

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY: TRADES UNIONS IN WALES DURING THE THATCHER YEARS*

With the National Library of Wales celebrating its centenary this year and with this being the Welsh Political Archive's twenty-first annual lecture, it would be remiss of me not to begin by offering congratulations and appreciation for all that has been achieved here in Aberystwyth.

This evening I want to take you back to the early 1980s, to Margaret Thatcher's premiership, to how unions in Wales responded, to how my own thinking developed and to how one of the most unlikely of partnerships emerged.

For those academics amongst you who feel a need for footnotes and reference lists I can do no better than to refer you to a book written by Joe England entitled *The Wales TUC, 1974–2004: Devolution and Industrial Politics* and published by the University of Wales Press in 2004. In doing so, I offer my thanks to Joe for providing me with such a valuable *aide memoire* for this evening.

For those of you with a more licentious appetite, whetted perhaps by the title of this evening's lecture and now wondering precisely who was sleeping with whom back in those days, let me put you out of your misery. When I woke that morning and turned to find the Secretary of State for Wales, Nicholas Edwards, still asleep next to me, I wondered for a moment whether I had done the right thing. The flight back from Tokyo at the end of our two week inward investment mission to Japan and South Korea was soon to land and we were about to be re-immersed into the bitterness of the 1984 miners' strike.

But more of that later. Because a lot of things had happened before ever I set foot in Japan.

So, to start with something we can all agree about, Henry Ford was not a Welshman. His assertion, often misquoted, that 'history is more or less bunk' is so far removed from the instincts of those of us who are Welsh that even when we include those qualifying words 'more or less', so as to correctly quote him, he is still many a mile away from having the sentiments of a 'Cymro'.

I say that because, for those of us born and brought up in Wales, our history is our very identity. It's our history that makes us who we are. And yet, because Wales is as much an emotion as it is a country, it means that we are also prone to embellishing our history with romantic idealism and fond nostalgia, living and planning our lives in consequence upon myths and dreams.

I was in my late teens when I first read some of the poems of R.S. Thomas and in particular his verses on a 'Welsh Landscape' where he wrote:

To live in Wales is to be conscious
At dusk of spilled blood
That went to the making of the wild sky
Dyeing the immaculate rivers in all their courses.

With a father brought up in the midst of the 1926 miners' strike and the recession that followed, with a grandfather that I never met, dead from dust years before I was born, I thought I knew a thing or two about the price of coal. And although I never followed R.S. Thomas into the mists of his nationalism, I was with him, wading deep, into those immaculate rivers of his.

For me the Rhondda rivers ran a ruby red. Red with socialist struggle. Red with communist camaraderie. Red with the blooded sweat of the miners. And red, red above all else, with the standards and banners of the 'Fed', the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers.

This was what Wales was all about. This was what I was all about. And it was to be the privilege and the destiny of trade unions and their members here in Wales to serve as the cadre in the struggles that lay ahead on the road to socialism.

It was a dozen years later that I stood on the steps of the De Vallence Pavilion in Tenby, chatting with delegates as they arrived for the sixth Annual Conference of the Wales TUC.

That Conference was in all ways but the truth my first Annual Conference. The truth was, of course, that I had attended the previous year's Conference, having started work as the Wales TUC's first employee, its Research and Administrative Officer a fortnight earlier. But for me it had been little more than a blur – a blur of people I had yet to get to know, a blur of procedures that I didn't yet fully understand and a blur of policies that would take some time yet to get on top of.

Now, a year later, I was very much more into the swing of things. I had spent much of the previous twelve months travelling around Wales for evening meetings with local union activists, joining them in their activities, supporting them in their campaigns. And I had also got to know the union officers who were active on the General Council and its Committees. The people, the procedures, the policies, they had all become very much a part of me. And as I waited for the Conference to begin, I knew with absolute certainty that this was where I wanted to be and that this was where I was meant to be.

The delegates arriving that morning were tired, disappointed and more than just a little bit annoyed. As Archie Kirkwood from the National Union of Railwaymen rose to deliver his Chairman's opening address to Conference, so 250 miles away Margaret Thatcher was arriving at Buckingham Palace to be confirmed as Britain's first woman Prime Minister. It was May 4th 1979 and our world was about to change.

Most delegates looked tired and not just because they had been up late the night before listening to the election results being declared. For many the past four months had been an endless series of meetings, rallies, picket lines and hustings as the winter's industrial action was followed first by a campaign for devolution and then by a general election campaign to save the Labour government.

