

## EPISODE 3: Under Attack - The War on Trade Unions

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.

On a June morning in 1984, one of the most violent episodes in British industrial relations unfolded. 5000 striking miners gathered at the aggrieved Coke processing plant in South Yorkshire. They'd face an assault by some 6000 police as police and picketers clashed. John Hendy, now Lord Hendy Casey was a legal rep for the National Union of Miners.

John Hendy 0:34

Thatcher and her cronies decided to try and smash the trade union movement and they organised set pieces in order to do that.

Andrew Muir 0:44

Len McCluskey, later head of Unite the Union, was a full time official.

Len McCluskey 0:48

The miners have a special place in the heart of ordinary working people. And once they were defeated, it was really, really bleak.

Andrew Muir 0:59

I'm Andrew Muir and this is activism in the eighties, where we shot the protests and culture wars that changed lives in Britain, Ireland and beyond. That clash, all grief happened as another strike by staff of the Irish Department store Dunnes was still in its infancy

in this episode. Justice for Grenfell co-founder Evette Williams explores how the eighties changed the face of British trade unions with John and Len, who opens the discussion with a look back on how the miners strike overshadow the dispute at Dunne's.

Len McCluskey 1:35

What did I know about it back in 1984? We have to remember that the Dunn strike took place in July 1984 and there was already the great miners strike in play a few months earlier, which occupied most activists minds. And I knew about the Dunn strike, although it was undoubtedly overshadowed by the miners strike because the Dunn strike was a heroic strike. Those women and one man who came out on strike were individuals who weren't particularly politicised, unlike you might say, many miners who have a tradition of knowing

what the establishment is all about. And it was an incredible dispute by these ordinary people. They were genuinely heroes in my mind. What did it have an impact on? Well, my union, the Transport and General Workers Union, also operates within Southern Ireland. Therefore, I was aware what was going on. I was aware of the kind of support, but my colleagues, my comrades over in the Republic say it had an incredible impact and it had a lasting image of people being prepared to stand up and tell truth to power.

Yvette 3:02

John Lennon's just touched on the miners strike being almost like the decisive and focused thing that is happening, especially in the mid-eighties. What's your recollection of what's happening at that time?

John Hendy 3:17

I agree with Len. The strike was in Britain anyway, completely overshadowed by the miners strike, of course. The DUNS strike has lasted a lot longer than the miners strike, and I didn't realise that they had such a worldwide audience. The fact that one of them addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, I was just amazed. These are ordinary, if I may use that word. Shop workers, extra ordinary shop workers, and to hold out on strike for what is it, two years and nine months? Absolutely staggering achievement. The eighties, of course, was a very significant period for British trade unionism. The real marker, of course, was the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and with it the supremacy of the doctrine of neoliberalism, which so far as trade unions are concerned, is an extreme form of capitalism. Any attempt by trade unionists or trade unions to combine together to achieve collective bargaining or still more if they exercised the right to strike in furtherance of collective bargaining. She regarded by the neoliberals as a distortion of the labour market, and that's why Thatcher and her cronies decided to try and smash the trade union movement and they organized set pieces in order to do that. Unfortunately, notwithstanding the heroism of the miners who stood out for an entire year from March 84 to March 85, the miners strike did not succeed, and the consequences for the labour movement have been absolutely catastrophic because it meant that capitalism was supreme and the trade unions didn't have the power to resist the onslaught on living standards, which we are only seeing today. 14 million people living now today below the poverty line, 5 million of them children. Wages stagnant since 2008. All really partly as a consequence of the miners strike and the onslaught of the Tories and neo liberalism. So the 1980s was a crucial decade in British history.

Len McCluskey 5:47

Let me just add a couple of things about the 1980s, because it also demonstrate trade, the inability of the trade union leaders to understand what was happening. The first strike that took place on the first attack on trade unions was the Steelworkers in 1980. And right throughout that period, the trade union movement was impotent and the trade union general secretaries were split. Eric Hammond and Frank Chapple, right wing regional secretaries who were effectively on the boss side, effectively on Thatcher's side. And unfortunately there was no left leadership to fight back in 1980, the steel strike took place and Thatcher decided to take on the steelworkers. They were on strike for about 12 weeks and then the dockers decide to call a national strike because dockers in Liverpool were being penalised for not moving steel that was being imported. And the Dockers, the Transport and General Workers Union calls a national dock strike in support of the Steelworkers. At that time a national dock strike would have brought the country to a standstill. It was incredibly powerful. On the same day that the Dockers leaders were meeting in London, the ITC executive, the Steelworkers union was meeting literally a mile away in Kings Cross and called the strike off at the very point in time where they had victory within their grasp. And had that not have happened, perhaps Thatcher would have been halted in their tracks. Now, that's because of the right wing leadership that the ICC had, but it was a period that we should look back with some shame because had we have rallied in a way that we should have done, I think she would have been stopped. And the devastation that was caused in, for example, my community in Liverpool and in the working class communities everywhere. It's a disgrace that our movements and of course the Labour Party was not much better. It's Black period. To look back on.

