



# Ireland and the miners' strike

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When the British miners' strike began in 1984, the dimension of the 1913 lockout and how the miners in Britain had supported the Irish trade union movement then was very important. The Dublin Council of Trade Unions (DCTU) set up a sub-committee to try and get support, financial and otherwise, for the strike. I was working in the ATGWU and I was given freedom of time by the higher echelons in the union to try and do my best for the National Union of Mineworkers. The Cork Council of Trade Unions and the Waterford Council of Trade Unions were doing their own thing as well.

What the NUM was doing was allocating special areas to countries: a support group for a particular colliery or a particular section of miners. We were allocated the South Wales miners, and we started to bring miners over here, around factories, areas, public meetings. Everyone of them was tremendously attended, and collections took place. We had a different miner every week. It got so good over here, they always went back with a cheque for the South Wales miners, that in South Wales there was a queue of people wanting to come to Dublin. Not alone would they have a good time – because we'd bring them out for a drink and that – but they knew the support was massive. We obviously didn't just appear. You contacted the shop stewards' committee and they would set up the meeting. The strange thing about it, in a weird sort of a way, was that in some places we went to, management and the employers were shaking Arthur Scargill's hand. This was the anti-Maggie Thatcher, anti-British thing, I suppose.

It would be very difficult to put your finger on the exact amount of money, but we raised hundreds of thousands of pounds: there's no doubt about that. Scargill has said, and I think he's right, that Ireland's contribution per capita, per trade unionist, would have been bigger than any other donations they got throughout the world. They say there was £60 million collected all over Europe for the miners. I'd put it much higher than that. It was anything from £60-100 million, and I think the figures from Ireland would be £2-5 million. Not alone were there collections, but there was linkage towards the trade union movement. You were doing something that identified the workers here in Dublin with the NUM dispute that was taking place. It was all about raising money, but it was all about raising political awareness as well.

The whole thing with the British Tory Party was to smash the NUM, because they never forgave them for the 1974 strike, where the Tories called an election and lost it. The funds of the NUM were sequestered by the High Court in London. This problem was put to us, and Scargill had done his homework. We set up accounts here in Ireland. I know there was an account here that I had responsibility for, and we put a lot of money into it. You couldn't say too much about it. It was secret. But I suppose I can talk about it now.

The money literally came to Dublin, in holdall bags, sometimes in amounts of £200,000. On one occasion there was £500,000. I know they did similar things in other unions throughout the world, but we had a big role here in Dublin. It was all done above board: I want to make that quite clear. The reason I'm saying that now is that, at later stages, there was a smear campaign against Scargill. I'm quite happy that the money we collected here and the money we looked after here was all above board. The system wasn't revolutionary. We had a bit of a code: Arthur Scargill would ring me and tell me he was sending over a certain number of leaflets, and I would add a certain number of noughts to those leaflets. It

wasn't that brilliant a system, but it worked.

I got a phone call to say he wanted a new account opened. And we walked into the bank, which was a small branch of one of the main banks here, and Arthur Scargill was carrying the big holdall. Of course all the customers were delighted to shake his hand, and some of them were giving him money into his top pocket, saying: "This is towards the miners."

We met the young bank manager, and he said: "Fair enough. How much are you depositing?"

And Arthur Scargill said: "£500,000 sterling."

Of course the young bank manager nearly died, he thought we were joking. He said: "Are you serious? Where is the £500,000?"

He said: "It's all in this holdall."

He freaked out. He said he couldn't handle that, and we'd have to get in touch with the senior bank, which we did. But it meant we had to get out, and get into a taxi and drive across town with this £500,000. The money was safely deposited in the bank.

There was another occasion when I was to meet a courier bringing in money, and you didn't say too much. Not that it was secret, it's just you didn't want anyone taking the money, because miners' families had to be fed, and the strike had to be won, and also there was no money or funds to pay the people who worked in the NUM. She came into my office in the ATGWU, a bit distressed. And she said she was after being mugged outside the union, two young lads had mugged her just on the pathway outside, and her handbag had been stolen. But the point about it was she had £18 sterling in her handbag, but she had £250,000 in a holdall, strapped around her, that she was bringing in to this account. So those young fellas, wherever they are today, took the wrong amount of money!

