came in to start a shift and saw the picket and said, I'm not going in. And that was it. And I mean, in fairness, I don't know how Tommy ever ProPlus because he used to drive them. No. And I would have a close relationship with Tommy. Even now I still have a close relationship to you. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 20:57

Yeah. So how did you get through it in terms of those long days and those many, many hours? And was it on a rota? Would have you work it out.

Vonnie Monroe 21:06

You had to become a rota because you'd be you.

Andrew Muir 21:09

There through the night or do you.

Mary Manning 21:10

Know most times you finish out about six or when. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 21:13

When the shop was.

Mary Manning 21:14

Closed on a Thursday it was 99. And then if we knew a delivery was coming in, okay, sometimes you came in early just to catch deliveries to try and stop them. But what happened then after that was we started to get some support so people would come down to the picket line. Yeah. Give us a hand. Yeah. But then people wanted us to go and speak of things. Captain, I must have spent a good bit of time in England actually, as well going round.

Vonnie Monroe 21:36

And the miners strike was on around the same time.

Andrew Muir 21:38

Why did they want you to speak? It was what? To share your stories. Yeah, well, you're up to this.

Mary Manning 21:43

It was a trade. Unions would bring us to places. And at this stage, like the strike, a public was going on for five or six months. More maybe. And people kept bringing it over to places. But someone had to cover you?

Andrew Muir 21:55

Yes.

Mary Manning 21:55

Okay. The picket lines, right? It became a rota like this.

Andrew Muir 21:58

And did the store try and take advantage of you not being present and get stuff in and deliver stuff?

Mary Manning 22:04

And it was only one time I think, we ever stopped deliveries for a day. And wouldn't the day that we closed the shop, we only closed one time ever. Other than that, on the Saturday we always had a mass picket so people would come down and be like a couple of hundred people maybe on particular. Yeah, Monday to Friday you wouldn't even know we were there. Really how many people were going in and out of the shop and bustling around that like this? Maybe. Yeah, four of us in the front.

Vonnie Monroe 22:26

But generally there was a falloff in footfall because we were able to walk up and down before you couldn't walk up and down, especially if it was a sale period.

Andrew Muir 22:35

Because there was so many people on the paper. Yeah.

Vonnie Monroe 22:37

Yeah. There definitely was an impact.

Mary Manning 22:39

On certain days. Had bigger impacts than what happened to us. Because even non-Jews come up and say you're you're hurting the black people of South Africa. And Nimrod made us stronger about that kind of argument back with people that way. But the first time that people started to take was when Desmond Tutu asked me, carried himself over and he was going off to collect his Nobel Peace Prize. So here we had a black man, a man of the church, a South African, standing by us and telling us we were doing the right thing so that some people started to think, well, maybe it is.

Andrew Muir 23:09

Maybe this is serious. Yeah. You met him, Marianne. You met Desmond Tutu? Yeah.

Mary Manning 23:13

Yeah, we met him in London. He was actually in the airport. Karen myself at.

Andrew Muir 23:18

Heathrow.

Mary Manning 23:19

He was coming from South Africa and he was going over to collect his Nobel Peace Prize.

Vonnie Monroe 23:23

He sent us lovely messages.

Mary Manning 23:25

But I remember being walked into the room going in to meet him, and I remember thinking, How do you carry a bishop? I never met Bishop before. He just came over and gave us a big hug. So that was like it just Yeah, but that was definitely one of the first turning points in a while.

Andrew Muir 23:40

It must have been like a confirmation, if you like. Yeah, yeah. Legitimacy, but not for it.

Mary Manning 23:44

I mean, I suppose at that stage we knew what we were doing and why we were doing it.

Andrew Muir 23:48

But for others.

Mary Manning 23:48

For the.

Andrew Muir 23:49

Public and the church, because.

Mary Manning 23:50

It was very little coming out of South Africa at the time. I think there's a media ban at the time anyway, right? So people weren't learning from the news. Yeah. And we didn't have social media the way you have now, but because of who he was and because of the Nobel Peace Prize, people instantly knew about it. It was one of the bigger turning points in the strike.