They were disappointed as well because whatever the differences that had emerged between the unions and the Callaghan government during what had become known as

the 'winter of discontent', in Wales at least, the trade union movement and its finances had stayed firmly behind Labour's election campaign.

And they were annoyed, oh yes, they were most certainly annoyed. Annoyed for what just might have been, if only. If only Jim Callaghan had listened to the TUC when it had told him that his proposals for a further round of wage restraint simply couldn't be delivered. If only Welsh Labour MPs hadn't divided in the run up to the St David's Day referendum on devolution. And if only, if only Wales now had its Assembly in place to provide a bulwark against Thatcher's tide.

But these were not the only emotions in the Conference Hall that Friday morning. Say it quietly, but there was also the beginnings of some excitement in the air. Set up as recently as 1974, in its short existence the Wales TUC had known nothing but a Labour Government. Whilst affiliated unions and most individual union members could remember only too well the Heath government of the early 1970's, it was out of those very experiences and for those very reasons that the Wales TUC had been formed – an organisation that would stand up for Wales and protect the interests of its workforce and communities.

By the end of day we knew exactly what we needed to do. If Margaret Thatcher was to stand criticised some five years later for her thinly disguised reference to the trade union movement as her 'enemy within', my recollection is that we certainly had no hesitation nor qualms in identifying her and her government as our enemy right from that very first day. Thatcher's new Tory government was readily identified as the enemy of working people, as the enemy of organised labour and as the enemy of Wales. If Margaret Thatcher was spoiling for a fight, well, bring it on.

She wouldn't be in power for very long, that was for sure. We would soon see to that. Once the country saw her and her policies for what they really were, she would be out on her ear and Labour could come back into government, having been suitably refreshed by a period in opposition and having learned the lessons of not heeding the advice of the TUC.

I suppose Conference could have reflected a little more on the words of Neil Kinnock, who, despite having been earlier decried for his leading role in defeating the Labour Government's devolution proposals, was nonetheless welcomed to the Conference platform in the aftermath of the election result. In a speech that provided some early glimpses of his later warnings not to be ordinary, not to be young, not to be ill or old in Thatcher's Britain, Kinnock spelled out just how serious the consequences of the election result were likely to prove for trade union members, their families and their communities.

I suppose too that delegates could have paid more heed to the heavenly signals being provided. Delegates, who in previous years had enjoyed coatless, warm spring weather as they strolled from hotel to Conference Hall, were forced instead to huddle and struggle along Tenby's Upper Frog Street as the opening of the 1979 Conference was met with a biting wind and flurries of sleet and snow driven in off the sea. We may have missed it at the time but the message from the elements surely couldn't have been clearer. It was cold and it was bleak and it was an all too accurate forecast of what the next decade and more was to hold for us.

But Conference was never a place for careful thought or wise reflection. Conference was the venue of the rostrum, the impassioned speech, the clarion call. Conference was the oh so very public face of the Welsh trade union movement and with the Tory manifesto having promised a curb on union power and with Thatcher's commitment to bring the unions to heel, there was never much doubt that we would seek to rise to the challenge.

There was a more private face of course, away from the microphones, unseen by the cameras, where we were looking to find our own solutions, Welsh solutions, to some of the problems besetting Wales. With the Wales TUC ardently pro-devolution, no one could have been surprised that we were looking at new ways of doing things. As a young organisation, we had little baggage to slow us down. And with unemployment the main challenge it was obvious to us that the Wales TUC needed to be actively engaged in the business of generating new jobs. New locally owned jobs in worker co-operatives and new jobs also in the internationally mobile companies that might be persuaded to come here.

But for now, in the summer of 1979, a collision course had been charted, the enemy had been sighted and the first battle was about to be engaged.

The run down of the steel industry had been a major issue for the Wales TUC ever since its inaugural Conference, here in Aberystwyth in 1974. East Moors, Shotton, Ebbw Vale, each closure announcement had been vigorously opposed, but nothing had prepared us for the announcement in June 1979 by the new Industry Minister, Sir Keith Joseph.

We had met with Margaret Thatcher and some of her cabinet only a few weeks earlier in Downing Street – the first union delegation to meet the incoming Prime Minister. For us it had been our opportunity to press at the highest level for a reprieve for the Shotton steelworks, already marked for closure by British Steel. But although she listened politely, in reality she seemed just as interested in the fact that our Chairperson that year, Sylvia Jones, was like her a mother of twins. And whether she was interested or not, it made not a jot of difference. We went into the meeting looking to protect one steel plant and we came out of it needing to save the entire industry.

