

Transcript of interview of Colum Maloney by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/23A part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Relates to the refusal to handle Grunwick mail by members of the Cricklewood branch of the Union of Post Office Workers.

Transcript

1. **CT:** Well, let's just start at the beginning, Colum. Just, how did you first hear about the strikers at Grunwick?
2. **CM:** As you are aware, Grunwick was in Chapter Road, which came under the postal area which Cricklewood was responsible to deliver the mail in, and my drivers and walking postmen who attempted to deliver mail there on a regular basis were reporting back quite regularly that the management of that particular company, i.e. George Ward and Grunwick, were not prepared to allow what was a parliamentary right of the individuals working there to belong to a trade union, and they felt that we as a sister union should do something to assist the strikers at that particular company.
3. **CT:** What action did that involve at that time?
4. **CM:** At that time we had a series of meetings: the committee, myself, Archie Sinclair, Dave Dodd and other members, particularly the senior management committee, worked out a strategy if and when we were requested to assist the people at Grunwick, what we would do. It would be illegal to go on strike, so we ruled that out. It would be illegal to take any action that would affect the delivery of the mail, and also we were responsible enough to realise that we wanted to make sure that we didn't affect other businesses in that area which meant that people working there would be affected as well. So we decided that we would not deliver the mail to Grunwick on the basis that they were not acting in a proper and reasonable and lawful way, and we could do that my refusing to deliver or indeed to accept mail from Grunwick.
5. **CT:** So that involved – I mean, were you aware that there was a picket line there, and what was your response to it?
6. **CM:** Our response to the picket line was that we gave instructions to our drivers and our delivery persons not to cross the line, and that was agreed at a meeting of all the members in the office.
7. **CT:** How did the discussion take place with the membership? I mean, what was the general feeling?
[2:41]
8. **CM:** The general feeling was one of sympathy with the strikers, but also one of helplessness because we knew that if we went on strike then we would be acting illegally and we'll play into the hands of the employers. But it also meant that innocent people such as ninety-nine point nine per cent of the people in the area, who I believed supported the Grunwick strikers, would also be penalised by what action we take, so we had to strategically work out the best way of having an effect on George Ward and the Grunwick empire in particular, and that's what we done, and I believe we done the right thing. Unfortunately, for our action in support of the Grunwick strikers we were locked out.

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Contrary to common belief that we went on strike, we did not go on strike. We were willing to deliver the mail to people in the Cricklewood area at no cost at all to the Post Office. We were willing to deliver it free rather than be locked out.

9. **CT:** How long was it that – for how long did you not cross the picket line before things escalated?
10. **CM:** I believe it was about three or four weeks, but our action in line with that went on for just over seven to eight weeks.
11. **CT:** And when did management escalate the stakes?
12. **CM:** About eight weeks later when they locked us out, and then they gave us an ultimatum to come back to work or we would be all sacked.
13. **CT:** And they – I mean basically, they were intimidating you to cross the picket line.
14. **CM:** They were instructing us to cross the picket line. They had no real sympathy towards the workers, it was more in favour of the business aspect of it. **[4:34]**
15. **CT:** How did the management of the Post Office relate to the management of Grunwick?
16. **CM:** Well, that I can't really say, but I can from my own personal, and indeed our involvement was it seemed that George Ward and his supporters – the National Freedom Movement¹ and the MP for Hendon, Gorst² – had all put pressure on them to make sure that the mail was delivered, but we as a group of trade unionists, and indeed of law-abiding citizens, refused to carry out what we believed was unlawful: to support George Ward and Grunwick.
17. **CT:** Now, one particular event: Ward was able to get his post out of the sorting office. Can you talk that through?
18. **CM:** Yes, what happened, when we were locked out they arranged for the 'Pony Express', which is the National Freedom Movement in conjunction with other right-wing groups, late on a Saturday afternoon, I was informed by Bob ?Dyall who was again a very committed human being. He rang me to tell me that the mail was being moved from the Post Office. Unfortunately, by the time we'd got there all of the mail had been moved, and we were warned by the police not to interfere [or] we [would] be prosecuted for obstruction.
19. **CT:** And were there consequences – was there an attempt to stop the consequences of that within the UPW³?