Andrew Muir 24:13

Vonnie as time goes on, it must have been getting harder and harder and harder.

Vonnie Monroe 24:19

Mm. Mhm. Yeah. It certainly was.

Andrew Muir 24:21
With as you said.

Vonnie Monroe 24:22
My did mortgage the door to the home. Well that when I had to surrender the home.

Andrew Muir 24:27
Brand you have an opportunity to save it.

Vonnie Monroe 24:30
Well Brendan came at me and we thought that that's what we would do. Could I get an extension, pay what I can just to keep a roof over our head? The strikes are going to last forever. They didn't give it, so the home was taken at me and they gave me a council flat down in the same area with one bedroom. But I wasn't company. Were they a crying or. I was sad for a short while. But, you know, I had to focus on why was I doing this, why was I let my home go? Because I was doing it because of the horrendous life that children my daughter's age were having in South Africa and adults like myself.

Andrew Muir 25:10
In South.

Vonnie Monroe 25:11
Africa, purely because, as I said, I couldn't get over this thing of the color of your skin, just purely.

Andrew Muir 25:16
Did you get a lot of hassle from other family members? Did they understand this decision?

Vonnie Monroe 25:23
They actually just didn't talk about it because if I talked about it to them, they had to realise what was going on and they had to be more supportive than what they were. But my mother was very supportive, very, very supportive. She's told me to stop paying the mortgage. You're not going anywhere. Just keep the money for yourself. They're going to take it from you. I've seen things happen, people, she said. And in the end, the banks always.

Andrew Muir 25:44
When was that a moment, Mary, where you thought, I can't do this anymore?

Mary Manning 25:51

I think over the time of the strike, everybody got a period of time where they were like down. So we'd rally around each other so you'd know that someone was looking, that they weren't very happy or they were upset about something. And we'd all rally around. And I think because it was such a small group of people, that was a benefit for us in the end, because we were so close, became so close. It was just a really tight knit bond. We knew what you were thinking and we knew if someone was down it just take them off for a cup of tea. I wouldn't say there was any time where I actually thought I'm going to go back because I never thought that. I actually thought at one stage that it would end, that we'd all just have to walk away. There was no end in sight. There was no one that wanted to do anything for us. Like it really was bleak and it was hot, cold weather and we were getting £23 a month. But people started to give us some support and then again it was Bishop Tutu. And the second time when he invited us to go over to South Africa.

Andrew Muir 26:48

Was that to give you an opportunity to see what you actually striking for, the kind of situation.

Mary Manning 26:53

We wanted to bring us around to the townships and stuff and show us what people are living in. We obviously hadn't got the money.

Andrew Muir 26:59

And you were going to have to fund it yourself.

Mary Manning 27:01

We went, we went around the pubs on a good three Friday nights.

Andrew Muir 27:05

We did it in Dublin.

Mary Manning 27:06

Yeah. And then we had an American guy and I can't, for the life of me remember what his name was, but he donated something towards the trip as well. So eventually we got the money to go.

Andrew Muir 27:15

Well, for all of you.

Vonnie Monroe 27:16

I didn't.

Mary Manning 27:16

You didn't go.

Andrew Muir 27:17

You didn't go.

Mary Manning 27:17

But now I think it was Tommy. Sandra, myself, Karen, and the six or seven of us went. We had to fly from London or Dublin to London, and then we were going to London. To Johannesburg? Yeah. And we got in early because our flight was early and we went and we got our boarding passes, put cases in, this.

Andrew Muir 27:36

Is in London and.

Mary Manning 27:37

Heathrow. And then after a while we were having a British Airways and they came over on us where we travelled and we said, Yeah, you're not going to be allowed on, you don't have a visa to go to South Africa, so you're not going to be allowed to go into the country. So can you take your bags and can you claim and we said no, were not like identifying our bags. And anyway, at that stage an Irish person with an Irish passport did not need.

Andrew Muir 27:59

Did not need a.