Joseph's announcement was that the British Steel Corporation was to be required to break even by the following year. It was an impossible target of course but it forced the Steel Corporation into announcing in December the closure of 30 per cent of its steel making capacity and the loss of 53,000 jobs, 40 per cent of which were to be lost in Wales.

The reaction here in Wales was immediate. Philip Weekes, the South Wales Area Director for the National Coal Board, stated that up to 8,000 mining jobs would be lost if the steel industry cut back its demand for South Wales coking coal. George Wright, the General Secretary of the Wales TUC at the time, demanded an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister and spoke of a general strike being a real possibility unless the government intervened to stop the job losses. The NUM in South Wales, alarmed at the threat now posed for a large part of the coalfield, agreed to lobby for a

national miners' strike against pit closures. And Newport dockers, keen to be involved, refused to unload coking coal imports bound for Llanwern, leaving the vessels to ride anchor outside the entrance to the docks.

Six days later and with no response from Downing Street, the Wales TUC convened a meeting of its steel, coal and transport unions which resolved to commence an all out strike unless the Steel Corporation shelved its plans. This decision received unanimous support later in the week from the Wales TUC General Council, which agreed that the strike would commence on 21st January 1980.

This was Wales and this was the Wales TUC, but a quite different agenda was being followed in London. Following the breakdown of pay negotiations, the unions on the TUC's Steel Committee had agreed to commence a national steel strike in the New Year in support of their pay demands. By the first week of January the steel industry was at a standstill across the UK but the issue was one of pay not jobs.

As far as the Wales TUC was concerned, the issue was all about jobs. Our research was indicating that the knock on effect of the steel closures would be the loss of up to twenty one pits and the loss of a further 50,000 jobs in transport and other sectors of the economy as Wales slid into an employment abyss. It was vital as we saw it to convince the national unions and the TUC to make the settlement of the steel strike conditional upon the withdrawal of British Steel's closure plans. Because if the national pay strike was settled without the jobs issue being resolved what chance would there be of getting any further action at a national level in support of maintaining jobs here in Wales?

Urgent meeting followed urgent meeting, but the TUC Steel Committee remained unconvinced. In their view it would be counterproductive to confuse the issues of pay and production capacity. The pay dispute had to be resolved on its own terms, whilst the issues of steel making capacity and employment levels were matters for further discussion with the Steel Corporation and the government. The south Wales miners' leaders received a similar rejection from the NUM's National Executive as their call for a national miners' strike against pit closures fell on deaf ears. And the view from Congress House was also clear, there was to be no all out strike action in Wales on 21st January on the issue of jobs.

The Wales TUC General Council now had a difficult call to make. On the one hand, we remained convinced that the opportunity to win the jobs argument would be lost if we delayed. On the other, we knew that successfully to call and sustain a multi-industry strike in the face of opposition from the national unions and the TUC would carry a high risk. And any failure to deliver would most certainly wreck the credibility of the Wales TUC just at a time when workers most needed the organisation.

So a decision was taken. The strike action called for 21st January was put on hold, postponed at least in theory until 10th March, and instead a one-day strike and day of action was called for 28th January.

Despite continuing opposition from the TUC, the day of action went ahead as planned. With an organiser's enthusiasm I announced the day to have been an

overwhelming success with 110,000 people out on strike and a quarter of a million others involved in protest action of one sort or another. Quite where that last figure came from is best lost in the passage of time, but what there can be no doubting is that steel, coal, and haulage were all on stop that day, and the main event in Cardiff saw some 15,000 rallying in Sophia Gardens to the speeches of Bill Sirs and Lawrence Daley, General Secretaries of the ISTC and NUM respectively.

The TUC was strongly critical of the actions being taken by what it saw as its Welsh region. It was simply not the role of the Wales TUC to be calling strikes or days of action for that matter, and the Wales TUC needed to recognise and accept the leadership and authority of the TUC General Council. As an employee of the TUC, albeit one permanently based in Wales, these were interesting times. To his credit Len Murray, the TUC's General Secretary and my boss, viewed the disagreements and differences that existed between the Wales TUC and Congress House as precisely that: differences between organisations and not between us as individuals. He never sought to use my employment relationship with the TUC as a lever, and this was a freedom that once established I was to continue to enjoy throughout my twenty-five years working for the TUC in Wales.