John Hendy 8:18

To footnote to that event. One is in relation to the national steel strike, I was junior counsel on a case called Newport Steels and Sirs, which went to the House of Lords to get an injunction to prevent a national strike, and we won. So the Steelworkers had the advantage of having a lawful strike, unlike many other strikes, which have been declared unlawful. And yet they still did what Lenny said. And the other footnote is that there were other betrayals, for example, in the miners strike with the sort of managerial ranks within the coal mines, decided that they weren't going to go on strike. And the effect of that was the strike in the coal mines was not national and was not extended to every pit. And it would have been if the management had been pulled out. And of course they suffered the same as the rest of the mining community is after the defeat of the miners strike and the consequences for the mining communities as possibly being even worse than in big cities like Liverpool absolutely shattered. No employment, drugs, crime, the very opposite of what a transition to a new, different green economy ought to be.

Yvette 9:36

I'm hearing that ultimately it's a painful time. The unions were defeated so badly. Do you think that's a defining moment where if the unions had taken a different road, if we would be in a different place now?

Len McCluskey 9:51

Well, of course, I've just mentioned the steel strike every two defeats Thatcher, then the whole of the eighties would have been different. But what does happen is defeat breeds a defeatism, a pessimism. And as the defeats mounted off in the eighties because we didn't win many on a Friday, they announced in the newspapers the closure of various firms. And it was just horrific. And we tried lots of things. Occupation in Meccano Factory, civil disobedience when Dunlop closed sitting down and the road block in places, none of it worked. If workers have confidence, then anything is possible. But when workers looked at the disputes and the strikes and every one of them was being defeated, then of course that downbeat pessimism built and built and built the miners strike perhaps was the worst, because I've never seen such a desperate wish from communities right throughout the land wanting the miners to win. The miners have a special place in the hearts of ordinary working people. And once they were defeated, it was really, really bleak. And workers just didn't feel that they could go on strike because they felt that they would be defeated. Interestingly enough, the opposite is happening today. There are literally hundreds of strikes taking place and many of them are successful. And that breeds a confidence of workers elsewhere saying, you know what, we're being offered 2% pay rise when inflation is ten, 11%. We should have a go in because we can win. And so that confidence was what was missing in the eighties. And we didn't have any leadership either in the industrial area or indeed in the political area of Kinnock and the Labour Party. There was no leadership that gave confidence to workers to stand up and fight back.

Yvette 12:10

I think we can see that membership climbing again and I think you're right and it is about confidence of people thinking that they can win. They're not defeated.

John Hendy 12:19

Absolutely. Just to add to what Len was saying, there were some leaderships which were outstanding in their heroism and leadership. I think the leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers during the one year strike was really above and beyond. I mean, of course, mistakes were made. That's inevitable if you conduct a battle on that scale and for that length of time. But we have to

pay respect to what the leadership of the new men were doing and backed by their membership. That was the key thing. The members were with the leaders and the leaders were with the members. That's in stark contrast, as Len says, to the the attitude of the Labour Party, which was to give no support at all to the miners.

Len McCluskey 13:07  
Quite the opposite.

John Hendy 13:08  
Absolutely. Yeah, exactly.

Len McCluskey 13:10  
I mean, Scargill was accused of telling lies when everything he said came true, came out with a declaration that they were going to close all the pits as opposed to just a few pits that they were talking about. And he was proved 100% correct. The one thing the establishment and the bosses are very clever is learning from history. We don't listen. And of 1970 to 1974, the Civil government was defeated by the mineworkers, which led to a general election which they lost, and they never, ever forgot that. And they worked out a plan as early as 1976, 1977 as to if they ever got back into power, they would seek retribution. That's exactly what they did with the miners.