There was an attempt to try and freeze the NUM money here. But because my own union was a British-based union, but in a different jurisdiction here in the Republic of Ireland, it fell down on that matter. They weren't able to touch any of the funds that were in Ireland. That's not to say that people weren't worried, but they weren't able to touch it. That was one of the big successes of the strike.

I had a great respect for Arthur Scargill. There are trade union leaders who always do what they're told: unfortunately they do what they're told on the wrong basis. Arthur Scargill did what he was told by the members, and that's the difference. Some trade union leaders here in Ireland—there are exceptions, obviously—they do what they're told because they're hunting promotion, or pushing their career up the ladder, or they're in partnerships and they have to do what they're told because that's the way trade union activity works with them. But with Scargill, you had a great respect. If he asked you to do something, you knew he was doing it for the members. He wasn't doing it for himself.

There was this tension around. My own union, the ATGWU, were very supportive, but the British TUC were saying: 'You're not going to win this strike. You're taking on the Tory government.' Scargill was right. In retrospect and in hindsight, he was *proved* right. He didn't know then he was going to be proved right. But he had his commitment to the members of the union, and political commitment as well. He knew this was trying to break the British trade union movement, which would have had an overflow to the Irish trade union movement, but the people who could have given him support, the British TUC, didn't give him support. There's a thing in the Irish trade union movement as well as the British movement: you get support, but people do nothing about it. On paper, they're always on your side, but you know that they don't come out and fight the fight. So Scargill was fighting within his own movement for support, and yet, didn't get that support that he should have got.

I was asked to go over to London to meet Scargill. It was around the Christmas period, just coming up to New Year's Eve, and I arrived over at the Barbican Centre. I only got a flat

number, and I was to go into this particular flat and Scargill would be there to meet me. A security man was sitting at the entrance, with a little Christmas tree, and a bottle of whisky. I just looked at him, thinking: 'Jesus, I wouldn't mind having a drop of that myself.' And he asked me where I was going.

I said: "I'm going to Flat No. 122."

And he says: "There's no one in Flat 122."

There were no mobile phones in those days, so I walked around again and had to find a phone box. I rang Scargill. "Oh," he said, "he should have let you through. I left word down there."

I went back around again, and at this stage the security man must have had another two glasses, because he was quite jolly at this stage. And I said: "122."

And he said: "I know. Why didn't you *say* Scargill?"

So I went up and saw Arthur Scargill, and the place was a hive of activity, with people working voluntarily, doing postering, doing leaflets, getting media statements out. It was unbelievable, it was another world. And here was I, feeling a bit out of it because I was stuck in the Barbican Centre on New Year's Eve.

We had a discussion, anyway, about bringing more money to Dublin, and Scargill said he had to go out. He pointed out to me that the Venetian blinds in all the windows were down very tightly, because there was a vacant building across the road and it could have been hired out by MI5, and they had these zoom-lens cameras. There were people typing statements, and trying to get into contact with their members, who had to actually hold their hands over their statements while they were typing. I believe this now: I mightn't have believed it then. People would say: 'Ah, that was Arthur Scargill.' But history has proven that he was right.

I remember saying I'd had nothing to eat, and Arthur said: "There's no food here, the miners are on strike."

I accepted all that, but then I said: "Jesus, I'll have to have something to eat."

He said: "I'll get you a sandwich or something. There's only tomato and a bit of white bread. Have a bit of that." And then he produced a bottle of whisky, a half bottle of whisky.

Arthur was away so long, I had to ring back to Dublin to say I wouldn't be back for New Year's Eve. I was there on my own for so long. People were leaving the building and coming back in, but I wasn't asking them what they were doing because I felt the thing was private and confidential, and I didn't want to get involved anyway. I had the one mission, which was over the money. And I drank a couple of glasses of whisky: five or six shots, I suppose. There was only a little drop left in the bottle, and I put it back into the press.

When Arthur came back he was delighted, and he said: "We'll go and get chips." He said he was sorry about keeping me overnight, but the struggle was the struggle. So I had a bag of chips, and then we went to the press. He nearly died, as I'd drunk the whisky. He shouted: "The whisky's all gone!"