In the first week of February the Wales TUC General Council met to consider its next steps. The day of action was viewed to have been a significant success but little seemed to be emerging from the discussions taking place at national level between the TUC and the government. A recalled Conference was proposed for 27th February, but this subsequently fell foul of further TUC objections, and I am sure that any objective bystander would have been forced to conclude that as far as the Wales TUC's plans for industrial action were concerned the early momentum had now been lost.

Still, the steel workers remained out on strike, albeit over pay, and the south Wales miners were threatening a strike in the event of any job losses in the pits. The British Steel Corporation, with the government standing behind them, could surely still be defeated on the issue of plant closures and job losses.

Through arrangements made by Ann Clwyd, the South West Wales member of the European Parliament, a delegation from the Wales TUC travelled to Brussels to seek the support of the European Parliament and sympathetic European Commissioners. Things were going well, we had received a positive reception from the Parliament's Social Affairs and Employment Committee on 21st February and we were looking forward to our forthcoming meetings with the Commissioners. And then a press reporter asked the question, 'What do you think about the south Wales miners voting not to go on strike in this morning's pit head ballot?'

It was more than a surprise; it was a complete bolt out of the blue, and a deadly one at that. Frustrated with the lack of progress, the South Wales area of the NUM had decided on 20th February to ballot its members on joining the steel workers in an all out strike from 25th February. Today it may seem unbelievable, but as recently as 1980 for us to be in Brussels was to be in a different world. Without mobile phones or blackberries and without a will within the NUM to let us know, we had been completely unaware that the miners had decided to call a ballot and even more unaware of the outcome.

I couldn't believe it. Only a couple of weeks before I had been there in a packed Afon Lido at Aberavon when miners and steel workers had united in a determination to defend their jobs and their communities. It couldn't be true. Any other group of workers might have jibbed when push came to shove, but not the miners. Not the miners of South Wales. Not the miners of the Rhondda.

But of course it was true. The miners could no longer be taken for granted. And with their ballot result went our struggle for steel. The Newport dockers immediately lifted their embargo on coking coal imports and within weeks the national steel strike was brought to an end with an offer of nearly 16 per cent.

As soon as the steelworkers returned to work, British Steel started local plant level discussions on cutbacks in production and in jobs. By the end of June the company had secured agreement for the loss of nearly 11,500 jobs in Port Talbot and Llanwern, which, when added to the 6,500 jobs lost with the closure of Shotton and other smaller losses made throughout the industry in Wales, meant that the British Steel Corporation had achieved most of their planned job losses in Wales without a fight. Whoever had masterminded the Corporation's negative pay negotiations and precipitated the industry's first national strike since 1926 had provided an easy route to closures and job losses that we in Wales were unable to resist.

When your opponent is down, kick him hard. Ian MacGregor, the new Chairman of British Steel, had obviously been brought up to play rough. Not long after the local agreements for job losses had been agreed at Port Talbot and Llanwern, the total closure of one or other of the two plants re-emerged as a possible solution to what MacGregor saw as the continuing overcapacity in the industry.

Morale amongst Wales TUC General Council members was low, and there was little confidence that further cutbacks could be resisted or even delayed. No one was talking now of industrial action, no one that is except for the miners who, having learned the lesson of their February débâcle, had worked hard to achieve pit head support for strike action should any pit with workable reserves be threatened with closure.

Once again a series of meetings was convened. The TUC's Nationalised Industries Committee met with the Wales TUC in Cardiff. A conference of coal, steel, transport and engineering union members was held. But although we may have said it quietly, the overwhelming conclusion was that industrial action in defence of the steel plants was a non-starter. George Wright told the conference that there were only two alternatives: accept closure or organise community based resistance.

How serious this suggestion was remains open to debate. A campaign of civil unrest was certainly envisaged and some discussions took place about barricading the Severn Bridge. The successful campaign for a Welsh language television channel was looked at for any lessons that could be learned. But the truth was that community action was unlikely to prove a strong card for the Wales TUC, and George was keen to distance himself from the idea some years later when campaigning to become General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union. At the time, however, it was seen as a last throw of the dice.