Yvette 14:03  
I'm going to move on to something a little lighter. So in the trade union protests and strikes that are going on, there are other protests and strikes going on. The anti-apartheid movement, as we see with Don still, there's the troubles in Northern Ireland that are really huge at that time. And there's also other cultural things that come up behind it, like Rock Against Racism. You get bands like the Flying Pickets, UB40 talking about where people are at. Why do you think the trade union movement connected with those other protests?

Len McCluskey 14:38  
Well, certainly the more radical and progressive trade unions did. I'm fortunate to being a member and a full time official in the Transport and General Workers Union, which is now, of course, Unite the Union. And we developed from there a culture that meant trade unions when just about winning, paying conditions in the workplace, but was also about our members living communities. The anti-apartheid movement was very close to my heart. The Chile Solidarity campaign, the attacks on Cuba. All of these became issues that workers bought into because of the common theme of fighting injustice. The media and the right wing would have you believe that trade unions should just stick to the factory and nothing else. But they failed to understand that

those workers go back into their communities and engage in the injustices that take place there, and that can be a powerful event. You involved in the Grenfell tragedy, which has seen an enormous response from the community, people coming together, people understanding that by working with each other, that solidarity, it gives them a louder voice. And so it was natural for me that that should happen with lots of good trade unions other than my own. Also playing a critical part.

John Hendy 16:15

The other side of that coin is that British trade unions have always had an international dimension. Part is the product of being the centre of the British Empire, but partly is the influence of Marxism growing in the 19th century amongst trade unions and working people. And so the trade unions have always had this major international dimension. And if you look particularly at the dockworkers, if you look at Australian dockworkers, unions who form them, but Irish and British Dockers going to Australia in order to do so, and that was the same in the Caribbean and in Canada and Ireland of course has always had very close links with Britain and in South Africa and many unions have got particular links with South Africa. So I represent the National Union of Mineworkers and we always had a very close relationship with the South African Mineworkers. So there are these links between unions, particular trades, having links with the equivalent trade unions all over the world. And of course the miners strike had a particular international dimension in that they needed lots of money because they were out permanently for a year. No strike by assets of the unions, sequestered and workers all over the world were supportive and sent money. I remember having a legal consultation in my chambers in London. One of the general secretaries of one of the area unions came in carrying a suitcase and I said to Billy, You staying the night is No, he said, Have a look at this and the suitcase. And it was.

Len McCluskey 18:01

Just full.

John Hendy 18:02

Of French and German money. So those links were formed quite deeply, I think. And it was the same in the docks. Strike links all over the world.

Len McCluskey 18:12

Yeah. I mean, obviously I worked on the docks. You would get ships coming in from all over the world with the seafarers being able to tell you what was happening back in their hometowns. I became very involved in the Chilean Solidarity campaign when the democratically elected government was overthrown by the American CIA coup. Because I spoke to the Chilean

seamen who used to explain what was going on. And so those links, as John said, are deeply rooted in many areas. There's members in Rolls Royce up in Scotland refuse to serve as the engines on the jets that were being used to suppress the Chilean people, absolutely fabulous heroes themselves. And that's how these things spread and how trade unions rightly get involved in things outside their workplace. It's why when I was general secretary, I created community brunches.

Yvette 19:20

I think that's intrinsic to what happened, especially post-war. I know many of the former colonies that became independent did the out of union movements, whether in their islands or their countries, to get to where they are today? And I think that's one of the legacies that the trade union movement left in terms of employment rights. Do you think from that period there's some kind of legacy that we can take forward now in order to kind of inform younger people today?

John Hendy 19:53

Yeah, well, if you just go back for a moment to 1970, the Tories introduced a bill called the Industrial Relations Bill, which became an act in

1971, and this was a complete transformation of labour relations, restrictions on trade unions and some employment rights, and that was effectively defeated by two miners strikes in 1972 1974 and massive organised zation amongst the labour movement against the Industrial Relations Act, leading to the defeat of the Tory government in 1974 and the introduction of Wilson's Labour government, which reversed and solidified what the law was on trade unions, giving them effective freedom to take industrial action and and support collective bargaining and so on. When the Tories came to power in 1979, they learnt that it was a tactical mistake to make all the legal changes in one act. So they didn't. They did over five separate acts of Parliament during the course of the 1980s, each one tightening the screws even more on trade union ability to defend the working class. That really is the history of the 1980s. Just getting more and more restrictions on trade unions. It's true that there were employment rights, which we hadn't had before 1970. Like the right not to be unfairly dismissed and so on. But I don't consider those individual employment rights significant in comparison to having the ability of a trade union to defend the worker at the workplace. That's the most important protection a worker can have. It's the most important chance of improving working conditions and the condition of working life. So by restricting trade unions, the Tory government were very effective. And unfortunately it has to be said that in the years since, there's been no retreat from that. Even during 13 years of a Labour government, the restrictions on trade unions have not been modified. The decline in the coverage of collective bargaining, that's to say, the proportion of