Mary Manning 27:59

Visa. I don't think actually Michelle has travelled on a British passport so British people did older. Now you've got to remember as well, as I said before, no mobile phones. I went to a payphone. We all did. We were 3 hours, been told we weren't going to be allowed on the flight. I rang home my next door neighbour because we didn't have a phone, said, Look, probably home tomorrow because not is on the flight. And then within a few minutes they came. Actually what they did was they sent Leo Evans from the South African Embassy out to the airport to tell us that we weren't going to be allowed inside Africa because we didn't have visas and we said we don't need a visa. So I took 3 hours.

Andrew Muir 28:34

Was the flight still on tarmac?

Mary Manning 28:36

Yeah. And what they didn't know was that we had journalists that were traveling with us who had been allowed to go onto the flight, and after 3 hours, they literally ran us down onto a flight, but they separated us out. So none of us were sitting together. And what we found out later from the journalists was that the captain had come on the flight and said that they were sorry for the delay. But there's people who are refusing to board. So you can imagine sitting beside someone after an eight hour flight who thought that you were after dozens refused.

Andrew Muir 29:03

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then the flight eventually took off.

Mary Manning 29:06

Took off.

Andrew Muir 29:07

Went down to Jo'burg.

Mary Manning 29:08

Yeah. We getting off the plane and loads of soldiers around, armed soldiers. And we kind of thought maybe it's normal. We didn't really know, like we'd never been there before. So we went into the terminal and these armed soldiers with machine guns come over to us and tell you. The group travelled from Dublin and we said Yes. And they said, Follow us. So up these flights of stairs at one stage was 32 armed guards with us. There was some before us and some behind us brought us up to this room. We had so many stories at this stage of people falling out. Please, Windows and being killed and never been seen again. And at this stage, nobody knew where we were because we'd rang home and said, We're going to be home tomorrow because they're not letting us on the flight. So we didn't have time to ring and say.

Andrew Muir 29:49

Of course, I mean, it's a ten or 12 hour flight down to South Africa. Yeah.

Mary Manning 29:53

So there was no Irish embassy there at the time. The US consulate was there, so they wouldn't even come to talk to us. They brought our suitcases up and searched everything, like took everything apart. They eventually sent us some food, were there. We were held for about eight or 9 hours, I think it was. And then we were sent back on the next flight with a day trip out to that I.

Vonnie Monroe 30:12

But they said you were terrorists.

Mary Manning 30:13

Oh, no. That's what happened in the media reported over there that we were terrorists. And the front page of the Irish Independent the next day was we were the most dangerous shop workers in the world that Brandon always quoted. So my parents. So you go that day, they thought I was in London and they woke up to seeing that we were being held in South Africa.

Andrew Muir 30:33

Were you scared.

Mary Manning 30:35

Shitless that.

Andrew Muir 30:36

Really?

Mary Manning 30:36

Yeah, for a while we were. After a few hours, they gave us food and we took ground. So we started seeing a few rebels songs and we started to kind of get a bit more brave. And then we were put back on the plane and as we were going up the stairs, Karen turned around and said, We be back, Quinn said. Africa is free. And so at the top of the stairs, the plane and Sandra polisher and said, Get on the plane. We never take.

Andrew Muir 30:59

I'm.

Mary Manning 31:00

So sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be.

Andrew Muir 31:02

Here.

Mary Manning 31:03

So they sent us back and then we arrived in London and they actually said to us, Can you hang on here? And we thought, Oh no, here we go again. But they actually brought us in for a press conference. So at the time we thought that we'd get in and we'd get a bit publicity first. The biggest publicity that they could of Abidjan was not us. And because people here had to ask, What's this about? Yeah, so they did us a favor, even though at the time we didn't think it was available.

Andrew Muir 31:27

Of course, they.

Mary Manning 31:27

Did us a favor by doing that because people would start to ask, What are they doing that's around? Yeah, you know, but what was going on over there that they don't want people to see?

Andrew Muir 31:34

So again, Mary, like another turning point, like you said, the arrival of Nimrod, there were various stages that it started to turn and get bigger and bigger and bigger. Yeah.

Mary Manning 31:42

And I think probably around September, October of the same year, I think the government start to realize we're not going away.