If Thatcher could not be shifted by industrial action, because workers were increasingly reluctant to forego large redundancy payments for an alternative of striking and uncertainty, then Wales had to turn to its communities. There was a logic at play here. The jobs were not there for individual workers to sell, the jobs belonged to the community. The jobs had been inherited from previous generations of workers and should be preserved for generations still to come.

In today's world the notion of a job transcending the generations may be difficult to comprehend. These days, jobs are often not expected to last the decade let alone a generation. But in the context of industrial Wales, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, and in its steel making and coal mining industries, I am not at all sure that it was such a daft thought at the time.

In the event it all came to nothing. Both steel plants remained open, but the privately owned Duport Steelworks closed, thereby providing an alternative route to capacity reduction. In the space of two years, the Wales TUC had progressed through making representations, to lobbying, to protesting, to striking and eventually, almost, to civil disobedience in our attempt to block the government inspired cut backs in steel production and the tens of thousands of job losses that Wales was to suffer as a consequence.

Two years of unstinting effort, and for what? Two years of raising hopes and expectations and for what purpose.

Of course, some will say that the campaign to save steel was there to win. If only the TUC had given its support, if only the steel unions had incorporated the jobs issue into their strike demands, if only the Wales TUC had held its nerve and gone ahead with the all-out strike planned for 21st January, and if only the miners hadn't jumped the gun and lost that pit head ballot.

Those holding that view will feel strengthened in their argument I am sure by pointing out that only a few months later, in February 1981, the south Wales coalfield was brought to a halt by unofficial strike action that was then quickly spread to other parts of the country. With a national coal strike looming and with winter coal demand high, Thatcher was forced to intervene and she told the National Coal Board to withdraw its list of potential pit closures.

This is a powerful argument in support of the 'if only' scenarios, but it remains locked in time. It's an argument that ignores the reality, that just a few years later, at a time of her choosing and with coal stocks high she returned to the issues of coal and the coal miners. And no government respite was to be offered then in what proved to be the wholesale closure of deep mining in Wales.

The truth is that at best, and with all the 'if only' scenarios in place, we might have delayed the closures by a year or so. We may have achieved the legendary 'time to readjust' which in reality, in my experience, is never time enough at all. For me the experience of those two years was salutary. My idealised vision of the Welsh working class had taken more than a bit of a knock. There had to be better ways of doing things and achieving our objectives.

It would be reasonable to presume that with all this going on, the relationship between the Wales TUC and the Welsh Office would be near to non-existent. Things certainly hadn't got off to a good start. Immediately following the 1979 General Election we had met the new Secretary of State, Nicholas Edwards, and had concluded that there was little or no common ground between us. In reporting back to the General Council following that meeting, it had been decided not to waste further time or effort with Edwards, since he was unlikely to carry much weight within cabinet. Instead it was agreed, with of a sublime mixture of confidence and arrogance, that in future the Wales TUC would deal directly with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. And so it was that we met her, once, and never met her again.

With Wales being a small community, it was difficult not to come into contact with the Secretary of State from time to time. And old habits, of course, die hard. Having spent most of the previous five years as regular visitors to the Welsh Office, union leaders were still in contact with Welsh Office officials on a range of matters. By the end of the year we had established what could at best be described as a difficult working relationship with Nicholas Edwards. But we were communicating, both through correspondence and the occasional frosty meeting.

In June 1980, in the aftermath of the steel strike and in the short interval before MacGregor resuscitated the possibility of total plant closures, the Wales TUC placed two proposals onto the desk of the Secretary of State.

The first came from the evidence we had submitted to the European Parliament's Social Affairs and Employment Committee in February. We had argued that with Wales facing a jobs chasm, public funding should be provided to enable the Wales TUC to help redundant workers set up their own co-operative businesses. This idea had been well received in Brussels and the newly formed Welsh Affairs Select Committee in the House of Commons had been similarly supportive. So our challenge to Edwards was to provide the cash.

The second had a slightly longer history in that unlike the TUC, who were at the time deeply critical of the growth of foreign owned companies in the UK, the Wales TUC had a policy of welcoming inward investment and the jobs that came with it. The issue was how to increase the number of inward investments coming to Wales. It was one thing for us to be proud of our trade union history of militancy, but my red rivers of the Rhondda did not play too well in the board rooms of Tokyo and New York. So the challenge to Edwards was to fund an Industrial Relations Unit, involving the Wales TUC, which would promote a positive image of Wales and its trade unions.