¹ National Association for Freedom.

² John Gorst.

³ Union of Post Office Workers.

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20. **CM:** Yes, I believe our colleagues in west London, north-west London, Birmingham, Oxford, Manchester, Liverpool, quite a number agreed that they would not handle the mail if it was transferred to them. Hemel Hempstead the same, I believe that was where originally it was heading from. And in the end they had a secret location – I believe it was a private warehouse where they sorted it themselves and distributed it. So we had great national support: trade union was magnificent, Arthur Scargill and the Yorkshire miners came on many occasion[s], they gave us support. And we done that without any cost to the Post Office or indeed to our union; we were supported by other trade unions. [7:10]
21. **CT:** Just going back to the ‘Pony Express’ incident: wasn’t that an illegal act that your management at Cricklewood sorting office connived with: allowing Royal Mail that was the property of Royal Mail to be removed privately?
22. **CM:** It was seem that way, but they justified it by saying that a court order and injunction was to be made or was made for them to have access to what was their property.
23. **CT:** Now meanwhile, relationships were tricky, shall we say, between the branch, which had full support of the London region as I understand it, and HQ, head office, the executive of the UPW. How were discussions between the two of you in terms of what they thought was the appropriate action and what you thought was the appropriate action?
24. **CT:** I think Tom Jackson⁴ was very sympathetic, but he kept talking about the legal implications of us getting involved, and that the union could suffer sequestration of its funds and indeed its assets. And we persuaded him that we were not doing anything illegally; we were at work, we were delivering the mail to ninety-nine point nine per cent of the people in that area, and would continue to do so if were let. And even it meant that they were going to take some sort of fine against us, we were willing to give our wages up to pay that fine if necessary. But it was the Post Office who locked us out; we didn’t want to stop delivering mail to the ordinary person or business in Cricklewood. Sadly, it seemed at that time that the right-wing people had more power than those who were elected or those who were lawfully doing the right thing. [9:17]
25. **CT:** How much pressure was put on you to call off your action by your executive?
26. **CM:** There was a certain amount of pressure, but each time that we were given an ultimatum, each time that we were told that we were doing something wrong, we went back and we had meetings with our membership, we explained it truthfully what we’d been warned, what we were told, and we had another vote and the vote was to continue with our action, that we are not the perpetrators of this, that George Ward was, and that everyone should be pointing their guns in that direction and forcing him to do what the mother of all parliaments had asked to do, and that is everyone had a right to belong to a trade union, and he was denying that right.

⁴ General secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers.

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27. **CT:** Quite extraordinary, given the pressure, given the issue – it was a solidarity issue, it wasn't an internal issue for your branch – and yet, each time there was a vote, they supported the position of holding the line and not crossing the picket line. Just talk through the sort of discussions people were having that came to that conclusion.
28. **CM:** Well, there were many very good reasons, and one in particular was that here for the first time in many of the people and my members who worked in the Post Office had never seen an ethnic group, particularly Indian women, out on a picket line, and they thought that this was a great acceptance by them of living in England and taking up the English ways, but not only that, asking to be part of the established community by being members of trade unions, which they were denied. I think that was one of the biggest inspiring acts that made our members support that action. [11:17]
29. **CT:** Extraordinary, and there was no dissent: "oh, this has got nothing to do with us", you know, "why should we take action?" You know, "this is not to do with our conditions." You know, "we're losing pay, we're being locked out."
30. **CM:** I think that the locking out aspect did have an impact, but the action that we took was fully supported by the members and they did not expect to be locked out. We turned up for work and we were not allowed in. And far from making them annoyed about our action in support of it, it just made it more solid, and for another seven weeks we stayed out. Unfortunately, one vote – fifty-one to fifty against – we went back, and people were crying that they actually had to go back, but people were under pressure because they had mortgages, they had rent to pay, some didn't have families that could support them, some were very near pension age, and they were under great pressure. So being democrats that we were, and being a good union, a loyal union – a strong family, that's what we were – we went back.
31. **CT:** Just – I'd like to come on to that in a moment, but just in terms of the timeframe: there was the famous 'super picket' as I think it was called of July the eleventh, the really big mass picket which had been escalating for the month previous to that, and then eleventh of July was decided that was the big day. At that time you were locked out. Can you just talk through your memories of that day? [12:50]
32. **CM:** Oh, that was just overpowering. It just give so much power to what a small group of people could enlighten so many people, that there were so many trade unionists out there who were willing to come and show their support, not just send small donations or letters of support or phone calls, but to physically come there. It was just, I suppose, D-Day all over again.
33. **CT:** But there was also the extraordinary support you and your members received from other trade unionists for your stand.
34. **CM:** Yes, we did. We had support from, I would say, every trade union branch and, more importantly, nearly all the various union organisations and trade councils. To see the banners coming from right the way up from Scotland all the way down as far as Kent, and across from Gloucester right over to Lincolnshire. Representation of the whole country was there, and it was really, really very emotional, even now when I think about it. It just lifted you. [14:18]