Andrew Muir 31:57

So let's leap forward a little bit to the latter stages of the strike. How long did it take before you knew that actually what you were standing for was actually going to make a difference? There was going to be some sort of change.

Vonnie Monroe 32:15

In terms of our government. There was talks with the union and Rory Quinn. He was a Labour TD and he was in government at the time and he pushed for the talks to begin and to try and get some sort of movement on it.

Mary Manning 32:30

And what they did was they said that they would think about it, they were going to make a decision on that, but they asked us to lift the picket so we didn't want to lift a picket. But their focus for the past year, Absolutely.

Andrew Muir 32:41

Yeah.

Mary Manning 32:42

And we were afraid that people would forget about of course, the government forgot about them.

Vonnie Monroe 32:45

We'll put it on the long finger as they do and fade into the background.

Mary Manning 32:49

So was a few marches and stuff in between that time and eventually they said they're going to ban South African goods. It's not going to be till next year when we try to go back to work. They want us to sign that we would do more or less whatever they want to do.

Vonnie Monroe 33:03

Ever change a.

Mary Manning 33:04

Contract? Yeah, which we wouldn't do. So then we had to go back out again and we didn't go back in until April.

Andrew Muir 33:09

How long were you out on strike?

Mary Manning 33:11

Two years in.

Vonnie Monroe 33:12

June. Year nine.

Andrew Muir 33:13

The strike lasted for two years and nine months.

Mary Manning 33:15

Yeah, July 1984 to April 1987.

Andrew Muir 33:18

For you, Vonnie and Mary. Was it worth it?

Vonnie Monroe 33:22

Yeah, of course. Yeah. That's only three years of our life, remember? You know, these people are putting up with this from birth to death.

Mary Manning 33:31

It's something I think we were all very proud of.

Vonnie Monroe 33:33

Oh, yeah. I mean.

Mary Manning 33:34

It's not something I go around shouting about, but I often think of the people who didn't go and how they would feel, especially when they think about what it was that we were selling them for. We weren't getting anything of this. Nothing was going to The benefit of that.

Vonnie Monroe 33:48

Was probably the most telling thing about the strike was we weren't going for pay, we weren't going for conditions. For us, it was for other people.

Andrew Muir 33:55

We were going out for people.

Vonnie Monroe 33:56

Yeah. And I wondered halfway through, why is other people not helping these people?

Mary Manning 34:02

For me anyway? It's something that just in here, in your heart, you know, I did the right thing.

Andrew Muir 34:07

Absolutely. So I'm going to ask Mary Manning, would you do it again?

Mary Manning 34:13

For sure. You do a bit more intelligence. You know what to do, but 400% would do for.

Andrew Muir 34:19

Anyone, right?

Vonnie Monroe 34:20

Yeah. There's different steps you've got to take, you take now. But we.

Mary Manning 34:23

Know there's a lot.

Vonnie Monroe 34:24

We know we know how to do it right this time. If you were to do it again.

Andrew Muir 34:28

It has been an absolute pleasure from the bottom of my heart. Thank you so much.

Vonnie Monroe 34:33
Thank you. Thank you.

Andrew Muir 34:36
Two years and nine months on strike. Just let that sink in for a moment and imagine if you can the sheer stamina required. Vonnie Monroe, Mary Manning and their fellow strikers to do what they did. Thank you to Mary and Vonnie for agreeing to take part in this podcast and for sharing with us a wonderful insight into those days. In the early eighties in Dublin when you and your fellow shop workers decided to make a stand in the next episode of activism in the eighties, we find out about what life was like for black South Africans living under apartheid.

Wayne Dooling 35:11
Highly segregated beaches in Cape Town. So there was the perverse experience doing something really joyful, i.e. going to the beach, but at the same time experience the humiliations that go with going to a segregated beach. And of course it doesn't take a genius to work out that the best beaches were not available to black people.

Andrew Muir 35:48
Activism in the Eighties is a podcast series recorded in response to the play Strike, written by Tracy Ryan and produced by Ardent Theatre Company at the Southwark Playhouse London in April 2023. This series have been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and was produced by Creative Kin.