I don't think we ever thought there was much chance of getting anything. These were ideas to embarrass as much as to succeed. Don't get me wrong, they were seriously thought through all right, but the expectation was that we would have to wait until the return of a Labour government after the next general election before they would be progressed. The press releases were already mentally drafted. Here was the Wales TUC coming up with a couple of well thought through proposals to tackle unemployment and what was the reaction of the Tories? Well, what would you expect?

Well, it wasn't what we expected. Nicholas Edwards was being carefully advised, of that I'm sure, and credit is almost certainly due in some measure to the civil servants who provided the briefing. But the decision was his. It was his gamble. And it set a course which differentiated Wales from the rest of the United Kingdom throughout the Thatcher years and beyond.

The response was positive. On the setting up of worker co-operatives he agreed first to fund an in depth feasibility study to the tune of some £40,000 and then, when that study demonstrated what could be achieved, he agreed to provide a direct annual grant of £100,000 with a further £50,000 coming through the Welsh Development Agencies.

On inward investment the response was different but no less positive. The setting up of an independent unit was not seen as the best solution. Instead he agreed that the Wales TUC should become involved with the existing agencies and the Welsh Office in promoting Wales to potential investors. And representatives from the Wales TUC would meet potential investors, both here in Wales and on overseas investment missions, to explain the positive role that trade unions could play in securing good industrial relations.

Today perhaps, neither of those two agreements would seem exceptional. Certainly not here in Wales, where trade unions through the Wales TUC have well worked relations with both the Assembly Government and the Secretary of State. But this was 1980. The Wales TUC had spent the previous year threatening industrial action against the government's industrial policy. The Thatcher government, of which Nicholas Edwards was a member, was committed to breaking the influence of the unions. Legislation was soon to be enacted that would marginalize, weaken and in some cases even outlaw union activity. And yet here was the Secretary of State for Wales providing significant funds for a union led jobs agency and making arrangements for us to meet incoming industrialists to talk about union recognition agreements.

It's not unusual these days for commentators to talk about the distinctive, so called 'non-Thatcherite' roles played by Peter Walker and to a lesser extent his successor David Hunt during their periods as Secretary of State for Wales between 1987 and 1993. But to my mind the foundations had already been firmly laid by Thatcher's first Welsh Secretary, Nicholas Edwards. And it is to his credit that the full force of Thatcherism was at times mitigated here in Wales.

His agreement to fund the Wales TUC's Co-operative Centre enabled us to draw down additional European funding and to go on to raise further funds from across Welsh local government. It was a unique activity for a trade union organisation here in the UK and it was one only rarely seen anywhere in Europe. No longer content with calling on others to do something, here was the Wales TUC literally rolling up its sleeves and getting stuck into the business of setting up new business ventures and offering alternatives to company closures. With the help of the Welsh Office, the Wales TUC had become a significant player in the world of indigenous economic development and had acquired a new legitimacy when speaking out on matters of economic policy as they affected Wales.

The Wales Co-operative Centre, earlier this year, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Based in Cardiff, but with staff operating throughout Wales, the Centre's most famous co-op is undoubtedly the miner's co-operative at Tower Colliery. But that is only the best known tip of a very big co-operative iceberg. In those twenty-five years the Wales Co-operative Centre has set up over one thousand new co-operatives across Wales. It has provided support and assistance to over two thousand Welsh businesses. And it has helped create and safeguard over three thousand Welsh jobs.

I am sure that you all get the same reaction from colleagues from other parts of the UK when you have to tell them from time to time that 'we do things differently in Wales'. But the truth is that we do, and the Wales TUC's Co-operative Centre, set up with the support of a Tory Secretary of State is a good example of just how successful doing things differently can be.

The decision on inward investment also bore fruit. At a time when the rest of the UK was encouraging prospective industrial investors to have nothing at all to do with trade unions, Wales was placing its unions at centre stage. And it paid considerable dividends. Throughout the 1980s Wales was regularly attracting up to 20 per cent of the UK's inward investment, far beyond what we might have expected and what would have been an equitable share. By the end of the decade there were over three hundred foreign owned factories in Wales providing over a quarter of all our manufacturing employment.

There were critics of course. With Wales falling to the bottom of the UK earnings league table, it was easy to blame the inward investors for the drift towards a low pay Wales. But there was never any evidence that the wages paid by the inward investors was out of line with the going rate. The reality was that Wales was losing hand over fist its highly paid jobs in coal mining and steel making. The new jobs in manufacturing assembly simply did not compare. But the alternative would only have been a further lengthening of what was already a frighteningly long dole queue.