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35. **CT:** Because you were asked to head the TUC march [because of] the significance of the action you were taking. Can you remember going to the head of that march and –
36. **CM:** I can, yeah, and it was an honour that all our members deserved to have and rightly so for their commitment. But I think that Arthur Scargill and the Yorkshire miners and all the other trade unionists, particularly the trades council people that turned up, deserved to be there marching, showing the rest of the country, and indeed the government at that time, that we recognise something that has been fought for for hundreds of years cannot be done away with by one employer, one rogue employer. If we didn't take that stand I have no doubt that most of the trade union rights that we've established over the year[s], and had been acts of parliament, would have been diminished.
37. **CT:** But on the day, were you surprised out how much support you and your members received from fellow trade unionists?
38. **CM:** Well, I didn't look at it so much as support for us but more for the Grunwick workers. I wasn't surprised, I knew it was out there because we were getting – we were inundated with all sorts of support, letters of support and whatever, and we were saying "now we're holding the fort as it is now, but whatever other people wish to do in support of this, they've got to speak to the organisers of the Grunwick strike, that we are here supporting them and we would hope everyone else will come and do the same thing."
39. **CT:** But your members must have been pretty overwhelmed by not realising, you know, just a small act of solidarity would be so universally recognised.
40. **CM:** Yes, I mean, as I said, they were so emotional, and people were speechless, they couldn't believe, even on that day, I remember, I'm not one that's stuck for words normally, but when you're stood down in Elmwood Park and you see so many people out there, standing up there and you think "well, this is what trade unions is all about. Don't sit at home talking about it, get out and do it." And Arthur Scargill, and all the miners, and all the various unions – the print unions, the transport unions, logistics – everybody. There was representation from across the country. As I said, if you looked down the banners, and you probably have in your film, and you will see they come from everywhere, and that's what trade unions are: we're everybody but we're nobody. And I didn't feel like any bigger than anybody else there; I was glad to be part of that crowd. [17:12]
41. **CT:** And then came the meeting shortly after that at Conway Hall, where you and the entire branch was instructed to attend by the executive. Just talk through that meeting.
42. **CM:** Well, we had a meeting before that, and we were told that "you've got to go back to work", that legal action is imminent against the union and great funds were going to be lost, and that it may put in jeopardy people who are entitled to all sorts of benefits such as pensions, sickness and whatever. And, as I said to you earlier in this film, we had always consulted our members, and we always felt that it should be in the open where it can be seen, where members of the public, press, whoever wished to attend, with the consent of the branch that was the case. And on that day we told them

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what we were told, that the union was under threat, and I think that had people not been under great pressure I think we would have stayed out longer.

