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## **A CASE STUDY: MOVEMENT from INSIGHT**

The campaign targeted at the apartheid regime in South Africa was gaining traction in the Ireland of the 1980's. The Irish Distributive and Administrative Trade Union (IDATU) was already involved in on-going issues with the management of Dunnes Stores over the working conditions of its members. In that context it formally instructed its members to implement an already approved union motion banning the sale of South African goods. This escalated the situation for Dunnes Stores management, where the Managing Director had been warning staff individually of potential dismissal for not handling South African goods.

On the morning 19 July 1984, Mary Manning, a twenty-one years old checkout-operator, arrived at her post at the Henry Street store to find herself and the other operators, whom she observed on that morning were all members of IDATU, flanked by managers, some of whom she suspected had to have been drafted in from other branches. Manning declined to register the sale to a customer of two grapefruits from South Africa under the directive from her union. That morning she and nine co-workers were suspended. Thus, began the bitter three-year long feud with their employer, as well as the Catholic Church, Government, and the police, which eventually forced the Irish government to impose a boycott on South African imports.

Nelson Mandela, visiting Ireland in July 1990, met with the Dunnes Stores strikers and spoke of what their stand meant to him: "Young shopworkers on Henry Street in Dublin, who in 1984 refused to handle the fruits of apartheid, provided me with great hope during my years of imprisonment, and inspiration to millions of South Africans that ordinary people, far away from the crucible of apartheid, cared for our freedom." One overall lesson taken from this experience was that committed people at the 'bottom' can bring change at the 'top'.

We are interested here in the personal impacts of this experience on Mary Manning, and particularly of one impact as recorded in her memoir. A different perspective on the context of this extraordinary experience is required for this purpose in addition to what had become the political dimension above.

Manning's account conveys the oppression by the Catholic Establishment on Irish women in the 1980's, when many women were still deeply religious and subservient to the writ of priests of the Catholic Church. This atmosphere is precisely conveyed by her as follows: "It may be difficult to understand today, but by 1984, the decades of control and fear exerted by the Catholic Church left the Irish population resorting to silence and evasion as their only coping mechanism."

Mary's mother opposed her daughter's involvement in the anti-apartheid strike and Mary herself felt alienated by this. Among the harassments visited on the strikers was the condemnation of the Church communicated privately to the union by the famous and, following a scandal, subsequently infamous Bishop Eamonn Casey.

On one morning some elderly nuns were proceeding to pass the picket line into the store when one of the strikers, Cathryn O'Reilly, a young single-mother living with her parents, confronted them about their lack of empathy and morals as well as ignorance of the conditions of the black majority in South Africa. This little but public episode, remarkable in Ireland of that time and evocatively captured in a published photograph, led Mary to observe that "Cathryn O'Reilly had proved to us and to herself she was not willing to stay silent in the face of adversity, *no matter where it came from.*"



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Mary continues her story from that event:

“That evening, as I walked from the picket line, I decided not to go directly home. The last two days had been exhilarating but emotionally exhausting. They had also caused an *unexplained shift within myself, which had sparked, in many ways unwanted, internal questioning about Mam and her own view on the strike.* I walked over the Ha’penny Bridge towards the south of the city and meandered through the streets until I found myself sitting alone on a wooden bench in St Stephen’s Green, *needing time alone to think.* As the evening sun dipped in the sky I threw the remnants of a half-eaten sandwich from my lunchbox into the pond and watched a paddling of ducks battle furiously long after the last crumbs were gone.”

Mary then speaks about herself:

“I have never been a person to make impulsive decisions – when faced with a quandary or moment of doubt, it’s just not in my nature. *I need time alone to reflect,*

*weigh things up and figure everything out within my own mind before I can reach a decision or, hopefully, find an answer. While for most of my life I have found this helpful, and it usually means my decisions are concrete, it has also on occasion made me slow to recognise a situation brewing under the surface, until it's about to boil over. This was one of those occasions. I now reflected on my own deeply personal reasons for resenting both the state and the Church and their appalling treatment of women and children, and that's when the penny dropped."*

She now saw something new about herself and her mother:

*"The reasons for Mam's reaction to my part in the strike suddenly dawned on me. I couldn't believe it had taken me so long to realise this, given what I knew of her personal history. It was not the strike that Mam feared, it was not the outcome of it and nor was it what other people thought of her or me: it was the Establishment she feared, for it was these structures that had shaped her as a child into the adult she was now."*

Mary's account goes on to show her working out the implications of what had just happened inside her:

*"I don't know how long I had been sitting on that wooden bench in St Stephen's Green when the park attendant tapped my shoulder and informed me he was locking up. Forced out of my reverie, I saw that the sun was long gone and that the light was rapidly disappearing from the evening sky. As I gathered my things and made my way out of the park I thought back on all that had happened over the previous couple of days. I realised now that meeting Marius Schoon [a white anti-apartheid campaigner whose family was bombed while he was away from home], a man who refused to be silenced, combined with witnessing Cathryn's refusal to bow down, had, in many ways, forced me to view Mam's attitude towards the strike from her point of view. I was now blessed with a far greater understanding of the fear she was experiencing and with this came huge empathy towards her."*

Her reflections show her growing awareness that brought her to her newly enlarged perspective:

*"The Dunnes Stores strike had been going for just over two months now and during this time I had already gone through huge internal and personal change, which was gradually allowing me to view the world from a different perspective. Mam could never know this, for it could possibly break her, but the strike was no longer just about black South Africans, it was now also for her and what she had suffered at the hands of the people who were now pitting themselves against myself and my colleagues."*

Here we have an example of a young person (albeit on recollection) reaching a position of greater understanding of herself and another person (her mother) and of a shift as a meaning making system.

*Source: Mary Manning with Sinead O'Brien. Striking Back: The Untold Story of an Anti-Apartheid Striker. Chapter 7 and pp. 198-9 for Mandela quote (all emphases added). The Collins Press, Cork, 2017.*

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