Every company will have had its own reason for coming to Wales. Sony, Matsushita, Bosch and all the others will need to speak for themselves as to what it was that tipped the balance in our favour. I am sure that the geographic location of our assisted areas, the transport infrastructure we had in place and the level of grants that were available all played a part, although other parts of the UK were offering similar benefits of course. But I am sure too that the prospect of operating within a stable industrial relations environment was a key factor, and it was this that differentiated Wales from the pack.

By having trade unions on his inward investment team, Nicholas Edwards was providing a clear message to prospective investors. Firstly Wales was prepared to directly address investor concerns about industrial relations. Secondly, the government in Wales viewed unions as a source of valuable advice. Thirdly, the government expected companies coming to Wales to work with trade unions. And finally and most importantly, the government didn't look on trade unions in Wales as part of the problem; it saw us as part of the solution.

And the result was equally clear. Companies coming to Wales would first discuss matters with the Wales TUC. Appropriate unions would then be identified. And with

barely an exception the inward investing companies would go on to recognise unions, most usually just one union, for the purposes of collective bargaining. With trade union membership in free fall across Britain, as unemployment and de-recognition took hold, here in Wales union membership held up.

The role played by the Wales TUC in attracting and unionising new employers was controversial, not least because the use of the so-called 'beauty parade' placed the choice of union not in the hands of the workforce but in the hands of the employer. Companies could use their negotiating strength, it was said, to wring concessions from the unions and drive down the standard of collective representation. As the person who was often at the heart of this process, I can say with some conviction that the agreements reached were not always perfect. In a different place and at a different time I am sure we would have negotiated better agreements and better deals. But this was at the height of Thatcher's onslaught. Companies elsewhere in Britain were ripping up agreements and unilaterally imposing their terms and conditions of employment onto a labour force glad to escape the dole. By contrast in Wales we kept the principles of union organisation and collectivism alive and ensured that union membership remained an option for upwards of 65,000 workers.

In the summer of 1981 all this was still ahead of us of course. Faced with the surprising agreement of the Secretary of State, we had little option but to progress on both fronts. The setting up of the Wales Co-operative Centre was a major task and required a huge commitment from the Wales TUC leadership and from George Wright in particular. Developing our role on inward investment was less time consuming but required nonetheless a considerable collective willingness to make it work, with individual unions being required to subjugate their own interests to those of the wider union movement.

By the following year the Wales Co-op Centre was ready to be launched and the Wales TUC's Chairman, John Griffiths, had toured the United States with Nicholas Edwards speaking to potential inward investing companies. Time was moving on, and with Margaret Thatcher proving to be Britain's most unpopular Prime Minister ever, we were beginning to look forward to the early return of a Labour government.

The Falklands war put an end to all that. A year further on in 1983 and Thatcher was re-elected with a hugely increased majority. Worse than that, Labour was routed and polling evidence showed that more trade union members had voted for Thatcher than had voted Labour. In Wales, as usual, Labour had done a little better, the trade union vote had held up somewhat, but it was still a bad result.

I had joined the Wales TUC five years earlier with such high hopes and with such a clear vision. And it now looked as if I was to serve my time under the Tories. All our campaigning, all our marches, and we had organised a fair few of those during the previous four years, all our criticisms had been effectively thrown back in our face. The electorate were clearly only too happy with rising unemployment, cut backs in public expenditure and a Prime Minister intent on a never ending attack on organised labour.

If my idealised vision of the Welsh working class had been jolted by our failure to deliver in defence of steel, the triumphal re-election of Margaret Thatcher fully

brought home to me the need to balance what remained of my idealism with a hefty dose of pragmatism. Our development of the Wales Co-operative Centre and our growing involvement in inward investment may not have lit the fires that once drew me into working for the trade union movement in Wales. But they were examples nonetheless, and good ones at that, of how on a practical basis and in the most difficult of environments the Wales TUC could still deliver for Welsh workers.

I recalled a telephone conversation I had had with an NUM lodge secretary only a few weeks after starting work with the Wales TUC back in 1978. The National Coal Board had announced their intentions to close the Nantgarw coke ovens just north of Cardiff and the lodge secretary was on the phone to the Wales TUC. He listened patiently as I enthused about building solidarity action across Wales and raising class consciousness within the community. And when I had finished he explained quietly that his reason for phoning was to see whether we could help fix up a meeting with the Industry Minister in London and could I tell him the best train to catch.