43. **CT:** And at Conway Hall what was actually – what was the position that was – because that was where the actual vote was taken, wasn't it?
44. **CM:** Yes. The vote was to return to work or to stay locked out, not on strike, but to stay in the position we were and demand [that] management opened the office and let us back in to deliver the mail. We had never refused to deliver the mail to ninety-nine point nine per cent of people and businesses in that area. It was the Post Office who took the radical act of locking us out in favour of George Ward and his cronies.
45. **CT:** And what was the position taken by Norman Stagg⁵ at that meeting?
46. **CM:** Oh, he was very forceful in saying that the union was going to be sequestered, it was going to cost millions of pounds and that we were the cause of it and, you know, and now we'd done all that we could and we should be thinking about the union and all the members that supported us right the way through. Oh, he gave a hundred and one reasons. Mainly, "get back to work or else!"
47. **CT:** And the impact on the membership.
48. **CM:** On the day the vote was a very quiet thing. When I announced the final tally [of] votes, fifty to fifty-one, it was very quiet, it was like being at a funeral, and people start[ed] crying and people start[ed] shouting. I had to call them to order and say "well look, one thing I don't want to see happen is this great branch disintegrate. We've got to go back as we came out, or as we were locked out: together, we go back together. And we don't go back in defeat, we go back in triumph, because the country has seen the injustice happening to the Grunwick workers, and I've no doubt, knowing the English public the way they are, that wrong will be put right." So we went back.
49. **CT:** Do you think if you had been able to hold out, if that pressure hadn't have been applied, that that would've actually got a result?
50. **CM:** I do believe if we'd stayed out longer [it] obviously would've brought George Ward a lot closer. But I also believe that it made him think before he would ever get involved with trade unionists again and treating them in that disrespectful way, that it wouldn't be tolerated in this country. So I think he learned a bigger lesson than anybody else did, and a lot of other employers who were thinking of going down the same road soon changed their minds. So for that reason, and all the other reasons I've given you, I believe that our involvement was a very successful involvement, and it is the way that if there is any unions out there who've got the key to settling a dispute then – assisting to settle that dispute – they should use it. Shouldn't be afraid; they should say if they can see an injustice being carried out, and they're in a position or working in an industry that has an impact on that, then they should act [21:57]

⁵ Deputy general secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers.

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51. **CT:** And just talk about the quality of your members, because now, I mean, it's these acts of solidarity, this class consciousness, people don't quite understand it. I mean it's, you know, that people looked after each other in that way, and that predominantly a white male Post Office workforce could identify and support Indian Asian immigrant women.
52. **CM:** Well, I think that's always been part of trade unionism. The formation of it in the first place, when people felt that other people couldn't afford to eat, they shared what they had, and then, you know, believed that it was wrong that, if you live in society, any civilised society should act the same way. So it's a natural instinct, and it just was lucky that we had some great trade union leaders that actually enforced it as a law on the land to make sure that people didn't go hungry, people weren't without medical care, people weren't without a home, people weren't without education. And that all came through the trade union movement; that's why I'm a Labour councillor.
53. **CT:** Just talk a little bit about the London branch and those that supported you. There was John Taylor and Derek Walsh.
54. **CM:** Yeah, John Taylor and Derek Walsh were very supportive. Both of them spent hours phoning us, coming down with us. I remember going on the TV programme [with] Michael Wale. John Taylor – sadly, John has departed – and we had a little discussion outside and he said “you know that George [John] Gorst is going to be here, and maybe George Ward.” And I said “well, you know, that's lovely, it's nice to see these sort of people in the daylight. Usually they're hiding around, you don't see them 'til the night-time.” And he said “well, when we go in, you'll be leading, you'll be doing the talking and you'll be answering the questions.” I said “hold on, you're the area representative, you'll be doing it.” “No, no,” he said, “you know what it's all about, so I want you to go in there.” So John was very, very, very supportive, as was Derek. They tried their best, of course they, like everything else, made sure that no one in the north-west area handled any mail.
55. **CT:** Just talk a bit – exactly what their position was and why it was so significant, and how, in terms of London, I believe.
56. **CM:** Well, they were in charge of the whole of the union for London, and they controlled the whole north-west area of London. Anything that happened in the north –
57. **CT:** Couldn't just stop you there and just say “John Taylor and Derek Walsh were in charge.”
58. **CM:** That's correct, yes.
59. **CT:** If you say that; just start the answer again.
60. **CM:** John Taylor and Derek Walsh were the most senior officers on the ground, outside the executive, that dealt with London. So they were like the regional council, the London regional council, and if they had a meeting with all the other representatives of the western district office, the northern district office, south-west district office and the south-east district office, they would decide the policy for London. And they decided that no office in London, with the backing of the representatives of all