And I said: "Yeah, I drank it. What's wrong with that?"

He said: "That's been there for over a year. We only hand it to people. We don't mean for them to drink it!"

The late Mick McCarthy was a great friend of mine—that's not the footballer, now, that's Mick McCarthy the music promoter, a socialist, a great man. He contacted me, and he was complementing us on the great work we were doing. He was at a concert we organised in Liberty Hall that Christy Moore and Dónal Lunny had been playing at, and he put a proposal to me that he would put a group together and bring them over to the collieries, to show the British working class the great support they had here.

We had a few meetings about it, and I met with Dónal Lunny, Christy Moore, Davy Spillane, Anne Conroy, Shay and Anne McGowan. Moving Hearts hadn't been playing, but

they said they'd put a group together. They put a semblance of Moving Hearts together, and we all went over for a week fundraising, which was unbelievable. They didn't have to do it, but they did it, and I know that they gave up gigs to go over there. Christy Moore couldn't make it, but he did concerts.

We had some hilarious moments in it as well. On one occasion, I don't know who was doing the booking, but they booked us into a temperance hotel. Davy Spillane and Shay McGowan asked the person where was the bar, and when they pointed out there was no bar, there was hell for leather. But we brought back cans, and the lads took out their instruments and we had a great session. Needless to say, we only stayed one night. We only wanted to stay one night, but they wanted us to move out anyway.

But they worked hard. They sometimes did three gigs a day in working men's clubs, which the local NUM set up, who were always delighted to see them. It was at that stage of the strike when support might have been going down and they needed a bit of a boost. The procedure was that the miners took all the money on the door, and we just got our expenses, which were only to pay the B&B and maybe get a few bob for a meal that night. But there was no money taken by the trades council or anyone personally from any events, even in Ireland either, not one ha'penny.

Through my own union in Liverpool, I got a van with "Liverpool Community Centre" on the side of it. We were doing this gig in Barnsley, and we didn't realise Barnsley were playing Liverpool in the FA Cup. Liverpool beat Barnsley that day 3-0, and of course, I parked the van a hundred yards from the Barnsley football ground. Some Barnsley supporters going by wrecked the van on us. They broke windows in it, and they pushed in doors. But there was no hassle over it. We got the windows fixed through a friend of Mick McCarthy's. The people in Liverpool were laughing at the way we had parked the van in the worst possible place you could actually park it.

On another occasion we were in a working men's club, and there must have been three hundred people in the hall. The person from the NUM who was organising the gig got up and introduced the band. He said: "And we'll have the céilí band from Dublin playing later on."

Now I know Davy Spillane got annoyed about that: "I don't play in a céilí band!", this kind of stuff.

But the NUM representative then said: "Now, before we ask the céilí band to play, as you know, we always have a half an hour's bingo."

The band were ready to go on stage, but the people proceeded to play bingo for a half an hour. And I've a photograph of Dónal Lunny—I'm trying to get my hands on it, I know I have it somewhere—of Dónal Lunny playing bingo in a working men's club in Barnsley before he went on stage. I wouldn't say he's ever done that again!

Another time, we went to a meeting in Chesterfield. It was one of the best meetings I was ever at in my life. Scargill had asked us to be there. A number of us went over, we brought the DCTU banner and we got pride of place to lead the parade into the stadium. Unfortunately, I can't find any photographs of it, but they might come up through the NUM or something. We walked in, and it was like an Olympic Games or something. There was someone announcing who was coming through, led by the Dublin Council of Trade Unions, and we got tremendous applause. It was overwhelming, an unbelievable feeling. You wanted to be part of it, and yet you didn't want to be too egotistical. But it's something that the trade union movement should have been doing, and was doing. They wouldn't have done it, only for the DCTU.

I remember Scargill made one of the finest speeches that I ever heard from a trade union leader, and you felt that this man can't lose this. You also felt maybe, listening to trade union people that you'd listened to through the years, is this for real? But it was for real, that's the

difference: he was meaning what he was saying, not saying something and doing something else. So I've great admiration for Arthur Scargill.

He's writing his own book on the history of the miners' strike, and he's told me that there'll be a chapter, at least, on the support of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions. It'll be very interesting.

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