It hadn't sunk in fully at the time, but the lesson had been clear. Working for the trade union movement is about providing straight forward answers and solutions to the problems encountered by working people. Five years on and now I knew. People don't join trade unions to change the world; they join unions to get practical day to day help with their problems, to improve their bargaining position on pay and working conditions and to get some protection if and when things go wrong.

I remember also, recalling the words of George Woodcock, General Secretary of the TUC in the 1960s and never one of my heroes, when he had spoken of the need for 'shoddy, shabby, dirty compromises' when trying to achieve the best for working people. I certainly didn't believe for one moment that what we were doing at the Wales TUC was either shoddy or shabby, but I now understood where Woodcock had been coming from.

With Nicholas Edwards back in Gwydyr House for the foreseeable future, I succeeded George Wright in September 1983 to become the first full time General Secretary of the Wales TUC. And within six months Wales was once again locked into a struggle for industrial survival with the start of the year long miners' strike.

The miner's strike could not have been more different to the struggle for steel four years earlier. Whereas steel had been a Welsh based campaign with the Wales TUC as its principal player, the coal strike was designed in Downing Street and delivered from Sheffield. In the early months of the strike the Wales TUC had provided significant support for the miners, despite Arthur Scargill's insistence that TUC assistance was neither wanted nor needed. Through the Wales TUC, unions representing steel workers, railway workers, haulage drivers, dockers and seafarers all provided practical support to the Welsh miners. Coking coal movements were restricted, steel production fell by a quarter and steel workers in particular paid for this support through their pay packets.

But it wasn't enough for Scargill and in June, some three months into the strike, the NUM National Executive demanded a total stop to steel production, effectively demanding that the steel and transport workers join the miners strike. This was never likely to have happened, but it was certain that it would not be achieved by a

unilateral demand from the NUM. As a result the support that we had put in place in Wales quickly collapsed, and in an atmosphere of considerable acrimony the south Wales miners President, Emlyn Williams, told the Wales TUC on 19th June that he didn't want us to have any further involvement in organising action in support of the strike. We always recognised that the NUM in Wales were highly critical of their union's national leadership on this issue, as indeed they were about most of the things that Scargill either did or didn't do throughout the year, but our involvement for the remainder of the strike was effectively limited to collecting cash and administering the miners' hardship fund.

With the miners' strike dominating the headlines, life away from the dispute went on pretty much as usual. And so it was that I found myself accompanying Nicholas Edwards on an investment trip to Japan and South Korea in October 1984. We must have met a dozen companies and yet the miners' strike was rarely raised. Each company that I talked to was interested only in its own investment plans and all seemed perfectly assured that world class industrial relations could be secured in Wales by recognising one or more of our unions.

In the years that followed some of those investments were to be made. Not by all the companies of course, but enough to make me feel that my time had been well spent. And with each investment came my payback of another union recognition agreement. But it is true that when I woke that morning on the return flight and turned to see the Secretary of State reclining, asleep in a nearby seat I did wonder, for a moment, whether I was doing the right thing.

What ever had happened to my youthful visions of the Welsh trade union movement, leading the march on the road to socialism? And what ever had happened to my Rhondda red?

The final piece in the re-assembly of my mental jig saw was put in place a further six months later when the South Wales miners marched united back to work. The year long strike had gained nothing: no concessions, no agreement, and in other areas of the British coalfield the miners' union was in total disarray. But here in Wales there had at least been unity, the strike had remained solid and the miners had remained loyal to the NUM. There was something special about the Welsh miners after all.

The 1984 miners strike had joined the list of the great Welsh working class struggles: the miners' strike of 1898, the Penrhyn quarrymen's lockout that lasted from 1900 to 1903, the Cambrian coal strike between 1910 and 1911, and of course the 1926 south Wales miners' lockout that followed the collapse of the general strike. All heroic struggles, all heroic defeats.

My ruby red Rhondda rivers are still flowing alright, but what I know now and what I learned then is that they flow red with the bleeding tears of the generations. Tears that have been shed for struggles lost, for wages sacrificed and for hopes extinguished. And I learned too that Wales and Welsh workers deserve better.

David Jenkins

Crickhowell

- * The text of the twenty-first annual lecture of the Welsh Political Archive delivered at Y DRWM, the National Library of Wales, 2 November 2007.