workers who have the benefit of having their terms and conditions negotiated by a trade union on their behalf declined in a steady state. And if you look at the statistics, in 1976, prior to the Tory government,

86% of workers had the benefit of terms and conditions negotiated by a trade union on their behalf. Now it's down to about 23%, which means that three quarters of our workforce are at the mercy of employers.

Len McCluskey 22:52

The legacy that you talk about is very real because Thatcher was completely successful back in mid seventies. The proportion of GDP or gross domestic product, the wealth created by ordinary people,

65% of it went into the back pockets of workers in salaries and wages. Today that is down to 50%. Now the 15% drop is dramatic. The wealth hasn't disappeared. It's still made and it goes to the 1%. The bosses, the multinationals, and of course, the inequality John mentioned about stagnant wages. That is all because of the restrictive nature of trade unions fighting back. And that's why trade unions do have to come up with new ways. I'm very proud of the fact that we created an Unite a strike fund that is the largest strike fund in the whole of Europe. It means that when all members go on strike now, they get £70 a day, £350 a week, and make no bones about it. It is given enormous confidence to work. It's there's currently literally hundreds of disputes taking place in Unite and it's because they have the confidence not to be starved back to work wondering where the next meal's coming from, wondering about the mortgage payments. And trade unions need to look at the workers in Britain or the West, protected workers in the whole of Europe. This is the nation that actually at the end of the Second World War, defeated fascism and gave to Europe all of the benefits, all of the laws to protect them that they currently have. And yet today, German workers, Italian workers, Dutch, French, all of them have got better protections than the very nation that actually gave them their protections when we defeated fascism. It's an outrage. It's a stain on every government's conservative confidence. Obviously, we know they're anti-union and anti worker, but Labor governments as well. There's an awful acceptance amongst many, many work. It's about no questioning that the law is wrong. You know, I was willing to start. Well, okay, so you would break the law. Well, in my union, we took a decision that, yes, we would, because I have a belief that if a law is implemented against a minority of people that disagree with it, then there's a duty to stand up against that law. And trade unions and trade union members need to always have in the back of their minds that these laws that were introduced are bad laws and are there for one reason only, and that is to restrict their ability to get a fair amount of pay and conditions for the wealth that they create and to make



certain that they are protected against unfair practices. We need to constantly remember the.

Yvette 26:06

The Dunnes stores strike eventually leads to the Irish government being the first country in the world to bring in sanctions against South Africa and banning the importation of their food. If you had one wish to ask our government to do something tomorrow in regards to trade unionism, what would that be?

John Hendy 26:29

Resign? Yeah.

Len McCluskey 26:31

Vanished.

Yeah, of course. Look, this is a class.

Yvette 26:36

I mean, John, you've spoken about, you know, the amount of employment acts that were either amended or bought in trade union acts that were both in which one could at least be a good start for us if we got rid of it.

Len McCluskey 26:50

They're all interlinked. That's why John pointed out the fact that they learned from their mistake in 1970 71 with the Industrial Relations Act. And it wasn't just in the eighties, it wasn't just on the Thatcher. Cameron introduced the Trade Union Act that David Davis, a very, very prominent Conservative MP, said this was disgraceful. This was akin to what could have been introduced by Franco under his fascist regime in Spain. So it continues today. So you can't just pick one. It has to be a political decision. It's got to be the Labour Party, presumably, although I'm not overly confident about where Starmer sits on these things. But there has to be a movement amongst the trade union movement collectively to insist that those type of restrictions are completely lifted. All of them. Nobody wants special treatment, but we do want to be treated the same way as our sisters and brothers in the rest of Europe.

