

Review: 'Strike!', Southwark Playhouse, London, 13 April-6 May 2023

2024 marks the 40th anniversary of the Dunnes Store strike. It involved just ten young Dublin shopworkers, nine women and one man. It lasted nearly three years, became the subject of songs, received a commemorative plaque outside their workplace in Henry Street, Dublin, and was lauded by one of the great world figures of the 20th century. Yet during the intervening years it has arguably stood in the shadows of Irish history. There is no substantive study drawing on the accounts of all ten workers, just a solitary memoir by Mary Manning, whose actions led to the strike – see review *Saothar* 43 (2018). Why? Could it have been that they were young, almost all women and working class?

Today, however, historical narratives can be presented in multiple formats, including in the theatre, one of the most enduring. Consequently, in London during April 2023 it was possible to experience in two theatres on consecutive days the defining characteristics of capitalism, through 'The Lehman Trilogy' and 'Strike!'. The worlds of the exploiters and the exploited as some would see them. Typically, national narratives give less attention to the exploited who often need other countervailing platforms, including through labour history. It is to this end also that Tracy Ryan's play is impressive, 'Strike!' focuses. First performed in Dublin in 2010 it was staged for the first time in Britain over three weeks at the Southwark Playhouse, London, in the spring of 2023. The story it tells virtually unknown in Britain. But the play gives, in an uninterrupted ninety or so minutes, a voice, laced with humour, to all the strikers over three long, hard years. Not only is Tracy Ryan to be praised for her writing of the play, but its producers, Ardent Theatre Company, congratulated for their courage and boldness in not reducing the strikers voices to a small representative number. Funding was raised through public subscription and sponsorship, including from the Society for the Study of Labour History.

The strike began on 19 July 1984 in response to a call from the Irish Distributive and Administrative Union (IDATU) for members not to handle South African produce. The Henry Street branch of the nationwide retail chain Dunnes Stores imposed oppressive, often demeaning and misogynistic shopfloor regulations creating a 'toxic' working environment. The company was anti-union and the Irish economy was in the doldrums with widespread unemployment. Yet Mary Manning, a 21 year-old till operator refused, with some trepidation, to register South African grapefruit to a customer and was promptly suspended. Fellow workers came out in sympathy. Some went back, leaving just eight other women and one young man, Tommy Davis, to picket. What followed were nearly three years of hardship on just £21 per week strike pay. They suffered racist and other physical abuse from some fellow workers, the Gardai and by some members of the public. Typically, they were branded by some sections of the press as extremists. Some were intimidated by Special Branch and Tommy was assaulted by the Gardai. There was little sympathy from the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government and hostility from the church. IDATU general secretary, John Mitchell, an anti-apartheid campaigner, was constantly resisting his increasingly unsympathetic Executive who would eventually prevail leaving the strikers feeling abandoned and betrayed.

Yet, despite all that a camaraderie grew into a fierce solidarity. Key to this was a resolute shop steward (Karen Gearon), a totally committed local IDATU

representative (Brendan Archbold) and an exiled South African (Nimrod Sejake), the first black person they had come across, who had not seen his family for twenty years. He would join the picket every day and became an inspiration, explaining to a largely non-political group, the reality of conditions in his country. As a result, they grew in political and social awareness. Their persistence began to slowly pay off as others visited the picket while some politicians, such as Michael D. Higgins, spoke out. But a key moment was the intervention by Nobel Peace winner Desmond Tutu and his insistence that their contribution to the anti-apartheid cause had made a difference. Eventually, the government relented and in 1987 Ireland became the first country to ban South African goods. When Nelson Mandela was freed and later visited Dublin in 1990 he insisted on meeting the strikers to personally thank them. In 2008, a plaque in their honour was unveiled in Dublin by the then South African President, Thabo Mbeki.

The play touches on all these key moments in a script that is tight, informative and imaginative. It was a huge undertaking to condense in this short play covering nearly three years with all its highs and lows, twists and turns, struggles and betrayals. It is given strength by Libby Watson's simple shop front backdrop onto a floor space. The smooth movement of such a large, and impressive, cast in such a confined space was almost balletic at times and a great tribute to Movement Director, Ira Mandela Siobhan. A soundtrack of popular music placed it in the mid-1980s. And in a compelling theatrical intervention, Tommy jumps onto a box with his guitar and sings, accompanied by the strikers, Florence Reece's 1931 American miners anthem, 'Which Side Are You On', a song Billy Bragg sung across Britain during the 1984-1985 miners' strike. It is particularly poignant as that strike, which was an inspiration for the Dunne's strikers, inflicted a major blow to their morale when it collapsed. All of this was pulled seamlessly together with verve and pace under the astute direction of Kirsty Patrick Ward. The theatrical space also helped engage an audience seated so close to the action as to feel almost part of it, especially when the cast moved into the audience. The whole cast were committed and convincing. There was crucial linked narration by Jessica Regan (as Karen Gearon) and Ann O'Riordan (as Liz Deasy). Special mention should also be made of Paul Carroll, who effortlessly switched from leering shopfloor manager to supportive union representative, and to Adam Isla O'Brien as Tommy. His solo, choreographed, portrayal of physical assault by Gardai was a powerful moment.

It has been said that any successful play must relate its plot to its meaning, and each should support the other. The plot of 'Strike!' is easily accessible both condensing and illuminating a real historical event. Its central meaning is surely the power of working-class solidarity, an illustration of what James Connolly described as the 'living proof of the truth of the idea that labour could furnish in its own ranks all that was needed to achieve its own emancipation'. Fittingly, the play ends with all the strikers and Nimrod lined up with arms raised, fists clenched delivering the ANC call and response rallying cry of resistance, 'Amandla-Awethu' (power-to the people). The original strikers in the audience joined in. Another moving and powerful moment. Ireland should be proud of them. A fitting tribute would be to stage the play in Dublin in 2024.

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