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of those areas in London, would not handle Grunwick mail. So that's why the great strategy of the national front had to check in. They had to take the mail away from London to some rogue Post Office area that would deal with it. And my belief is that it never happened, it took the mail to somewhere in the midlands, to a warehouse where they sorted that mail. It was never touched by Post Office people, specially the UPW. [26:19]

61. **CT:** But they – pressure was on them and they defied their executive as well, in terms of circulating a leaflet of support. What happened there?
62. **CM:** Yes, they encouraged branches to not handle the mail, not deal with it, and the strategy was one of solidarity with us, but we also had to make sure that the mail didn't leave Cricklewood, otherwise it would have meant maybe more lock-outs across London. But there were also people who took action in support of us, like the western district office refused – I think, took a day off and said "well, you know, if you can lock out one office then you can lock us all out." Northern office done the same. Right across the whole postal region down to Oxfordshire, they took days off and they said "well, you know, management [?are going to lock us out] we can take a day off," and so they did. It was a lovely gesture at the time, so it also sent a message back: we weren't, or they weren't, going to be intimidated. Locking people out wasn't the answer, but stopping rogue employers like George Ward was.
63. **CT:** But then the pressure was applied to Derek and to John Taylor – Derek Walsh and John Taylor – by the executive, and that was a grim moment in trade union history, wasn't it?
64. **CM:** Yes, obviously they would've been seeing that they couldn't crack myself, Dave or Archie, or indeed the membership of Cricklewood, so they would turn to our sort of leaders of what we would call the regional unions, and to get them to put pressure on us. I have to say that they always came with a smile.
65. **CT:** But they were fined.
66. **CM:** Yeah, they were fined, but they were defiant as well.
67. **CT:** What was, do you think, the feeling within the union as a whole, in terms of that particular moment when those two officials, who had led the work so heroically to co-ordinate the action, were fined?
68. **CM:** My understanding was that there was a great move to actually have a strike, maybe on a London basis, and it would've widened out, but both those individuals, John Taylor and Derek Walsh, pleaded with members not to take any action, that they would, in the long term, want to stay in control, and we've controlled it in a very good, honest, fair, compassionate way, and we mustn't lose the reason why the incident happened in the first place, and not make it look like that we were taking revenge against the Post Office. And so we done what they said: we went back to work, our members agreed it, and we done what every other branch done in London at that time: we supported them in their request not to escalate or take further action. [29:35]

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69. **CT:** Now, in terms of the legal threats that were being applied by George Ward and his supporters in the National Association for Freedom, and using the Post Office Act, and if the Act was to be broken, the penalty was the possible wholesale sequestration of UPW funds. That's what broke Tom Jackson, but if he had actually thought bigger, and actually turned to the trade union movement [as] a whole and said "do you want to go big? Well, let's really go big." Do you think the TUC could have acted differently at an executive level and said "we're behind you, we'll support you, don't let these people threaten you"?
70. **CM:** Well, I don't think it, I know it. We should have done that, that's what should have happened. Unfortunately, I can't answer for them; they all had to answer for themselves. But that's what trade unionism is all about: not allowing bullies to bully you, but to take the bullies on and to beat them at their own game. And we had the strongest hand ever; we were dealing with a group of Asian women that wanted to belong to a trade union, which was an act of parliament their right to do so. There was no reason why the TUC could not have supported that. There wasn't a law in legislation that said anything we done was wrong. Everything we done was right, and I don't know why – I don't believe at that time that there was the will, or indeed it felt that this was something that would have been as great as what it was, and why they never acted I don't know. It would've put the TUC in the right light, and we probably would've got millions more members if they had acted properly.
71. **CT:** Terrific. I just couldn't close that door, could I? Just – I won't be a –
72. **CM:** Sorry.
73. **CT:** No, no, no, no.