John Hendy 27:58

When we have articulated what labour law ought to look like. I'm chair of the Institute of Employment Rights and working with Andy McDonnell, MP. I was adviser to a group of trade unions who came up with what is now called a New Deal for Working People, which was endorsed by the Labour Party conference in 2021 and 2022. The challenge now is to make sure that the current Labour leadership do not detract one iota from the proposals that are in there and that

would transform industrial action law and the law on collective bargaining in particular, it would require collective bargaining on a mandatory basis across all sectors of the economy, which would make such a difference to working people's lives.

Len McCluskey 28:56

John has some fantastic work on this, and if you just correlate the reduction in collective bargaining under reduction in the share of wealth that goes to workers, they run parallel. And therefore for any Labour leader and any trade union leader, anybody believing in justice, it's very evidence that in order to get rid of the inequality that we have in our nation, John's talking about the 5 million young kids go to school hungry every day in the fifth richest nation in the world. It's an outrage.

Yvette 29:34

So let's end on a positive note on a personal level, if you had to pick one thing that sticks out for you in the 1980s, what's the memory that you treasure?

Len McCluskey 29:46

I suppose it was that working class solidarity that I seen during the miners strike. It almost still brings tears to my eyes in Liverpool, and this was happening all over the country. There were food banks, areas where people could come and donate, food that would go then to the various mining communities and to see that little women putting in a can of soup and kids coming with things. My particular branch, we adopted Arm Tool Colliery in Yorkshire and the amount of generosity that was seen, I can remember at Christmas, this came very often from some of our shop shoes who went particularly left wing, but they had a working class feel and collecting toys for the children to be taken over in lorry loads was heartwarming. It reinforced my faith in my class and I still believe that's incredibly important in political terms. I see it's in what you're doing in Grenfell, and when tragedies like that occur, the goodness of working people is astonishing and so strange, even though we were defeated. That is something that I remember very, very well and very fondly from the miners strike.

Yvette 31:17

John Neil treasured memory.

John Hendy 31:19

Well, not surprisingly, my treasured memory is exactly the same. It's the class solidarity. And during the miners strike, I spent nearly two years doing nothing but work for the annual memorial to civil cases, all the dozens of injunctions it was sought against there. And, um, and I became very, very close to the

mining community and indeed the leadership of the men and women as well. And that intimacy seeing that class solidarity, it does move me to tears as well. Still, when I think about it, I did actually weep when the miners went back to work without a deal. I remember watching on television the Marty miners in South Wales with their band, and I just cried. It was so emotional, so many hopes hung on it. But the other dimension of that class solidarity was also the perception and the insight that those people had, not just the leaders, but ordinary miners, most of them not well-educated, but their insight into what was going on politically, how the economy was being run, and their understanding of what was happening globally, I found really quite breathtaking. I've spent my life reading books these guys hadn't, but they still had the understanding that their strike. It wasn't about money, it was about the economic future of their communities and.

Len McCluskey 32:54

Can I just quickly finish on something, because you mentioned above Ireland becoming the first nation to take action against. How do you think those who must have felt by that, why heroes they are and I hope all of them understand just how deeply, deeply grateful we are for the stance that they take. It must be incredible for them to know that the heroics that they displayed during that nearly three year dispute led to a change. It just shows that people power when it's brought together and if anything.

John Hendy 33:36

Yeah. And it also shows the perception that they had I mean, how would they know about the conditions in South Africa?

Len McCluskey 33:43

They didn't. And this is my experience that when any workers go on strike, they become politicised. And that's exactly what happened with the Dunnes workers. They had an opportunity to go back. Some of them lost their houses, but they grew in strength because they wanted to know, Well, yeah, we think we're doing the right thing, but are we sure? And they found out and they became stronger and stronger and stronger. And that's what happens with work and people when they do go on strike, they become politicised as the nature of injustice within society and the causes that they might be fighting for.

Andrew Muir 34:27

A story there of solidarity, betrayal and defiance. Thanks to Lord John Hendy, Casey, Len McCluskey and Yvette Williams for sharing their insights into a crucial episode in British politics. In the next episode of Activism in the Eighties, veteran anti-apartheid campaigners remember the tactics that shamed big business.

Lela Kogbara 34:49

To go to those AGM's eat the canapés and drink the champagne at the beginning, and then disrupt the whole meeting by asking questions, then standing up and chanting. And it was just sweetened by the fact of having eaten the kind of pace and drank the champagne and all these people that had come from all over the country for this AGM. And we did that every year for quite a while.

Andrew Muir 35:13

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Activism in the Eighties is a podcast series recorded in response to the play Strike, written by Tracey 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.